Students with Invisible Disabilities: Unique Challenges for Academic Librarians in Ireland

Dissertation submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science (MSc) Information & Library Management at Dublin Business School

Gráinne Mooney
Student Number: 10034102
Declaration

Declaration: I, Gráinne Mooney, declare that this research is my original work and that it has never been presented to any institution or university for the award of Degree or Diploma. In addition, I have referenced correctly all literature and sources used in this work and this work is fully compliant with the Dublin Business School’s academic honesty policy.

Signed: Gráinne Mooney Date: 22 August 2016
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Abstract

This dissertation examines the unique challenges academic librarians in Ireland face in providing their services and supports to students with invisible disabilities. It is a qualitative study, undertaken over the months of June, July and August 2016 which involved a number of one to one interviews of academic librarians based in Dublin, Kildare and Belfast. The research outlines the current awareness of invisible disabilities within the academic library sector and the resources and best practices currently in use in the provision of library facilities to third level students with invisible disabilities. The research also shows that there is an increasing number of students with disabilities attending third level education and that most of these students have an invisible disability. The study finds that academic librarians tend to have a proactive approach in their provision of services to this cohort of students and shows them to be actively involved in the sharing of their knowledge and experience and engage in close collaboration with their respective disability support services and access offices. The diverse nature of conditions that constitute an invisible disability adds greatly to the challenges faced by academic librarians and their desire for further training in this area is very much apparent. This research also draws attention to the existence of any unintentional barriers within each library which may be causing issues for students with invisible disabilities. Overall, this study shows academic librarians have a keen interest in invisible disabilities and how they impact on their students. It shows the librarians to be actively involved in providing effective services and supports to these students and are constantly looking at ways in which they can improve these supports.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................... ii  
Abstract ........................................................................ iii  

List of Tables ...................................................................... vii

List of Figures ..................................................................... vii

1 Introduction .................................................................... 1

1.1 The Research Questions ................................................. 3
1.2 Rationale of the Research ............................................... 4
1.3 The Objectives of the Research ........................................ 5
1.4 Irish Statistics .................................................................. 6
1.5 Defining Invisible Disability ............................................. 8
  1.5.1 Ireland .................................................................... 9
  1.5.2 United Kingdom ........................................................ 9
  1.5.3 European Union ....................................................... 9
  1.5.4 United States .......................................................... 9
  1.5.5 Australia ................................................................ 10
1.6 The Contribution of the Research .................................... 10
1.7 Organisation of the Dissertation ...................................... 11

2 Literature Review ............................................................ 12

2.1 Academic librarians supporting students with invisible disabilities ............................................ 12
2.2 Third level education for individuals with invisible disabilities ......................................................... 15
2.3 Students with invisible disabilities taking part in the process .............................................................. 17
2.4 Summary ........................................................................ 18

3 Methodology ..................................................................... 20

3.1 Introduction .................................................................. 20
3.2 Research Philosophy ...................................................... 21
3.3 Research Approach ......................................................... 22
3.4 Research Strategy and Choice ......................................... 23
3.5 Time Horizon .................................................................. 23
3.6 Techniques and Procedures ............................................. 23
  3.6.1 How the research was carried out ............................... 24
### 3.6.2 The Value and Importance of the Study

### 3.6.3 The Justification of the Study

### 3.6.4 The Restrictions of the Method

### 3.7 Ethical Issues

#### 4 Research Findings and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Introduction</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Findings and Analysis</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1 Awareness</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 Training</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Policies and Procedures</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.4 Disclosure</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5 Resources and Best Practices</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5.1 Disability Services Librarian</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5.2 Disability Support Service and Access Office</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5.3 Assistive Technologies</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.5.4 Inductions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6 Unintentional Barriers</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6.1 Signage and Way-Finding</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6.2 Self-Issue and Online Facilities</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.6.3 Physical Space</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.7 Collaboration between librarians and teaching staff</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.8 Academic Librarians - Proactive or Reactive?</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Summary</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 5 Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Addressing the research title</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Awareness of invisible disabilities among academic librarians</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Training</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4 Disclosure</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5 Resources and Best Practices</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4 Unintentional Barriers</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5 Collaboration</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.6 Proactive or Reactive</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Recommendations 49
5.4 Summary 51
Bibliography 53
Appendix 1 - Interview Questions 58
Appendix 2 - Introduction Email 63
Appendix 3 - Information/Informed Consent Form 65
Appendix 3 - Personal Reflection 68
  1. Introduction 68
  2. My Learning Experience 68
  3. Presentations 69
  4. Group Work 69
  5. Information Overload 70
  6. Work Placement 70
  7. Assignments and Exams 71
  8. Dissertation 71
  9. Summary 72
List of Tables

Table 1.1: List of some conditions categorised as invisible disabilities 8
Table 4.1: Student Numbers and those registered with Disability Services 31

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Numbers of students with disabilities 1993/94 to 2013/14 2
Figure 3.1: Profile of total disabled student population 2014/15 20
Introduction

Inclusion, accessibility, equality, diversity, dignity and fairness are just some of the many concepts heard when addressing the rights of individuals who live with a disability. Human diversity is being recognised and accepted as a normal part of the human condition and something to be celebrated rather than hidden away. There have been many positive developments particularly in the education sector which have resulted in an increase in the number of students with disability progressing from second level to third level education. Colleges and universities in Ireland have come a long way in making their facilities inclusive and accessible to all, and academic librarians have been key players in this endeavour. This research examines how academic librarians in Ireland are overcoming the unique challenges that they face; ensuring that students with invisible disability have full access to their library services.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. The Convention which celebrates human diversity and human dignity stipulates that persons with disabilities are entitled to the full spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination (United Nations, 2014). This year (2016) marks the tenth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention which Ireland signed in March 2007, and has committed to ratifying by the end of this year. It recognises persons with disabilities as primary stakeholders, active participants and equal partners in State action around disability (NIU Galway & Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2016, p. iii). According to the CRPD, individuals with disabilities 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 (NIU Galway & Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2016, p. iv).

