



**Learning from Home
During Covid-19:
A Survey of Irish
FET and HE Students
with Disabilities**

ahead



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Foreword

By Dara Ryder, Chief Executive Officer, AHEAD

The Covid-19 crisis has turned our world upside down. It is hard to believe that just 12 weeks prior to the release of this report, there were only rumblings on the airwaves about Covid-19 and not a single case had yet been identified on our shores.

In a short matter of weeks, the virus arrived and as the government reacted, everything changed. Our schools and colleges closed, our economy was placed in hibernation and our ability to be close to the ones we love was taken away.



Overnight, our further education and training (FET) centres and higher education (HE) institutions were pushed into remotely delivering the programmes that are so vital to the lives of our learners, without the chance to fully plan and prepare. Yet they showed remarkable commitment and innovation in moving quickly and nimbly to support learners through this difficult time to try to ensure they remained engaged with their learning in an equitable way.

For learners with disabilities however, some of whom are in the identified Covid-19 'at risk' categories, there remain huge challenges in engaging in remote learning during this time and difficulties in how they access the support that is vital in their continuation and completion of programmes. Many have concerns for the health of themselves and their families, many are juggling childcare and other family demands with trying to adapt to a new form of learning, and some are struggling with limited or poor access to reliable technology and a reliable internet connection. Many are experiencing high levels of anxiety related to both the wider Covid-19 situation and the new mode of their programmes and some are experiencing challenges with the accessibility of materials provided.

This survey aims to shine a light on the reality for students with disabilities on the ground who are doing their best to continue learning 'as normal' in a situation that is far from it. The report hopes to authentically gather the experiences of learners with disabilities and bring their voice to the decision-making process about our response as a sector and a nation. It seeks to use the voice of learners to highlight key challenges and issues which we can collectively address together – government, institutions ETBs, teaching staff and independent bodies like AHEAD all have a role to play in responding effectively.

But it also highlights the committed and innovative work already happening in the

sector in trying to respond to the crisis, and while there are many areas where colleges/centres can improve, there are also many reporting good experiences learning remotely and that is testament to the work that has already been done in extraordinary circumstances.

We are no doubt living through one of the most challenging moments our education system will experience in our lifetimes, but I believe that the energy and commitment of the staff in our tertiary education sector is evidence that with the right information, the right support for staff and learners, along with the smart channelling of resources, we can overcome these challenges and ensure that no learner gets left behind.

We hope that this research, alongside the many other valuable pieces of work being conducted by others in the sector, can contribute to informing the response of the sector and help to create better outcomes for learners with disabilities on the ground.



Introduction and Methodology



Introduction and Methodology

The aim of this research is to gather the views and experiences of Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education (HE) students with disabilities who are now learning, or attempting to learn remotely due to the impact of Covid-19. It aims to explore the challenges that students are facing in continuing to engage with their learning during this period and takes a closer look at issues affecting students with disabilities more specifically.

The findings in this report are the results of analysis of the survey responses of students across Ireland. The survey was disseminated through AHEAD's general mailing list and social networks and through a series of direct mail requests to HE and FET practitioners in our networks to share the survey with their students with disabilities.

601 students responded to the 34-question survey and the results were collected between April 9th and April 27th 2020.

Students currently living in 25 of the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland were represented in the responses (no students living in Leitrim responded), although there were a notably higher proportion of respondents from the major urban centres as one might expect.

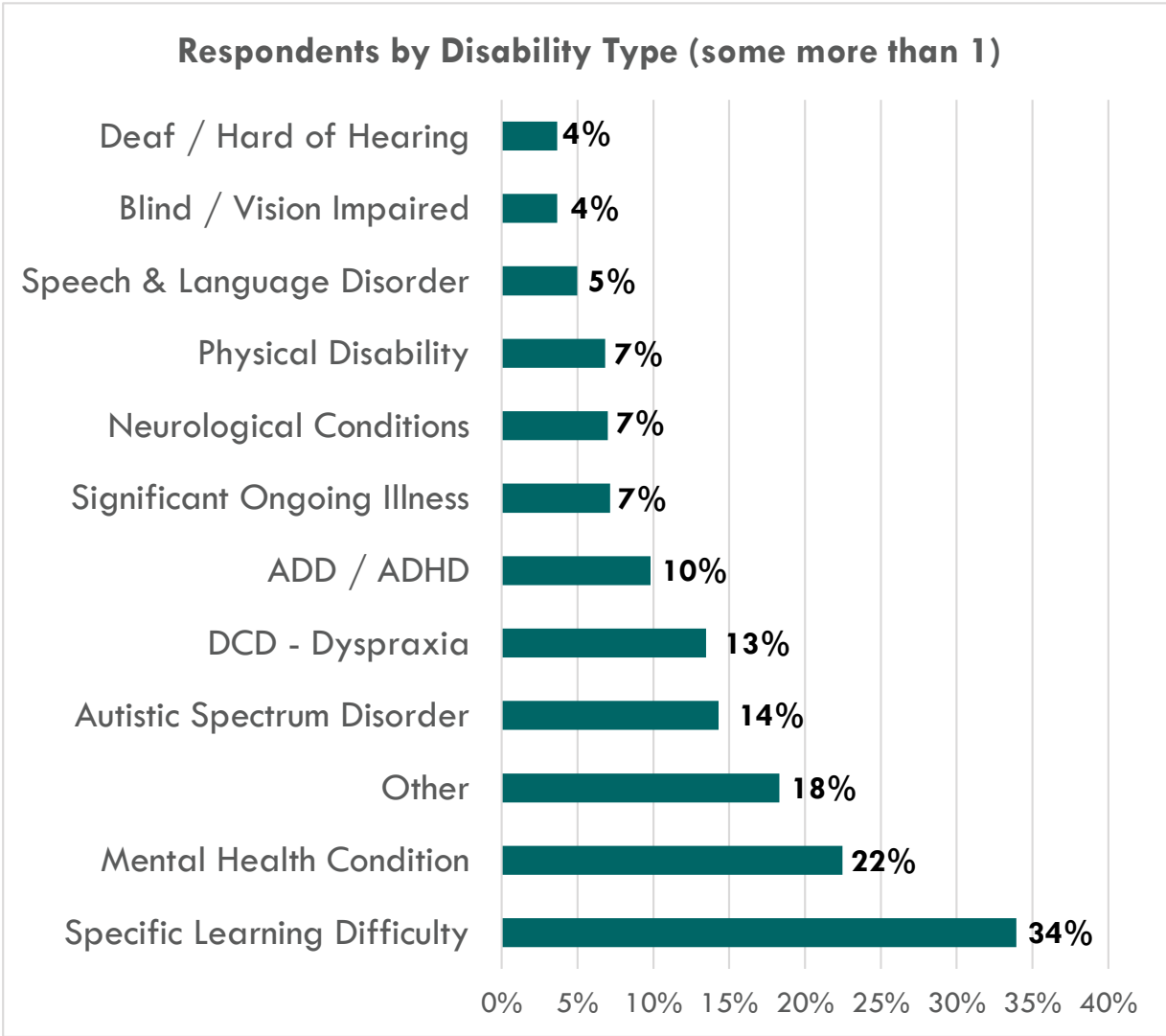
66% of respondents were enrolled in a higher education course, while 34% were in a FET/Other programme (28% said FET programme, 6% said Other but majority of 'Other' responses actually listed FET programmes in the text field provided).

Students from all categories of disability were represented in the responses with the highest numbers of students in the specific learning difficulty (34%) and mental health condition (22%) categories.

This provides us with a rich data set, from respondents with many types of disabilities, enrolled in many types of courses/programmes, residing all across the country and presents us with the opportunity to get an accurate national picture of how students with disabilities are adapting to learning remotely during Covid-19.



Figure 1 - Breakdown of respondents to the survey by disability type.



Key Findings and Student Comments



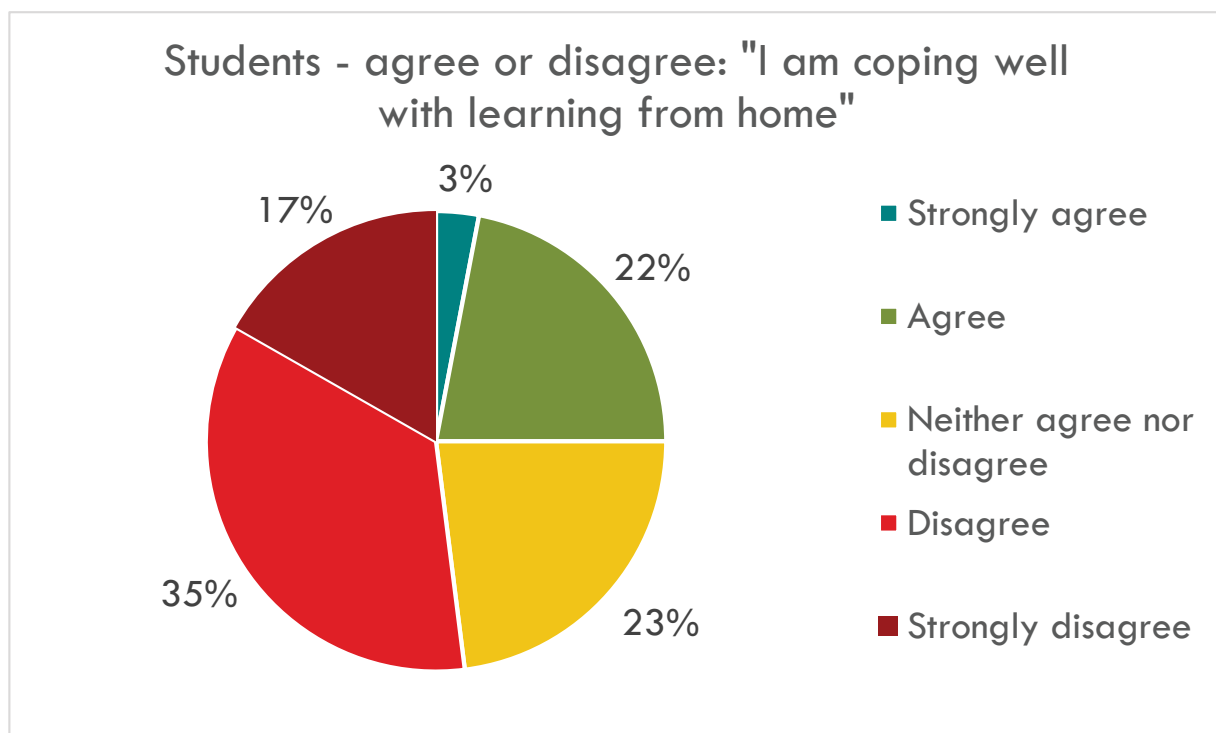
Key Findings and Student Comments

How Students are Coping with Learning from Home

This section explores how students with disabilities feel they are coping with learning from home during Covid-19.

More than half of the respondents either disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) with the statement 'I am coping well with learning from home'. One quarter of respondents either agreed (22%) or strongly agreed (3%) with the statement, while 23% said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

Figure 2 - Breakdown of reaction to the statement 'I am coping well with learning from home'



Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on How They Are Coping

“I am at breaking point without the structure - 2 young children on my own, fighting fatigue from my auto-immune disease, 2 bald patches on the front of my hair line from my hair falling out. The feeling of being alone and abandoned. My lecturers have said we all have to adapt. No understanding. I know they have their jobs to do but this is the difference of putting myself and my 2 children on the back burner for the last number of years and to fall at the last hurdle. The pressure is unbearable..”

“It has been challenging mentally and difficult to maintain motivation when suffering with mental illness without counselling and also working Frontline while family members are unwell”

“Main issue is trying to learn while also looking after my child. I have to wait until night time to do a majority of my work and then I’m too tired!”

“I’m very lost and I think I will fail the year due this. Hope Susi grant will allow to repeat the year due to Covid-19”

“I find it hard self-learning, I find it difficult to hear the lecturer on the class video calls, I feel like I’m falling behind and missing out on the information”

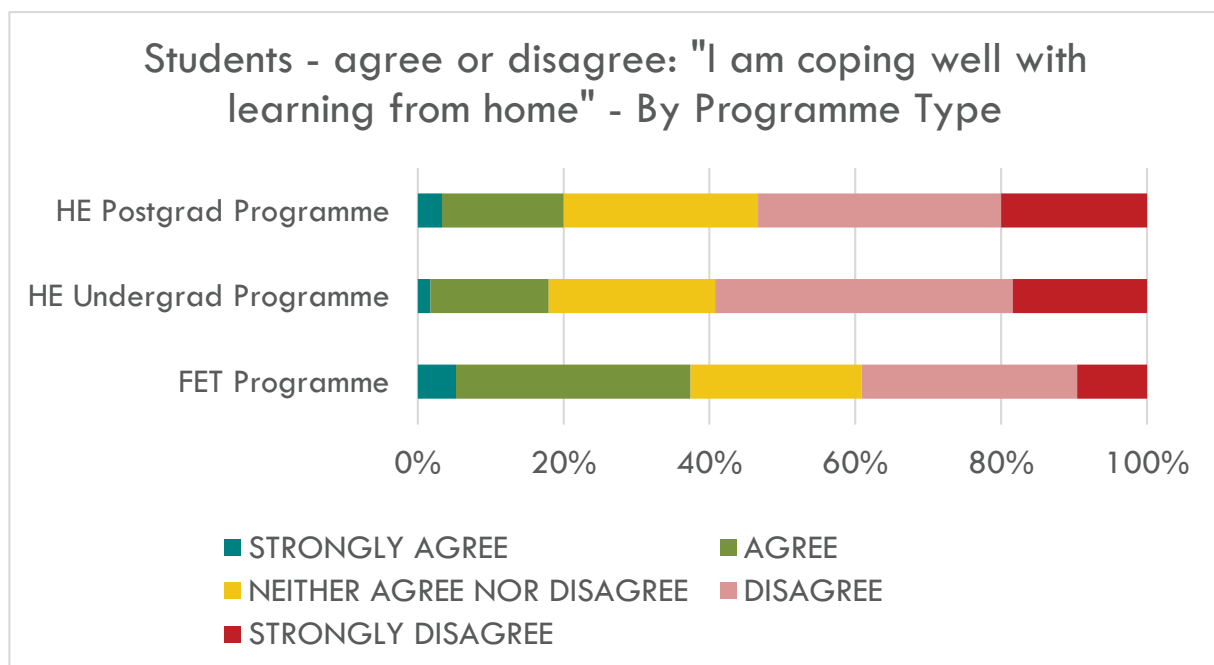
“I miss the structure of college and leaving work behind as well as the conversation with peers about assignments that can ease worries a lot. I still talk to my friends but it is not the same”

How Students Feel They Are Coping – Breakdown by Programme Type

An analysis of the data broken down by programme type shows that students with disabilities in FET programmes were significantly more likely to agree or strongly agree (37%) that they were coping well with learning from home than students in higher education undergraduate (18%) or postgraduate (20%) programmes.

Students with disabilities in higher education undergraduate programmes (59%) and postgraduate programmes (53%) were significantly more likely to disagree or strongly disagree that they were coping well with learning from home than students in FET programmes (39%).