While the majority of Irish people are probably unaware of the Convention, there can be little denying that once ratified it will have an impact on those working in the education sector, among others. However, universities have made great progress in making their facilities
accessible to students living with disabilities and now foster an inclusive learning environment. This is reflected by the ever increasing numbers of such students participating in higher education as borne out by the AHEAD study Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2013/2015 which shows the number of students with disabilities participating in higher education having doubled in the 5 years leading up to the study (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 The increasing numbers of students with disabilities from AHEAD’s first survey on the subject in 1993/94 right through to 2013/14.

Academic librarians have played a key role in creating, developing and maintaining such an inclusive educational environment and continue to do so. As a profession they play a very proactive role in providing a diverse and dynamic information service to all their students. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine in detail the unique challenges that academic librarians in Ireland face in providing support specifically to students with invisible disabilities. It looks to establish what level of awareness and understanding there is of invisible disabilities among academic librarians and also what supports they have in place for students with such disabilities. Another research goal was to ascertain what, if any specialised training is available to academic librarians in this area. It was also proposed to establish what kind of collaboration exists between library staff and teaching staff that might
benefit students with invisible disabilities and to see if there is a sector-wide approach in supporting these students or more of a institute-specific one.

The research in this study was carried out by conducting one to one interviews with academic librarians across the following eight third level colleges:

The amount of direct contact the interviewed librarians have with students in general varied and was dependant on each librarian’s role and the size of the institution in question. However, they all have a good knowledge of how their libraries manage and meet the challenges involved in supporting students with both visible and invisible disabilities.

1.1 The Research Questions

This research project seeks to address how academic librarians in Ireland are meeting the unique challenges presented to them in providing support to students with invisible disabilities. In addressing this issue the following areas were explored in an effort to gain a fuller understanding of the current situation:
- Awareness of invisible disabilities among academic librarians;
- Training or lack of, in the area of invisible disabilities;
- Awareness of policies and procedures pertaining to disabilities either visible or invisible;
- Disclosure of a student’s invisible disability;
- Examples of best practices and resources in the provision of library services to students with invisible disabilities;
- Examples of unintentional barriers within academic libraries which may affect students with invisible disabilities in particular;
- Collaboration between teaching staff and library staff;
- Librarians’ role - proactive, reactive or both;

1.2 Rationale of the Research

“A Social Portrait of People with Disabilities in Ireland”, a report commissioned from the Economic & Social Research Institute by the Social Inclusion Division in the Department of Social Protection, as part of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016, states that “in order to understand what people are able to do, we need to take account of the resources available to them and the barriers placed before them in their environment as well as their own physical, mental and emotional resources” (Watson & Nolan, 2011, p. 21).

Included in these resources and barriers is the structure of the educational systems.

Third level education is extremely challenging for any individual, even more so for an individual with an invisible disability but such challenges should not exclude them from full participation in higher/third level education. An invisible disability can be complex and may affect how a person processes, retains and communicates information. They may not be able to screen out distractions, making it difficult to focus; they may not have the stamina for a full class load, or may not be able to interact well with others. Anxiety may make it hard to take exams or to approach lecturers with questions. All people experience their disabilities uniquely. Students who have the same medical diagnosis for their condition may have different abilities and disabilities and different support needs. It is important for educational institutions to work with each individual to figure out what is best in any specific situation.
The library in academic institutions is seen as a ‘neutral zone’ where students can come and seek help without feeling intimidated. The academic librarian is in a unique position to meet with students face to face and therefore can provide invaluable support to students with invisible disabilities, provided of course that they have appropriate training in this area. A survey of students with disabilities at Northern Illinois University was conducted to “find out what elements of the library’s Services for Student with Disabilities were most useful to them; what the students really wanted and needed and how the program should be changed or developed” (Curry, 1992, p. 479). 85% of the respondents “felt that the people who help them at the library were more useful to them than any other part of the program” (Curry, 1991, p. 480). Although this survey was carried out over 20 years ago most third level students regardless of ability would still place a high value on the input of academic librarians when it comes to their willingness to assist them in their search for information.

1.3 The Objectives of the Research

The main objective of this research is to examine how academic librarians working in Irish third level colleges/universities are providing and adapting the library services to meet the needs of students with invisible disabilities. Librarians are always concerned with their users and strive to provide the best possible service to them. The college student tends to view the college library as a ‘neutral zone’ where they can seek out help and advice on their academic studies in a safe environment. That being said many students, especially those with an invisible disability, can experience library anxiety on top of all the other stresses that come with academic life. So this study attempts to look at the ways in which academic librarians help students with invisible disabilities overcome such anxiety but also how they enable them to get the most out of the library services. Anyone who has attended college knows the library to be the information hub of academia and is the goto place for all students as they strive to achieve academic success.

This particular study approaches the research subject from eight academic librarians’ perspectives working in large to medium sized third level education institutes and aims to:
• Evaluate the level of awareness of invisible disabilities among academic librarians;
• Ascertain what training has been provided to librarians in the area of invisible disabilities;
• Gauge the awareness of disability policies and procedures among the librarians;
• Assess the benefits of disclosure of a student’s invisible disability;
• Gather examples of best practices and resources in the provision of library services to students with invisible disabilities;
• Look for unintentional barriers within academic libraries which may affect students with invisible disabilities;
• Find out what sort of Collaboration exists between teaching staff and library staff;
• Establish whether librarians are proactive, reactive or both in the provision of library services to students with an invisible disability;

While the study does not intend to provide a complete picture of the national situation it should nonetheless be indicative of the situation that exists within the Irish academic library sector. Given the timescale of this project and the available resources it was not feasible to conduct a survey of all the third level educational institutions that are currently in operation in Ireland. Gaining an insight into Irish academic libraries in both public and private colleges would have perhaps added another dimension to the research however the smaller scale study allows for a more in-depth overview of the smaller cohort. The overall research shows the willingness of academic librarians to find ways to help their students with invisible disabilities and many of the participants mentioned that taking part in the research interviews served as a reminder to review their existing policies and procedures and how taking a proactive approach in this area is paramount.