Figure 3 - How Students Feel They Are Coping – Breakdown by Programme Type

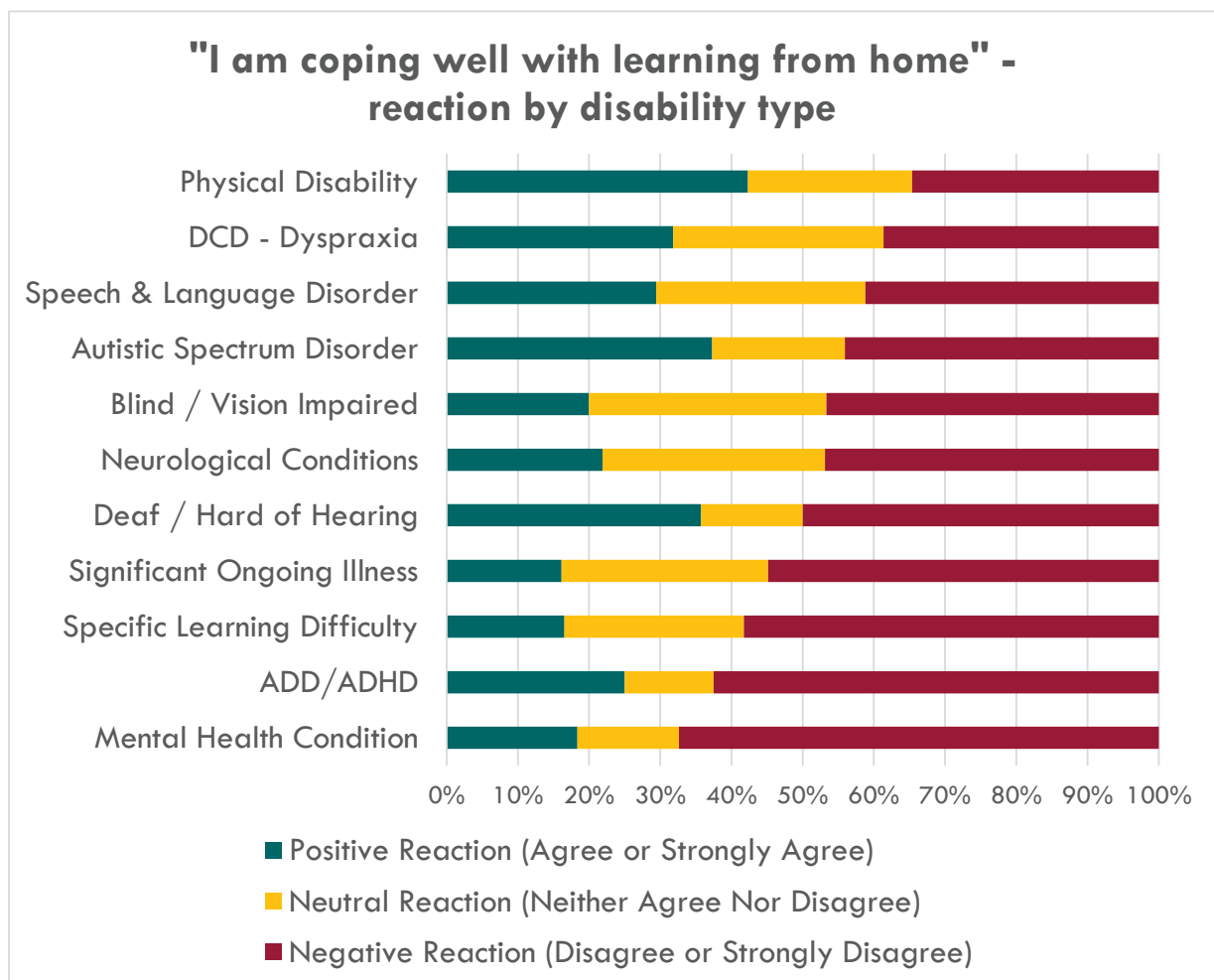


How Students Feel They Are Coping – Breakdown by Disability Type

An analysis of the data broken down by disability type shows that the students who have the highest percentage of negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) to the statement 'I am coping well with learning from home' are those with a Mental Health Condition (67%), ADD/ADHD (62%) or a Specific Learning Difficulty (58%).

The students that have the highest percentage of positive reaction to the statement are in the categories of Physical Disability (42%), Autistic Spectrum Disorder (37%) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing (36%).

Figure 4 - How Students Feel They Are Coping – Breakdown by Disability Type

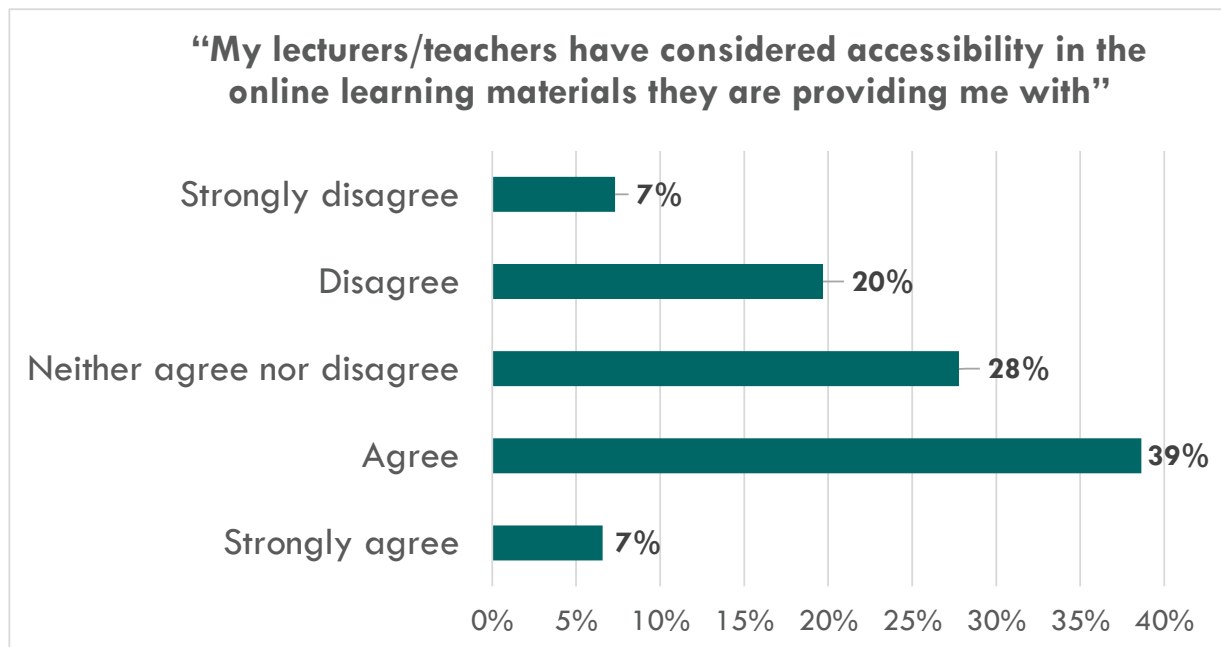


Accessibility

This section explores whether students with disabilities feel that accessibility of materials has been considered by teaching staff in the move to remote learning during Covid-19.

42% of responding students said they agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (7%) with the statement 'My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with' while 27% said they disagreed (20%) or strongly disagreed (7%) with the statement. There were a large portion of comments which pointed to accessibility of materials being lecturer/teacher dependent, differing from one to another in the same programme.

Figure 5 - Breakdown of Reaction to the Statement 'My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with'



Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Accessibility and Learning from Home