1.4 Irish Statistics

According to statistics published by the Central Statistics Office in 2012 which are based on the 2011 Census, almost 600,000 (13% of the population) people in Ireland have a disability. The type of disabilities can be broken down as follows:

• 9.7% intellectual disability;
• 23% difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating;
• 41.1% difficulty with basic physical activities;
• 16.1% psychological or emotional condition;
• 8.7% blindness or a serious vision impairment;
• 15.5% deafness or a serious hearing impairment;
• 46.2% other disability, including chronic illness;

Indeed these figures can be viewed as a conservative estimate given that many people with an invisible disability choose not to disclose it or do not necessarily even know that they have such a disability. In its 2014/2015 report on participation rates of students/graduates with disabilities, AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability) identified a total of 10,773 students with disabilities which represents 5.1% of the total student population. When put in real terms, this means that in an average university lecture hall with 20 rows seating 400, there will be on average one student with a disability sitting in every row (AHEAD, 2015, p. 11). Taking these numbers into account it is crucial that higher education institutions are prepared to facilitate a successful academic outcome for any student with either a visible or invisible disability so as to enable them to have a productive and successful educational experience (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013, p. 2). The academic librarian plays a key role in a student’s academic life and even more so for students with an invisible disability, therefore it is important that they have the necessary resources and training that will enable them to provide the necessary support to these students. This research has been carried out to ascertain how academic librarians in Ireland manage their engagement with students with invisible disabilities and to see how they have overcome any obstacles along the way. Given the increase in the number of students attending third level education it is more important than ever that academia is proactive in this area and the academic librarian is in a good position to take the lead in its service provisions to students with invisible disabilities. A clear definition of invisible disability is helpful in distinguishing the differences between a visible and invisible disability. The next section will address this issue and look at some of the various definitions in use at this time.
1.5 Defining Invisible Disability

The term disability is one that is familiar to most people and one that tends to be used as a generic term for all types of disability both visible and invisible. On hearing that someone has a disability the tendency is to think of an individual being physically impaired and perhaps requiring the use of a wheelchair in order to move around or perhaps one might think of a condition which on seeing the person it is immediately obvious that they have some form of disability. For those with an invisible disability it is not obvious that there is an underlying condition which affects how they interact with the world and therefore this can make life very challenging for them. The World Report on Disability (World Health Organisation, 2011, p. xxi) recognises that awareness of and scientific information on disability issues are lacking and that there is no agreement on the definition of disability. Given this situation it is hardly surprising that there is no one clear definition of the term invisible disability.

So while a universally accepted definition of disability is yet to be agreed upon, there is at least an attempt to acknowledge the differences between physical and non-physical or invisible disability and to highlight that those living with an invisible disability can have very different special needs to those living with a physical one. Table 1.1 below, gives a list of some conditions which can be categorised as invisible disabilities insofar as it is not immediately obvious to an observer that an individual is living with a condition which can have a direct impact on how they interact with the world. While not an exhaustive list by any means, it gives an idea of the diverse nature of invisible disabilities.

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<tr>
<th>Chronic Fatigue Syndrome</th>
<th>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</th>
<th>Acquired Brain Injury</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blind/Visually Impaired</td>
<td>Deafness/Hard of Hearing</td>
<td>Asperger Syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Disabilities</td>
<td>Chronic Pain</td>
<td>Heart Conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyscalculia</td>
<td>Eating Disorders</td>
<td>Coeliac Disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Fibromyalgia</td>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthma</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
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<td>Epilepsy</td>
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Table 1.1 List of some conditions categorised as invisible disabilities. (Disabled World, 2015)
1.5.1 Ireland

The Disability Act 2005 defines disability as

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 (Guide to Disability Act 2005, p. 4).

No official definition of invisible disability could be located but as stated above 13% of the population of Ireland have a disability (Central Statistics Office, 2012) and 10,773 students have been identified as having a disability (AHEAD, 2015).

1.5.2 United Kingdom

According to the UK’s Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘longterm’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities you are disabled (GOV.UK, 2015). Invisible Disability UK defines an invisible disability as one that cannot be seen, may not require a wheelchair, crutches or a blue badge (Invisible Disabilities UK, 2015). There are over 11 million people in the UK living with a limiting long term illness, impairment or disability as per GOV.UK, 2015.

1.5.3 European Union

There are 80 million Europeans with disabilities which equates to 15% of the overall population of 508 million inhabitants, according to the representative organisation of persons with disabilities in Europe, Nothing About Us Without Us (2016) but there does not appear to be any breakdown of this figure which would indicate the number of Europeans with a so called invisible disability.

1.5.4 United States

According to Disabled World, an independent health and disability American news source, an invisible disability is a one that is not immediately apparent. It is an umbrella term that covers a range of hidden disabilities or challenges that are primarily neurological in nature (Disabled World, 2015). The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 defines an individual with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; has a record of such an impairment; or is regarded as having
such an impairment (ADA, 2009). It is worth noting that Disabled World also highlights that invisible disabilities are the most common type of disability among college students in the US (Disabled World, 2015). They also quote that 10% of Americans, approximately 32,411,879 have a medical condition which could be considered an invisible disability and 96% of people with chronic medical conditions live with a condition that is invisible which is to say that they do not use any assistive device to get around and act as if they do not have a medical condition.

1.5.5 Australia

Over 4 million people in Australia have some form of disability according to the Australian Network on Disability (2016) who define disability as any condition that restricts a person’s mental, sensory or mobility functions be it temporary or permanent, total or partial, lifelong or acquired, visible or invisible. They also recognise that people with disability are part of every section of our community and that no two people with the same disability experience their disability in the same way.

In researching a definition of invisibility disability it has become clear that not only is there no explicit definition of what is meant by the term, there is also no uniform definition of what is meant by disability. Many of the definitions have very legal and medical undertones with little reference to the person with the disability. The term invisible disability is a somewhat new one but is an attempt to separate, or at the very least identify, the differences between a physical and non-physical disability and the unique challenges that are present in the latter. The important point is that people with disability are recognised as valuable members of society and although they may have special requirements to enable them to do certain things, this should not exclude them from participating fully in society.

1.6 The Contribution of the Research

A number of recommendations will be made in Chapter 5 which have come about as a result of this research. These recommendations serve to reinforce the work that academic librarians do in providing students with invisible disabilities continued access to their services. The research data collected and the recommendations made will not only empower academic
librarians but also their students who are living with invisible disabilities. Providing the librarians with training specific to invisible disabilities will give them the skills and knowledge necessary to allow them to not only meet their legal requirements but also to empower their students to achieve their academic goals. The role of a Disability Services Librarian will be to oversee this empowerment and discover new ways to meet the needs of students with invisible disabilities through collaboration with the students themselves, the academic librarians, the Disability Support Service and teaching staff. The recommendations also include the effective use of Assistive Technologies so that students do not feel segregated from their peers, and also the recognition of the most valuable resource available to academic librarians, the students who live with their invisible disability every single day.