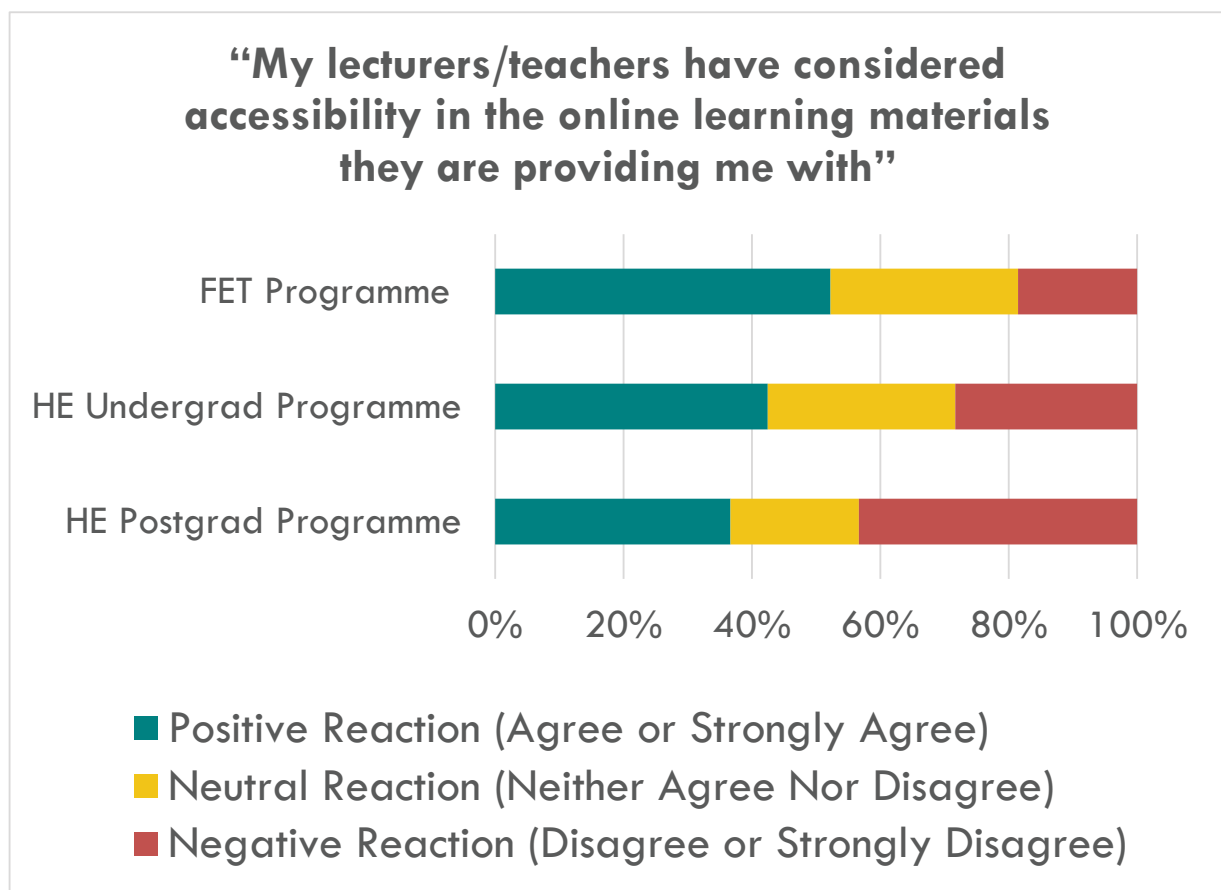
- “Instead of practical workshop we would normally have we instead have to do lengthy assignments, which I feel do not dictate my knowledge of the subject as I have a hard expressing my knowledge of practical subjects with words.”
- “My LENS report states I am to receive notes and readings in advanced and in the since my diagnoses only one lecturer has actually followed my LENS report.”
- “Recorded lecture videos don’t have captions turned on.”
- “I have made my own work and materials accessible for me to study and work with.”
- “The internet strength is poor and many teachers send files of too high quality to read.”
- “Some lecturers are very forthcoming with e-mails, reminders, and course information and maintaining college structure. Others are using video tutorials as means for presenting modules. Others use PowerPoint and downloads for the use of self-work with module. There is no across board structure for this new way of learning.”
- “All of my assessments involve oral presentations to be pre-recorded. I am not able to perform presentations.”
- “2000-2500-word reports in practical courses are unrealistic and difficult for students with dyslexia and the likes to cope with.”

Accessibility and Learning from Home – Breakdown by Programme Type

When broken down by programme type, students with disabilities on FET programmes (52%) were notably more likely to have a positive reaction (agree or strongly agree) to the statement ‘My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with’ than students in HE undergraduate (42%) or HE postgraduate (37%) programmes.

Students in HE postgraduate programmes (43%) were significantly more likely to have a negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) to the statement than those in HE undergraduate (28%) or FET programmes (19%).

Figure 6 - Reaction to Accessibility and Learning from Home – Breakdown by Programme Type

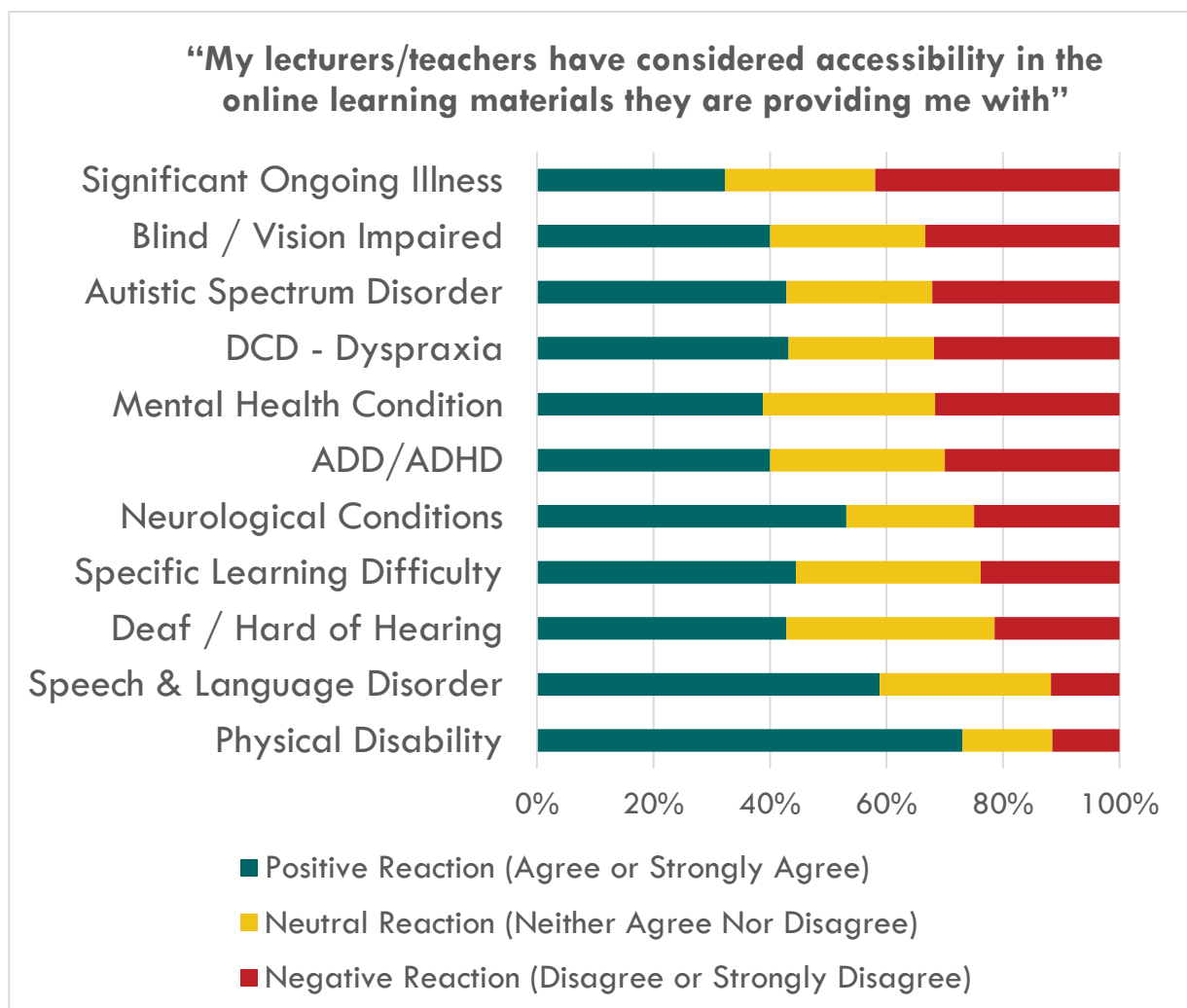


Accessibility and Learning from Home – Breakdown by Disability Type

Analysis of the data broken down by disability type shows that the students who have the highest percentage of negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) to the statement ‘My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with’ are students in the Significant Ongoing Illness (42%), Blind/Vision Impaired (33%) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder Categories (32%).

The students that have the highest percentage of positive reaction to the statement are in the categories of Physical Disability (73%), Speech and Language Disorder (59%) and Neurological Conditions (53%).

Figure 7 - Reaction to Accessibility and Learning from Home – Breakdown by Programme Type



Assistive Technologies

This section explores the level of assistive technology use of students with disabilities and examines issues arising with the use of these technologies from home during Covid-19.

Just over one quarter of the respondents (26%) said that they used Assistive Technologies (AT). Of the students who said they did use AT, 72% said they had no difficulty accessing or using their AT in their learning from home, while 28% said they had experienced some issues in this regard.

Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Assistive Tech Use

“Lectures are delivered differently, and unfortunately, I left the special paper to write on up in cork.”

“I can’t set it up properly at home.”

“No laptop.”

“My ZoomText fusion will not work with teams or zoom as they are both big packages so my laptop shuts down or switches off when I try to use both together to access material or lectures online.”

“I don’t have access to it at home on my private computer.”

“Only dictation on work, couldn’t access but not a major obstacle, just would make like handier.”



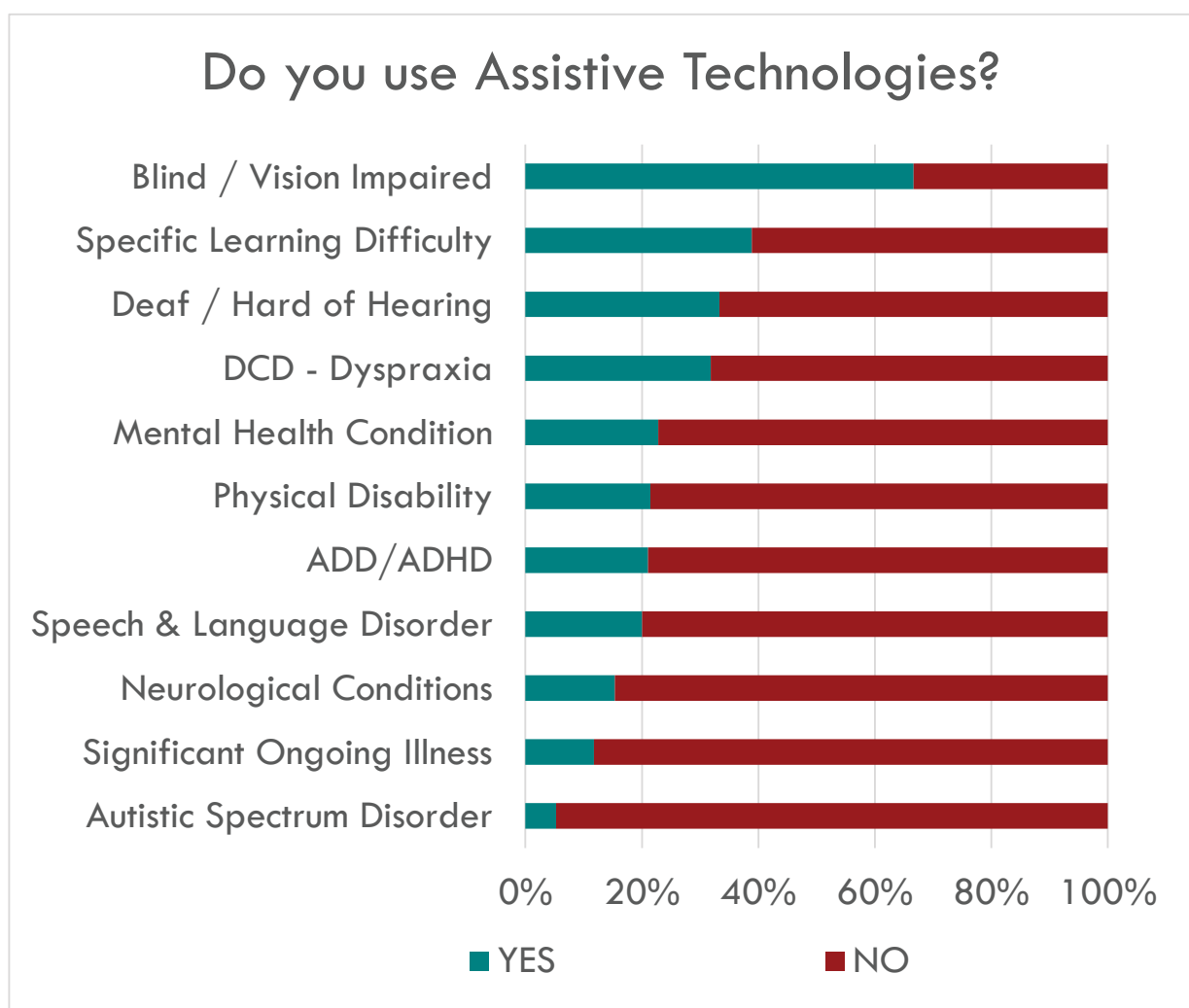
Assistive Technology Use – Breakdown by Disability Type

An analysis of the data broken down by disability type shows that the students who have the highest percentage of reported AT use are Blind/Visually Impaired students, with more than two thirds (67%) of them reporting AT use.

The categories of disability that have the next highest reported AT use are Specific Learning Difficulty (39%) and Deaf/Hard of Hearing students (33%).

The categories of disability with the lowest reported AT use are Autistic Spectrum Disorder (5%), Significant Ongoing Illness (12%) and Neurological Conditions (15%).

Figure 8 - Assistive Technology Use – Breakdown by Disability Type



Home Setup and Technology

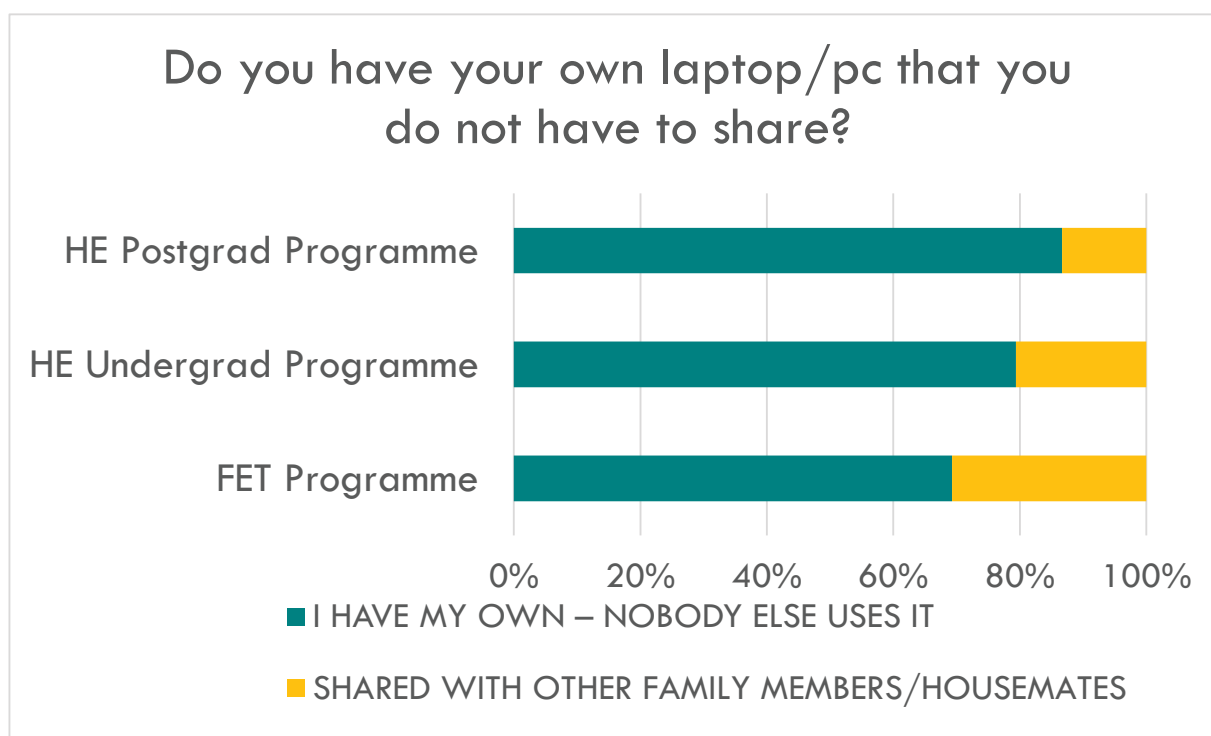
This section explores the home setup/situation of students with disabilities during Covid-19 with regard to the physical space they are learning from, the technology they are using to access their learning, the strength of internet access and the family demands/distractions which might impact on their ability to learn from home.

Laptop/PC Access

98% of the responding students with disabilities reported that they had access to a laptop or PC in their home*.