1.7 Organisation of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organised into a total of five chapters:

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 3 - Discussion of the research methodology used and explanation for the choices made

Chapter 4 - Research findings and their analysis

Chapter 5 - Outlines the conclusions reached and recommendations made

A Personal Reflection on the overall learning experience is given in Appendix 3.
2 Literature Review

This literature review will be carried out under three sub-headings which serve to distinguish between the main themes running through the overall articles. They are as follows:

- Research carried out directly with academic librarians in the support of students with invisible disabilities.
- Research material that focuses on the broader area of higher/third level education for individuals with invisible/hidden disabilities as opposed to the library focus.
- Research material where students with invisible/hidden disabilities themselves took part in the process.

In all the literature reviewed there was a common theme present which is: having effective supports in place for students with disabilities whether visible or not is crucial if they are to have a positive learning experience. The majority, if not all, acknowledge the increase in the number of such students attending college, the willingness of academic librarians to train so they can provide effective support to this cohort and that the benefits of such best practices stand to benefit all not just the students with disabilities.

2.1 Academic librarians supporting students with invisible disabilities

Sandra Charles (Charles, 2005) a principal library assistant in a university in Scotland, looked at disability awareness from a practitioner’s point of view while taking into account her own personal experience of organising training in an academic library and the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). The author and a colleague organised a training event for academic library staff which sought to improve not only their awareness of disability but also their frontline service that they provide to students with a disability. While the researcher recorded very positive outcomes and feedback via evaluations sheets showing an overall score of 4.5, it remains unclear as to how questions were phrased, what participants were asked to score out of and whether or not individuals with disabilities were included in the feedback or indeed whether the training itself themselves were included. It is also worth
noting that the focus seemed to be on visual and hearing impairments whereas it would have been a more thorough exercise had the focus included more subtle forms of disability such as ADHD or Aspergers Syndrome. Samson (Samson, 2011) reflects the spirit of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the more recent 2010 Department of Justice regulations to establish a set of best practices for students with disabilities. At each of eight academic libraries, the librarian most directly responsible for library services to students with disabilities was interviewed and a comprehensive analysis was done of physical facilities, services, management practices. Access to and within the library was also considered, and data and observations to place each library in the framework of the opposing reactive or universal access service models were analysed. While acknowledging the lack of recent studies at the time (2010) around the broad spectrum of service needs that could be proactively addressed by academic libraries for students and faculty with disabilities, a substantial literature review was carried out by the author which highlighted many important areas where students and indeed faculty members with disabilities can benefit. Samson’s research, however could have benefited more by expanding interviews to more than eight academic libraries and also by involving students with disabilities in the research process so as to allow those living with a disability to have an input in the final recommendations.

In 2009 the Syracuse University Library and Access (a service supporting college course attendance for adult students who have developmental or cognitive disabilities) partnered to provide library orientation to six of their students who each had a developmental disability. Mulliken (Mulliken, 2009) gives detailed information about the services provided by the Access group and highlights the benefits of holding orientation programmes during the summer for students with such disabilities. The author notes how academic libraries could learn from the experiences of public and school libraries who recommend several sources for collection development on this subject. This article pulls together well and applies in a practical way research done by others in providing academic library services to students with developmental disabilities within Syracuse University. The author has addressed work done by others in the profession and together with Access developed a positive orientation programme for the six students involved in the initial trial, while at the same time has discovered new ways in which academic libraries can help this cohort of students.
Pinder (Pinder, 2005) surveyed the general academic library response within the UK and in particular Scotland, to disability legislation and the increasing number of students declaring disabilities entering higher education. While not directly pertinent to the Irish situation the paper gives a good overall review of the positive impact the legislation has had on both academic library staff and students with disabilities. Use of two case studies to highlight the positive outcomes that have occurred since 1975 is admirable but it would perhaps have been more impactful had the spectrum been expanded to include students with an invisible disability. This article is specific in detail to the UK and Scotland higher educational system. However some of the ideas could easily be extrapolated to the Irish system even though it was written over ten years ago. While quite heavy on the legislative side of things and possibly outdated at this stage, the author provides an in-depth overview of the improvements made within the academic library sector in the UK and Scotland. Carter (Carter, 2004) suggested focusing on three specific areas where academic librarians could concentrate their effort to better meet the needs of students with disabilities in DeVry University, Chicago: bibliographic instruction, web page design and staff training. The assumption has been taken that these are not in any order of importance. The author reaffirms the reputation of librarians to be proactive in providing equal access to information for all library users. Despite the title of this article, the focus is not entirely on students with disabilities and the writer is keen to note that all users regardless of their abilities can benefit from instruction in the above areas. This article would not qualify as a research paper but more of an overview on how academic librarians can help all academic library users to have a more positive learning experience which will add to their information skills.

In the final article in this section, Holmes (Holmes, 2008) was only briefly reviewed. The focus of this paper, written in 2008, is entirely on the US public library sector where two surveys were conducted with adults with developmental disabilities as a sample population who were asked a variety of questions involving library usage and information needs. The objective of this research was to determine the library usage, attitudes and needs of an unobserved population with developmental disabilities with a view to offering insights to librarians as to how to better serve these individuals. As the focus of this research was not
directly related to this dissertation topic it was decided not to go into it in too much detail. It worth noting that the author included much detail on her survey techniques and supplied copies of questionnaires which could possibly be adapted for a quantitative research process.

2.2 Third level education for individuals with invisible disabilities

Mc Guckin (Mc Guckin et al, 2013) explored the experiences of students with special education needs (SEN) as they transitioned from secondary school to higher education. This is a substantial piece of work and while it does not focus on academic libraries per se it highlights the importance of having proper supports in place for students transitioning to higher education. The document would, nonetheless be of great benefit to academic librarians in providing support to such students especially as it was written from the Irish perspective although it should be noted that international experiences were also examined. The authors looks in detail at the roles of educational institutes, individuals and health services in preparing students with special educational needs for their transition together with the resources and supports available to them. Among other issues they also explore the experiences of the students themselves before making recommendations for the implementation of pertinent support policies. It is a long document containing an in-depth literature review and great detail is given on research methodology and findings. Reference is made to other equally valuable work carried out at the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) on post-school provision. The length of the document is a testament to the level of research carried out.