Of those who said they had access to a laptop, 24% said it was a shared laptop used also by other family members or housemates while 76% said it was solely for their own use. The percentage of students who are learning with a laptop/pc that is shared with another family member/housemate was notably higher in FET programmes (31%) than in HE undergrad (21%) or postgrad (13%) programmes.

Figure 9 - Laptop/PC Access - Breakdown by Programme Type



45% of the respondents rated the performance of their laptop as average. 36% rated their laptop/pc performance as above average (21%) or excellent (15%), while 19% rated it as below average (14%) or very poor (5%).

* Please note, this survey was conducted in an online only format which would significantly impact on ability of those without a device to respond.



Internet Access/Quality

96% of the respondents reported that they have an internet connection where they are currently living while 4% did not*.

Of those that do have an internet connection, 26% rate the strength of their connection as below average (17%) or very poor (9%), while 28% rate it as above average (19%) or excellent (9%). 46% rated the strength of their internet connection as average.

Learning Space

19% of respondents said that they don't have a private space in their home where they can engage with learning with minimal distraction and a further 33% said they only sometimes do. 48% said that they do have such a private space in their homes.

Respondents were also asked to rate the physical set up (e.g. availability of a desk, comfortable chair, lighting etc.) in the space where they learn from home. 28% of respondents rated the physical set up, where they normally engage with their learning at home, as below average (18%) or very poor (10%). A large number of the more negative comments attached to this question pointed to students studying on their beds.

* Please note, this survey was conducted in an online only format which would significantly impact on ability of those without an internet connection to respond.

Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on their Home Setup and Technology

“I use the kitchen table it means books on and off the table all the time my back, neck and shoulders are killing me and the tension from the anxiety brought on by the Covid has meant I am taking a lot more pain medication just to physically function.”

“Have to do work with laptop on my knees. Cannot afford a desk with proper lighting for my eye condition”

“Have to use the kitchen only place with a table to set up but my family is constantly in and out even when I ask them not to it is really difficult to get any work done. I am scared as I have no place else to do my exams, I don't feel I will do well with the set up I have but have no other choice”

“The only place I can study is my room on my bed with bad lighting”

“I have no space during the day as 3 family members are working from home and in the evenings the lighting is too poor and I have too much distractions/noise as my quiet area to study at my dining room table is situated off the kitchen and living space.”

“I just don't have a comfortable chair for prolonged hours of study or exams. I sit at my dressing table with a stool and study. After half an hour or so I can feel my shoulders and neck sore from not having an ergonomic chair to sit at for hours. This is distracting.”



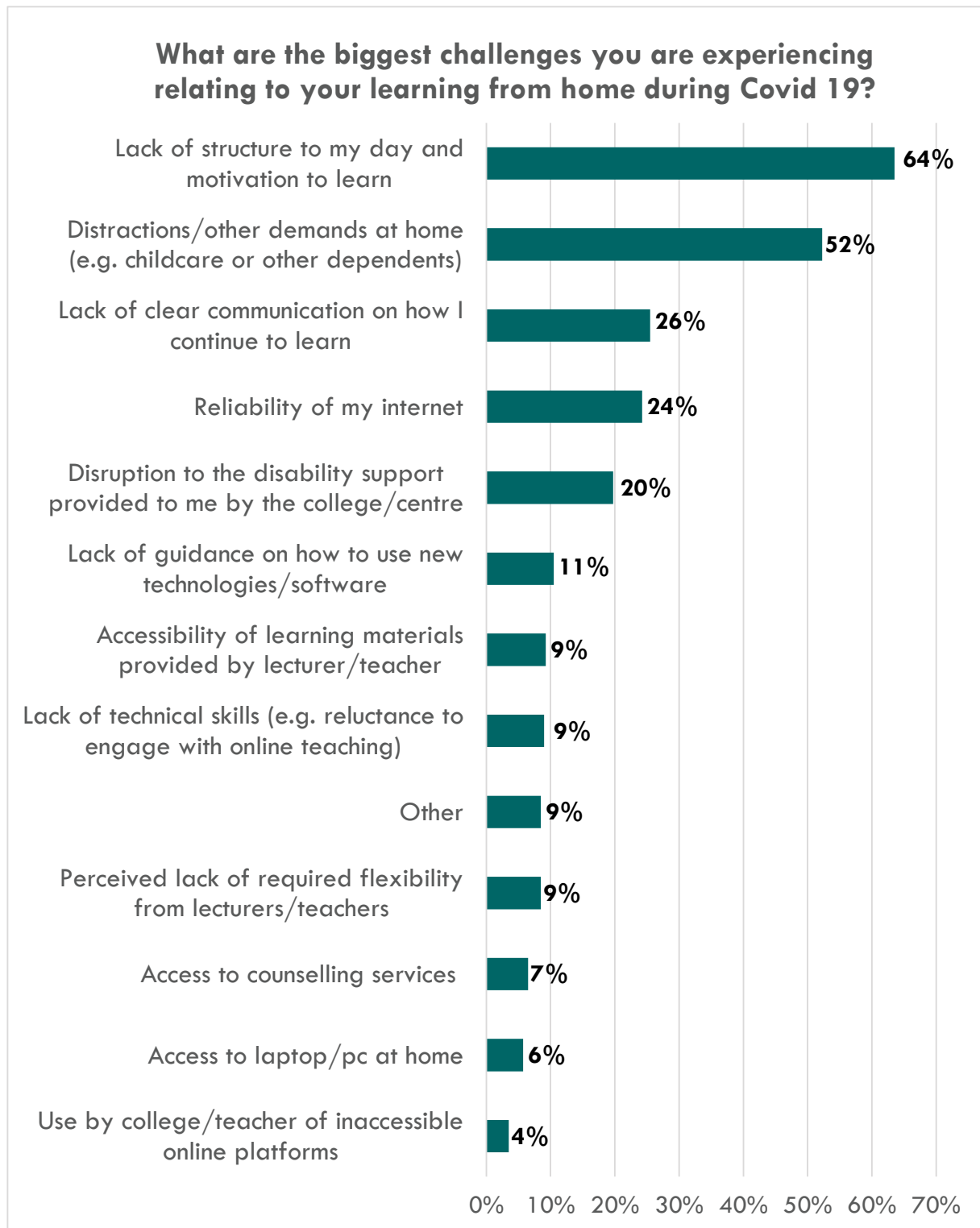
Biggest Challenges - Learning and Assessment

This section explores what students with disabilities believe are their biggest challenges in learning from home during Covid-19.

Learning from Home

The five biggest challenges learning from home reported by the respondents were a 'Lack of structure to my day and motivation to learn' (64%), 'Distractions/other demands at home' (52%), 'Lack of clear communication from the college/centre of how I continue to engage in learning' (26%), the 'Reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household' (24%) and 'Disruption to the disability support provided to me by the college/centre' (20%).

Figure 10 - Biggest Challenges Learning from Home During Covid-19



Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Their Biggest Challenges Learning from Home

“Struggling with the doubled online work load due to dyslexia, lack of support through lecturer interaction, counselling services, DSS, library resources”

“A lot of lecturers don’t give us any Audio support which makes for a lot more reading therefore taking more time to go through the content.”

“If I was in college, I could walk away from poverty life for a few hours - here it never ever ends.”

“Working from home with a mental illness is difficult, sleep routine is non-existent and lecturers schedule classes and do not record them, most of the time I cannot avail of these because I am trying to sleep. When I wake up, there is no recording of lectures so I am falling behind.”

“I am a lone parent...doing all my assignments at night time and getting around 3-4 hours of sleep a night.”

“I have severe dyslexia and all this online stuff is just going absolutely nowhere for me I’m confused I don’t know what I’m reading I’m not taking any information in whatsoever! I’m really struggling and feel like I’ve missed out a lot”

“The lecture breaks up due to poor internet connection. I have emailed some lecturers and they haven’t gotten back to me and I find the breakdown in communication appalling. As someone with Asperger’s syndrome I find it very difficult to communicate with people when I have a problem. It takes a lot for me to ask someone for help so it would make it a lot easier if the lecturers were more approachable.”