In a similar vein Hart (Hart et al, 2006) discuss postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities however it does not go into the same detail as the previous article and it is written from a US perspective. This short article considers definitions of intellectual disability, provides an overview of postsecondary education options, research findings of the then current knowledge of postsecondary education options and recommendations for improving access to higher education. While the article makes for an informative read it does lack substance and provides more of an overview of a bigger picture; but in saying that, the authors clearly state that this is a ‘brief’ rather than an in-depth report. The University of Washington (2012), as part of its DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking &
Technology initiative produced a document to address the challenges students with invisible disabilities can experience. While it is not a research paper as such it draws attention to the type of disabilities that come under the term of ‘invisible’ and how such conditions can impact on students in their college life. It discusses accommodations and universal design; terms that come up time and time again when discussing invisible disabilities. This short article provides a clear explanation of these terms, how they relate to the students and how gaining a fuller understanding of them can help university staff make life easier for students with invisible disabilities.

Hidden Abilities in Higher Education: New College Students with Disabilities (1996) is a monograph containing many interesting articles relating to students with disabilities. The temptation was to dismiss it from this literature review on the grounds that it would be outdated and no longer relevant, however on further inspection it showed itself to be, on the whole, as relevant today as it was twenty years ago and works as a reminder that we cannot afford to become complacent when it comes to ensuring that students with disabilities, invisible or otherwise have a positive experience in higher education. Some of the topics included in this monograph are:

Hidden Abilities - Visible Disabilities, Marginal Beginnings but Great Endings, A Safety Net for Success: An Approach to Transition Planning and Lessening Stumbling Blocks to Retention Through Accessible Academic Libraries to name just a few. The overall theme is very much in line with those articles already discussed and despite being twenty years old it adapts well to the twenty-first century.

To conclude this section Robertson’s (Robertson, 2012) paper on access for library users with disabilities which was put together on behalf of the SCONUL (Society of College, National and University Libraries) will be reviewed. The author acknowledges the major drive for change for library users with disabilities since the introduction of the Disability Equality Duty in the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and the aim now is to take a much broader anticipatory approach, with emphasis on providing all library services in an inclusive way. Inclusion is very much underpinning this document and all the previous ones above, as is taking a proactive approach in making academic libraries accessible to all students.
Robertson addresses the broad range of issues which lie at the foundation of such an approach, from social and political issues, to users’ needs and expectations, to understanding disabilities and differences in service delivery and training and staff development. All of these have been mentioned in the preceding articles which go to show a consistency running through the library and educational sector’s drive to make inclusivity a working model. This particular document is a well thought out framework which addresses important issues which can be applied to all libraries or at least adapted to any particular library environment. The content comes as a result of much research in the area along with a desire and willingness on behalf of library staff to give their users a positive learning experience.

2.3 Students with invisible disabilities taking part in the process

The previous sections have all highlighted a need for inclusivity when it comes to higher level students with non-visible disabilities, so it seemed appropriate that there should be a review of some literature where students with such disabilities took an active role in the research. Two such research papers will now be considered.

Dr. John Kubiak (Kubiak, 2015) carried out an inclusive research project in an Irish higher education institution where a postsecondary educational program is offered for students with intellectual disabilities. From the outset the author provides a definition of inclusive research and how underpinning it is the key principle that research should be conducted with, rather than on, those whose lives are its focus. He goes on to give an informative overview of the methodology of such research which sets the scene well for the rest of the report. Kubiak states that he used a phenomenographic approach to his research which was a new term to the reader and a brief explanation of this approach would have been appreciated. This approach was used to examine how students with an intellectual disability experience learning while attending university. He does go on to give a detailed breakdown of the entire research process and the complexities involved in each process. The inclusion of some of the interview transcripts worked well to explain how conversations were kept going even when the interviewee showed reluctance to do so. What set this paper apart from the others was the active involvement of students with an intellectual disability and it succeeded in highlighting
the benefits of staff and students coming together to share their expertise, ideas and voices in a common cause.

Another Irish research project by O’Brien and colleagues (O’Brien et al, 2008) looked at the lessons learned from the Certificate in Contemporary Living Programme operated in Trinity College Dublin. This was the first of its kind to be run in Ireland and inclusion through education, research and advocacy was its modus operandi. The researchers recognised the importance of documenting its implementation. The research plan was broken down well and included input from the students themselves, their family members, tutors and key workers involved. The innovative nature of the programme came across well in the report with a good explanation of the methodologies used. It was interesting to see the international framework being addressed in the context of education for all which, it could be argued, was perhaps unnecessary given the Irish context but on the other hand it places the research in a global framework. The final chapter addresses the challenges, opportunities and lessons for the future. This type of programme is still very much in its infancy and it is hoped that future follow up research will be done so as to ensure that the programme does not become stagnant.

2.4 Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights a number of key areas that are considered important in the academic librarians’ provision of effective support to third level students with invisible disabilities such as:

- Effective training for academic librarians in the area of invisible disabilities;
- Collaboration between librarians, teaching staff and students with invisible disabilities;
- Need for proper support for students transitioning from second to third level;
- Importance of a proactive approach by academic librarians;
- Inclusion of students with invisible disabilities is key;
- Complacency is not an option for academic librarians;
There is a need and a desire among academic librarians for formal training on the subject of invisible disability and such training should focus on what is meant by the term invisible disability, what conditions come under this heading, what are the implications for an individual who has such a disability. In order for librarians to be able to provide supports for their students with invisible disabilities they need a better understanding of what its like for those living with an invisible disability. This is why inclusion is important. It is not just about including this cohort of students in all aspects of college life but it is about actively listening to them because they are the true experts in their disability. This is where collaboration between the students, teaching staff, disability support services and academic librarians comes into play. Librarians have shown themselves to be very proactive in supporting all their students and when it comes to students with disabilities, visible or invisible, they are aware that they cannot afford to be complacent. Academic librarians recognise that there will never be just one universal way to provide library supports to students with invisible disabilities because of their diverse nature. Training, inclusion, collaboration are the main themes running through the literature and serve to act as good foundations stones for academic librarians to build on their existing support structures.
3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges faced by academic librarians in their provision of library and learning resources to students with invisible disabilities. The study also seeks to establish what awareness exists of such disabilities and what if any supports and training academic librarians receive in this important aspect of their role. Studies have shown that the number of students with disabilities attending third level education in Ireland is increasing (AHEAD, 2015) therefore it is incumbent on academic librarians as with all education professionals to be conscious of the important role they play in this area. As more and more students with invisible disabilities attend third level education there is the need to ensure that their requirements are met across the entire sphere of their academic life (Figure 3.1 AHEAD, 2015). This study seeks to gain an overview of the current situation for librarians and to ascertain if there are any areas that could be improved upon.

![Breakdown of Students by Category of Disability 2014/15](image)

**Figure 3.1** Shows AHEAD’s disability profile of total disabled student population 2014/15
Research philosophy relates to “the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p. 4, chapter 4). Given the topic of this research a qualitative approach was deemed to be most appropriate in that it helps to explain how human beings understand, experience, interpret, and produce that part of the social world relating to the research question(s) (Sandlowski 2004, p. 893). This research examines academic librarians’ understanding of invisible disabilities, their experiences of providing learning supports to these students and how they create a learning environment that is conducive to the students’ needs. In applying a qualitative research method one adopts a type of social inquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live. Qualitative research is inductive by approach, with the gathering of data taking place in a natural setting which in this case involved one to one interviews with academic librarians in their own working environment. The researcher is the primary instrument in the collection of data and the data set consists of words rather than numbers as in a quantitative approach. While there is some focus on numerical detail in this research project, the main attention was on what the participants were saying and the information they were imparting. With qualitative research the point is to understand multiple realities, in how humans make sense of their lives, their perceptions and their realities. (Beck and Manual, 2004, p. 68). This research seeks to gain an understanding of how academic librarians overcome the daily challenges that arise in their support of students with invisible disabilities and this is done by entering their environment, being empathetic while at the same time remaining impartial to any of my own preconceived ideas or prejudices of the subject matter. A qualitative research method has been chosen primarily because it allows for a normal conversation to take place between the researcher and the participant as opposed to a formal question-and-answer session (Taylor, 2016, p. 9) and also enables the researcher to gain a deep insight into the academic librarian’s working environment.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Given the nature of this research an interpretivist philosophy which seeks to understand people and how they interrelate, what they think and how they form ideas about the world (Thomas, 2013, p. 108) has been applied. Understanding is key to the interpretivists’
framework and this research work seeks to gain a meaningful understanding of the unique challenges that academic librarians face in their dealings with students with invisible disabilities. Interpretivism highlights the difference between conducting research among people rather than objects (Saunders, 2012, p. 8) and given that the nature of this research project is very much person-centred and concerned with the working environment of the academic librarian and their experiences with students with invisible disabilities this approach has worked well. In applying an interpretivist philosophy to this research it enables the researcher to empathise with the librarian and to get a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and how they overcome them or not as the case may be. It allows for a deeper interaction between the researcher and the participants on an informal basis and helps place the researcher into the participant’s shoes giving them an in-depth view into their world.

3.3 Research Approach

An inductive approach has been used in this research project as it was thought to be the best approach in order to get a feel and a better understanding of what the current situation is like for academic librarians when providing support to students with invisible disabilities. Such an approach is mainly concerned with the context in which certain events are taking place (Saunders, 2012, p. 21) so in this case the context being the academic library and the events being the interactions between the librarians and students with invisible disabilities. At the outset of the research no concrete theory or hypotheses were set out, rather the goal was to learn from the experience of academic librarians in order to reach a conclusion or to generate a theory from the data gathered. Having said that it was surmised that given the increasing numbers of students with disabilities attending university that the academic librarians interviewed would have some considerable experience which they could impart and which would ultimately lead to an in-depth overview of current policies and procedures. Holding one-to-one interviews allows for the development of ideas that were perhaps not considered or known about at the start of the research and provides the opportunity to gather information from library professionals who are at the frontline of student engagement.
3.4 Research Strategy and Choice

The research strategy chosen was one of semi-structured one-to-one interviews with academic librarians working in a range of large to medium sized third level educational institutions in Ireland. One-to-one interviews were chosen as it was felt that they would allow for a in-depth exchange of information and provide a substantial amount of qualitative data as opposed to a quantitative survey method. An interview schedule was drawn up containing a number of questions to be asked of the librarians (Appendix 1). However these questions were not necessarily followed in a verbatim way rather they were used as means of guidance during the interview process. The interview schedule was constructed as a data collection instrument that allows for field notes (Beck and Manuel, 2008, p. 89). Questions were phrased in such a way as to encourage the participants to expand on their own experiences in working with students with invisible disabilities and the challenges they face. The broad range of such disabilities and the varying ways in which they affect an individual can lead to the academic librarian experiencing a variety of interactions and the aim of the research is to find out as much as possible about these. The one-to-one semi-structured interview process enabled a deeper exploration of issues raised during the interview itself.

3.5 Time Horizon

Given the time constraints of this dissertation (12 weeks) it was not feasible to interview academic librarians in all the main third level institutions in the country. A number of large to medium sized colleges were chosen as it was felt that this would give a reasonable overview of how their librarians are meeting the challenges involved in supporting students with invisible disabilities.

3.6 Techniques and Procedures

The purpose of this research project was to establish how academic librarians are meeting the challenges presented to them in their support of students with invisible disabilities. Research has shown that more and more individuals with invisible disabilities are attending third level education and therefore it is important that all academic librarians are receiving appropriate training as they are very much at the forefront of student support. One of the objectives of this particular research was to ascertain if academic librarians are receiving any such training.
This research is also concerned with finding out what collaboration if any exists between teaching staff and librarians specifically with students who have an invisible disability. One of the overarching aims of this research is also to examine the resources and best practices that are currently in place in the participating universities/colleges.