“I have younger siblings to take care of and make sure they are doing their work that they are assigned as my dad is working and my mam has physical mental conditions that prevent her from doing a lot around the house. Making sure meals are provided and that the pets are taken care of is a bigger priority. Not having a counselling session something that is missing in my

routine. With my audio and visual hallucinations and delusions, it is becoming challenging to continue with everyday life”

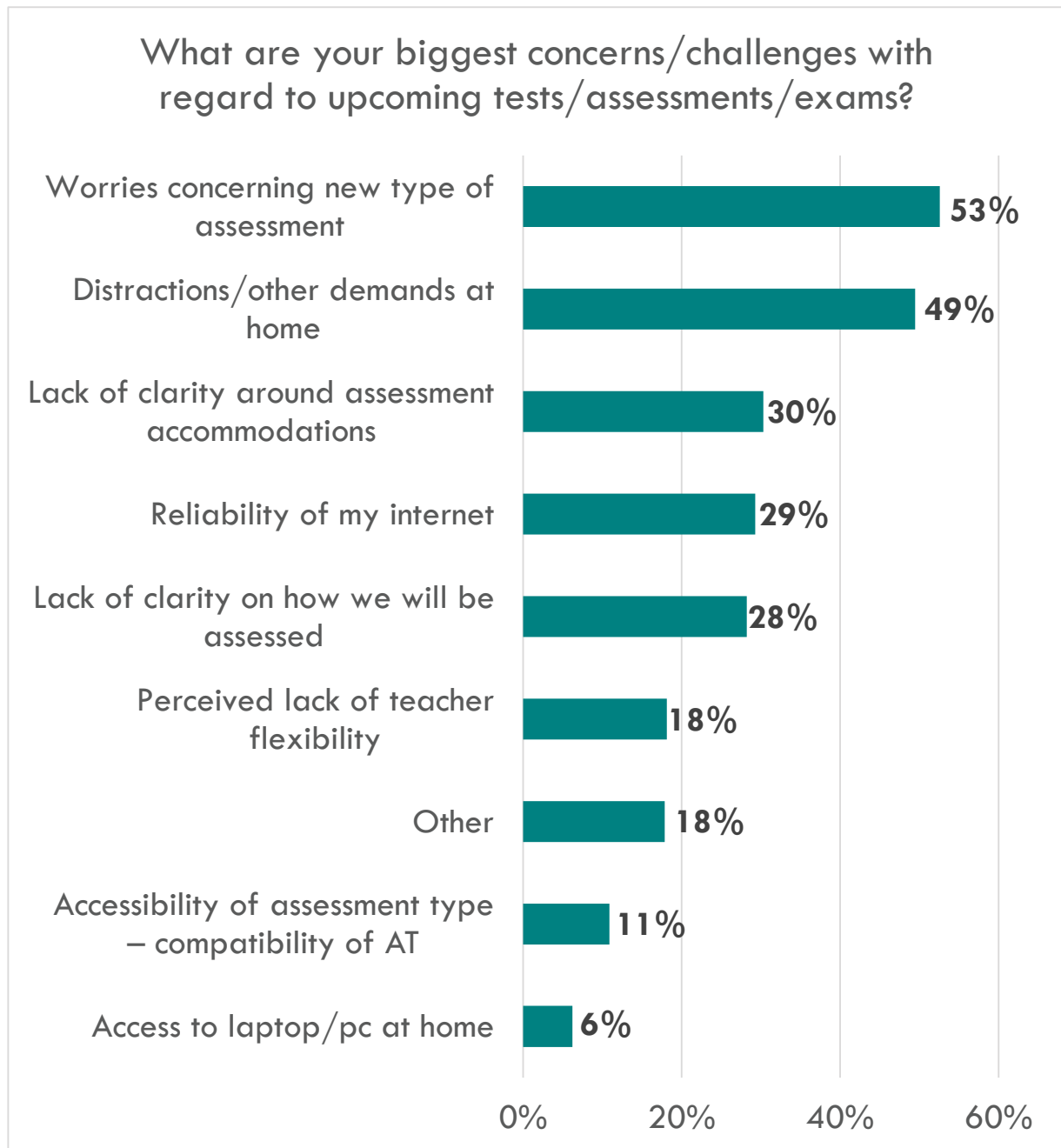
“My mental health has severely suffered during this time which has further exacerbated the problems that my disabilities cause me. Motivation and a lack of structure are huge issues for me right now as a result. Many of my lecturers have been slow to adapt to the new situation, both in the sense that they’re slow when learning new technology and some have been refusing to adjust our assessment/marking scheme....we still have a full, demanding workload that doesn’t reflect that anything’s unusual. I’m now home with my family all the time and have responsibilities around the house. I’m also impacted by my parents’ stress and worry (over their jobs, their health, the health of other members of the family) as well as my own. It’s a very tense environment.”



Assessment from Home

The five biggest challenges or concerns reported by the respondents about taking their upcoming assessments from home were 'worries concerning new type of assessment' (53%), 'distractions/other demands at home' (49%), a 'lack of clarity around whether/how accommodations for exams/assessments will be provided' (30%), the 'reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household' (29%) and a 'lack of clarity about how we will be assessed' (28%).

Figure 11 - Biggest Challenges/Concerns Regarding Upcoming Assessments



Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Their Assessment Concerns

- “I usually use this full extra 20 mins in a normal written exam and with the change of the exam to an online assessment and having to type rather than write, I feel like these 20 minutes will not be nearly enough time to accommodate the challenges I face with my disability”
- “I feel forced to try and get a PC to run the software I require to complete work. I feel like I am not being equally graded as when it (the assignment deadline) arrives, I will be under pressure to complete upcoming work while trying to catch up on previous assignments I’ve missed. I don’t think it’s fair to grade me on my work completion considering the circumstances I’m in as I don’t have the ability to show my skills and what I have learned.”
- “My internet is very bad and because of this it sometimes takes hours to upload an assignment which takes time from other modules.”
- “I am worried that they will not go over the exams/ assignments with us in a virtual call. Everything else is on a poor audio file
- “I normally get extra time and a spelling and grammar waiver during my exams. I am unsure of what waivers I will still receive during the new assessments. I am unsure of how my internet could lag during my open book exam and I am also worried about this form of testing. Distractions are my biggest concern for all my assignments and exam replacements.”
- “I feel my learning agreement has not been considered and not everyone is good on the computer so these open book exams are not suitable to me”
- “Need direction that I can follow easily, been given 6 different briefs constantly been changed and not really explained, as well as juggling home-schooling and college work with no laptop and crap Internet.”
- “I needed lots of guidance and assistance uploading pictures and videos online which I found difficult. I would have benefited with upgrading my computer skills.”



“We have been given alternative assessments in the form of essays but so far in our course, we’ve never done them so I’ve no idea how they want them or what they want in them. I specifically chose my course as it is more hands-on learning in labs”

“Have to do an oral exam through Skype, which is very difficult living in a full house. I’m very bad with technology and find that it will take me much longer to complete an exam and we’re not given enough extra time to complete the exam.”

“Lots of uncertainty, anxiety, and lack of proper training with the proper tools, due to one of these important apps not working until a week or 2 before the epidemic happened, and even then, I couldn’t get any help with actually using it, leading to me feeling hopeless.”

“If my eyes are able to stand the long hours looking at a laptop screen, as I get tired eyes which leads to migraine and then I can’t focus or do anymore work”

“As students we have no idea what grade we are at and no idea what way we are being assessed. There doesn’t seem to be any accommodations made for the situation we are in”

“I’ve received no help when it comes to assignments, or how to complete them. There has also been no information regarding repeat exams.”

“Students have been assured they will still have their disability accommodations, yet no one has explained how those will work for example with extra time/rest breaks when the tests will have an online timer with a submission that is sure to close as soon as time is up.”

“I would usually have a reader for exams and everything so now I don’t have that there is extra pressure on me.”

Information from College/Centre

This section explores whether students with disabilities believe that they have received clear information from their college/centre about how they continue to participate in their programme remotely and how they will be assessed during Covid-19.

57% of the respondents either agreed (45%) or strongly agreed (12%) with the statement 'I have received clear information from my college/centre with regard to how I can continue to participate in learning remotely'. 18% of respondents either disagreed (12%) or strongly disagreed (6%) with the statement while 25% neither agreed nor disagreed. Lots of comments alluded to the clarity provided being lecturer/instructor dependent and varying between modules in their programmes.