### 3.6.1 How the research was carried out

A total of eight interviews were held with academic librarians from various colleges/universities seven in the Dublin area and one in Northern Ireland. The librarians themselves were comprised of senior librarians, assistant librarians, and directors of library services. Some were contacted directly via email and others were subsequently recommended by colleagues as it was felt they were best suited to participation in this particular research topic. In some instances the librarians’ role was specifically targeted to students with disability. However all the librarians interviewed have dealings with such students but some are more involved than others. All the librarians involved were sent an email of introduction (Appendix 2) which included an explanation of the research project and an invitation to take part in a one-to-one interview. Those emailed were initially selected from their respective college/university websites however not all replied and some of those who did were not in a position to participate. This resulted in acquiring introductions with the help of the Head of Library Services in DBS library.

The initial interview was held in Trinity College Dublin which resulted in some minor adjustments in the ordering of the interview questions going forward from there. The interview schedule comprised of 27 questions (Appendix 1) although not all were directly asked as some were answered by the participants in preceding questions. The duration of the interviews was planned to range from 30 to 45 minutes and not expected to last longer than one hour. The level of the participant’s involvement with students with an invisible disability directly impacted on the length of the interviews as some had more experience and therefore more to say on the subject.

The interviews were not digitally recorded as it is not recommended practice and can often lead to participants feeling uncomfortable. Instead notes were taken during the interview,
transcribed afterwards in preparation of the final analysis. All participants read and signed an Information/Informed Consent form (Appendix 3) which explained the purpose of the dissertation, the process, and their rights. The way in which qualitative data is analysed is through the creation of a conceptual framework which may be formulated before, during or after data collection. Analysis of the data collected in this research project comprised of three main types of processes; summarising, categorising and unitising (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 484-493):

1. **Summarising** data involves reducing long statements into shorter ones thereby rephrasing what was said in fewer words.

2. **Categorising** data involves the development of categories and attaching them to meaningful chunks of data. This helps to recognise relationships and further develop the categories which in turn helps to draw conclusions.

3. **Unitising** data involves attaching relevant pieces of data or units of data to the appropriate category or categories that have been devised.

This analysis of data was carried out manually.

3.6.2 **The Value and Importance of the Study**

The value and importance of the study is that it serves to highlight the challenges that academic librarians face in providing support to students with invisible disabilities but it also shows the need for ongoing training for all academic librarians given the increasing number of such students attending third level education. The role academic librarians play in their support of all students cannot be overstated and this role is even more crucial when it comes to providing support to students with invisible disabilities. It is important that academic librarians have appropriate training so they can be proactive in their delivery of these supports. It is equally important that students with disabilities whether visible or invisible know that their requirements will be met with as little stress involved as possible. Librarians in colleges/universities work hard at providing a safe, non-judgemental environment for all students and it is crucial that this is recognised. Equally important is the existence of collaboration between disability services within the institution, the teaching staff and the
library staff. Any weak link in such a chain is likely to cause the student with a disability great anxiety and stress.

3.6.3 The Justification of the Study

The justification of the study lies in the fact that more and more students with invisible disabilities are attending third level education which is a very positive development. Equality Legislation which includes the Equal Status Act 2000, the Disability Act 2005 and the Universities Act stipulates that students with disability must be treated equally to other students, have the same access to what is being taught, to materials, books and information generally (AHEAD, 2015). Academic librarians face the responsibility and challenge of ensuring that students with disability receive their appropriate library supports and resources. The nature of the academic librarian’s role means that they are very much on the frontline when it comes to interactions with students who tend to see them as being the ‘neutral zone’ of their college or university and as such rely on their information skills and general library know how. So the justification is threefold, the increasing number of students with invisible disabilities attending college, legal obligations and the academic librarians who have to meet the challenges of providing supports to this unique yet diverse cohort of students.

3.6.4 The Restrictions of the Method

The most obvious restriction is that the method of research chosen meant that a relatively small number of academic librarians were interviewed. According to the Department of Education and Skills Higher Education in Ireland is provided mainly by 7 Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology and 7 Colleges of Education. In addition, a number of other third level institutions provide specialist education in such fields as art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music and law (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). It was never intended to interview librarians in all of the third level educational institutions in Ireland, rather the plan was to gain an insight into how a small selection of academic librarians meet the challenges presented to them in providing support to students with invisible disabilities.
Another limitation which may impact on the overall study is in larger colleges/universities
where there are a large number of librarians employed some of whom may not have a lot of
front desk experience. While every effort was made to secure interviews with librarians who
deal directly with students especially those with disabilities it was not always possible, so as
result their answers to the questions may have been somewhat limited. Also given the time of
year in which this research was taking place a lot of librarians were on holidays so it was not
always possible to meet with the appropriate librarian.

Restricting the interview process to academic librarians and not expanding research to
include students who have an invisible disability may lead to a somewhat one-sided outcome
but given the ethical implications and the time constraints on this project it was decided to
focus only on the academic librarians on this occasion.

A quantitive census type survey could have been distributed to all academic library staff but
given the subject matter of the research it was felt that more in-depth data could be gathered
by having one-to-one interviews. In doing so it would allow for expansion of answers and
allow for a more detailed discussion of participants’ past experiences. It is not a black and
white area and what works for one academic library may not work for another and therefore
the qualitative method allowed for an insight into the diversity that exists in supporting
students with disability but this in turn may have led to having a lot more data to analyse.
Some of the librarians interviewed did not feel that they could be of any help to and yet when
it came down to the interview session had a lot to offer. This may be the reason why a lot of
those contacted initially did not respond.

3.7 Ethical Issues

When embarking on any research project ethical issues must be considered and every effort
made to ensure that all participants’ personal details and input are treated and held securely.
In this case all participants were given a clear overview of the research project (Appendix 3),
confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in writing. An informed consent form was
sent to the participants ahead of any interview so they had time to read it and raise any
concerns they might have. On one occasion a participant expressed their concern about being
directly quoted at any future presentations and asked that their consent be requested before any such event. All participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the process at any stage. Transcripts, interview notes and informed consent forms were all stored securely.