59% of the respondents either agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (17%) with the statement 'I have received clear information from my college/centre with regard to how my course/programme will be assessed remotely'. 23% disagreed (17%) or strongly disagreed (6%) with the statement while 18% neither agreed nor disagreed.



Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Clarity of Information Provided

- “The emails have too much to read and I find myself losing interest and missing the point on the emails”
- “They have changed the complete structure of the exams there is no choice like past papers and also there is online quizzes which you cannot go back to a question if you’ve time at the end. The course I’m doing is very time sensitive we need every second more than most. There is no technique of doing your strongest topics first in the MCQ’s anymore and we feel very disadvantaged by this.”
- “My lecturers have been communicating verbally but haven’t discussed with me of how I’m coping doing online assignments.”
- “They have provided the information but it is hard to understand for everybody, especially those with a learning difficulty. I am a class representative and get messages from my peers about the assignment but I have no extra knowledge, this is stressful. “
- “There has been a lack of communication between lecturers and students and therefore I don’t fully understand what I need to do or what is expected of me.”
- “We were told there is ‘Replacement Assessments’ at the end, but it feels like vague information, and I feel so hopeless from everything going on, that I don’t know how I’m supposed to do good in them.”
- “No clear dates have been given. I have days where 4 assessments are due on the same day.”

Financial Concerns

This section explores if students with disabilities have financial concerns as a result of Covid-19 which may affect their ability to learn effectively.

36% of respondents said they had financial concerns as a result of the Covid-19 crisis that are impacting on their ability to learn effectively, while 64% said they did not.

Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Financial Concerns

“The college has switched to an online delivery, but they still expect the full fees. Equivalent online courses are half the cost elsewhere. I may need to pay for new medical equipment that is not covered by long term illness/medical card and am unsure exactly how I will pay.”

“I’m on Susi, need to pay for Adobe (software) and can’t afford stuff like TextHelp (software).”

“I have been forced to spend my savings on a PC to complete my work and try pass my module as the only other option I have been given is to repeat next year. I don’t want to repeat and paying 1400 for a PC is better than paying 3000 to repeat in my opinion. I have been forced into this and the college has provided no support.”

“I am afraid I will not get a job in summer to fund my masters in 20/21.”

“I cannot work at my college-based part-time job because the campus is closed. I applied for the COVID-19 payment but I’m not sure if I will get it because my weekly pay would be far less than what the emergency payment would give me. I have severe asthma and am afraid to find a customer service job right now because I am hospitalized at least yearly with pneumonia.”

“Financially not being able to attend my next year in college as I don’t get financial help and I’m currently out of work and will be for the summer so I probably won’t be able to afford student accommodation and my college fees for next year without a big struggle and stress.”



“ I am out of work and have to pay off my student loan. Also, our course leaders want us to buy materials to do work which is added financial pressure on top of massive college fees when we aren't even attending college.”

“ I have no idea where I'm going to get the money for accommodation by August when I can't take out another loan and with it being hard to find work right now.”

“ Worried about how I'm going to be able to afford college next year due to studying at home as everything has become more expensive - buying printer, paper, ink, WIFI.”

Longer Term Learning Concerns

This section explores what longer/medium term concerns students with disabilities have about the impact that Covid-19 may have on their ability to continue learning.

66% of the responding students with disabilities said that they had concerns about how Covid-19 will impact on their ability to continue studying/learning in the medium/longer term, while 34% said they did not.

Many comments focussed on the struggle to learn remotely and fearing that remote learning may continue in to the autumn, while others referenced family demands and financial issues.

Notable Comments from Students with Disabilities on Longer Term Learning Concerns

“I have concerns on how my next year will be approached if quarantine continues as the current approach to studying and learning is hit or miss”

“As I learn from listening, not having lectures has put me to fail”

“I will not be able to complete this course through online delivery. It is impossible.”

“My mental health is suffering a lot.”

“I am afraid I will continue to live in panic and having panic attacks when my exam paper is uploaded. Also, my lack of available time to study with 5000 questions a day and ‘Mammy will you play with me’ all day long. I have completely packed in home-schooling also as the stress was unbearable... if I have to do repeats my life will be a prolonged nightmare.”

“I’m currently employed as a beauty therapist and make-up artist, there may not be a job for me to return to and my partner is high risk so I fear bringing it home to him if I return to work. I also don’t know how I can afford my HDip next year so may not be able to attend college.”



“As my course is very practical based, we are limited in how much we can progress with learning through online studies.”

“I think I am going to fail first year. I can't study with everyone home in my house. I'm struggling to divide the classes as they should be.”

“I am afraid if once the new term starts, we are still only doing online learning, I may have to defer as my mental health cannot allow for good enough grades under those circumstances.”

“I am completing a one-year FETAC course with the hope of progressing onto a Degree Course. With Covid-19 I am unsure whether colleges will reopen, how the CAO process will be implemented or will a deferred Leaving Cert Exam affect college entrance for non-Leaving Cert students like myself.”

“Colleges should have brought in a non-detrimental policy when it comes to marking and students should have been made aware of this to put our minds at ease.”

Recommendations



Recommendations

Recommendations for Colleges/Centres

- » When the Covid-19 restrictions are reduced, prioritise campus face to face access to counselling services for learners with Mental Health Difficulties, particularly those with diagnosed illnesses. In the meantime, ensure counselling services reach out to contact learners most at risk and provide online counselling where possible.
- » Provide learners with a choice of assessment/access to alternative assessment to mitigate against the numerous barriers which may prevent them from being able to participate effectively in exams on any given day (personal, technological, accessibility, assessment overload etc). When designing assessments, consider how learners with poor internet access, badly performing technologies and family demands/distractions have an equal opportunity to complete their programme.
- » Ensure maximum flexibility is provided to learners regarding deadlines. Call on departments to coordinate deadlines of newly introduced continuous assessments and exams so that they are spaced out and give learners ample time to complete with due consideration given to the potential difficult personal circumstances/home set up which may impact on learners' ability to engage.
- » Ensure that reasonable accommodations are fully applied in the provision of online assessments and exams and that students have clarity about what accommodations they will receive and how they will be provided. Provide additional 'extra time' to cater for the longer time needed for learners with disabilities to engage in online exams than face to face exams (e.g. interacting with a scribe over skype). For example, where learners with disabilities may have been given 10 mins extra per hour, this needs to be significantly increased in an online setting.
- » Reiterate the need for teaching staff to consider basic accessibility in the materials they produce and provide guidance/CPD on how to build in accessibility when designing learning materials.
- » Where online lectures are being delivered, ensure that lectures are recorded and made available as quickly as possible to students unable to participate synchronously. Where software (e.g. Teams) used for delivery has auto-captioning as a feature, turn it on. Liaise with students who are deaf/hard of hearing to plan professional captioned solutions for them.



- »» When using new assessment formats (e.g. open book exams), ensure students fully understand what they are, provide demonstrations to the students and ensure they have a chance to trial any new/unfamiliar platforms in advance. This should also apply to any new technologies being used to deliver learning.
- »» When Covid-19 restrictions are reduced prioritise access to the library facilities for students who have poor physical/technical setup for study from home, or family circumstances which mean they have no/little ability to learn effectively from home.
- »» Coordinate information being sent to learners by different departments to reduce amount of communication and avoid overlap. Keep communication clear and concise and provide learners with communication channels to clarify issues and ask questions.
- »» Explore ways in which to replace the informal face to face peer to peer support which learners typically receive on campus with an alternative online (e.g. buddy systems, online student chat rooms/meetings, increased number of group projects).

National Recommendations

- » Set up a national helpline which students who are struggling with anxiety and mental health difficulties can call for support and guidance during Covid-19.
- » Ensure SUSI grants to students and state funding to colleges will cater for any student wishing to repeat or defer as a result of the impact of Covid-19.
- » Explore provision of a bursary to reimburse economically disadvantaged students who have had to purchase technologies as a result of Covid-19.
- » Explore ways to ensure no learner is left without a laptop or internet connection should online learning continue to be a major feature of the 2020/21 academic year.
- » Examine ways to replace the income learners would traditionally have earned through summer and part-time work. Students with disabilities in at risk groups are adversely affected by this.



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