Students with invisible disabilities were not interviewed as part of this research project. Their input would have been valuable but for ethical reasons it was decided not to include them on this occasion. Issues of confidentiality had to be adhered to. Students who have disclosed that they have a disability usually do so through the disability support service within their relevant college. Students do so in the knowledge that the details of their disclosure are treated confidentially and while the academic librarians involved in this study are made aware of any student registered with the disability support service they do not receive any details of the students’ disabilities. It is important that such students know that their personal information is secure and not shared with a third party. It is crucial that students registered with disability support services do not feel their personal information is compromised in any way or that they feel pressurised to take part in a research project. So having given due consideration to all involved and not wanting to cause any unnecessary anxiety to these students it was thought best not to include them directly in this project.
Research Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This research project set out to discover how academic librarians meet the unique challenges presented to them in supporting students with invisible disabilities. In this chapter the findings of the research will be discussed. The research took place over the months of July and August 2016 and the participants comprised academic librarians currently working in third level educational institutes. A total of eight academic librarians were interviewed at their libraries, seven working in Ireland and one in Northern Ireland. All interviews were done on a one to one basis and were structured in such a way as to encourage the participants to share the experiences they have had in providing library supports to students with invisible disabilities. There were a total of 27 questions but the nature of the interviews meant that a lot of the questions were answered indirectly and without having to be asked specifically. All participants were sent a copy of the questions in advance of the interview process which gave them the opportunity to give the matter due consideration and also gave them the time to confirm statistics such as the number of students attending their respective institutions. The interview questions addressed the following areas of interest:

- **Awareness** of invisible disabilities among academic librarians;
- **Training** or lack of, in the area of invisible disabilities;
- Awareness of **policies and procedures** pertaining to disabilities either visible or invisible;
- **Disclosure** of a student’s invisible disability;
- Examples of **best practices and resources** in the provision of library services to students with invisible disabilities;
- Examples of **unintentional barriers** within academic libraries which may affect students with invisible disabilities in particular;
- **Collaboration** between teaching staff and library staff;
- Librarians’ role - **proactive, reactive or both**;
Some of the librarians interviewed had more face to face contact with students than others depending on their respective roles within the library and the number of students attending each college which ranged from 3,000 to 25,000. That being said every effort was made to set up interviews with librarians who had some role to play in providing library support to students with invisible disabilities. The interviews themselves were not digitally recorded but notes were taken throughout the process and clarification when needed was sought when appropriate. The venues for the interviews were chosen by the participants themselves who all chose to meet in their workplace.

4.2 Findings and Analysis

4.2.1 Awareness
During the interview process and subsequent analysis it became apparent that academic librarians have an awareness of the term invisible disability although some have a greater understanding of what it means than others. While some had not heard of the term before they were able to make an educated guess as to what it meant and others were much more knowledgeable about the specific conditions that constitute an invisible or hidden disability having taken part in some kind of formal training on the subject. All of the librarians knew how many students attend their respective colleges but when it came to the number of students with disabilities attending there was some ambiguity partly because such figures are held by the Access Office and not readily available and the figures that are available only relate to students who chose to disclose their disability. While every effort is made to encourage students to disclose if they have disability before they start their studies, there are many who chose not to do so.

Table 4.1 below, indicates the number of students attending the colleges in question and the number of students registered with the disability service within each college. It is immediately apparent that the number of students registered with a disability is quite substantial even in the smaller populated colleges.
Table 4.1 Number of students in attendance and those registered with Disability Services.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Total Number of Students</th>
<th>Students Currently Registered with Disability Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National College of Ireland</td>
<td>5,000 approx.</td>
<td>450 approx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National University of Ireland Maynooth</td>
<td>10,000 approx.</td>
<td>600 approx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity College Dublin</td>
<td>15,000 approx.</td>
<td>708*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra (DCU)</td>
<td>4,000 approx.</td>
<td>400 approx.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin Institute of Technology Aungier Street</td>
<td>20,000 approx.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 campuses)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute of Technology Blanchardstown</td>
<td>3,000 approx.</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland</td>
<td>3,731</td>
<td>Not available at this time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen’s University Belfast</td>
<td>25,000 approx.</td>
<td>2,053</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This figure was taken from the Higher Education Authority’s Trinity College Dublin Profile 2016/2017 available at: http://www.hea.ie/sites/default/files/tcd_3_profile_2016.pdf

4.2.2 Training

What became very clear from the outset was the enthusiasm and interest that academic librarians have for providing support and resources for all their students and this was expressed in their desire for training in the area of invisible disability. Of the eight academic librarians interviewed only three have received any type of disability-specific training and found it to be hugely beneficial to them in their roles as academic librarians and students with invisible disabilities have also benefited as a result. In Queen’s University Belfast there are regular training sessions which focus on particular conditions, for example Aspergers Syndrome, Dyslexia or mental health. Such training enables the library staff to gain a better understanding of what living with such conditions entails and also shows them how best to provide supports and resources to such students. The library staff of IT Blanchardstown have availed of training with the National Learning Network (http://www.nln.ie) which is situated within the institute’s campus. This training has proved invaluable to them in their provision of supports to students with disabilities both visible and invisible. The librarians in St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra took part in a Customer Service course which wasn’t specific to users with disabilities but yet they found it to be of enormous help to them when dealing with students with special needs. The librarian interviewed in the Royal College of
Surgeons in Ireland has done some policy training which has helped to ensure the library meets their legal requirements in the provision of services to students with disabilities. While less than half of the librarians interviewed have taken part in any formal invisible-disability-specific training they all work closely with their Disability Support Service teams and Access Officers in order to provide the best possible support to students with disabilities. As a result of this collaboration there are many resources in place within the libraries which provide great assistance to the students with invisible disabilities. Academic librarians are very open to new ideas and initiatives that may help students and there is much sharing of information between librarians in the various academic institutions.

4.2.3 Policies and Procedures

Under Equality Legislation, all higher education colleges are legally obliged to ensure that a student with disability is treated equally to other students and has the same access to what is being taught, to materials, books and information generally (AHEAD, 2016). All of the colleges visited are bound by Irish Equality Legalisation (2005) except Queen’s University Belfast which is bound by SENDO - Special Education Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2010). Although the focus of this research was on academic libraries, the policies and procedures that their institutions have in place will have a direct impact on how they provide their services to students. Most of the librarians interviewed said they were aware of their legal requirements in this regard but agree that it is not something that can be taken for granted and requires continuous monitoring to ensure that they are meeting their legal requirements. As stated above, the library team work closely with their institute’s Disability/Access Officer or equivalent. This ensures that they meet their requirements and enables them to design student specific supports as and when requested. One librarian mentioned that sometimes a student with disability will present with an advocate such as a parent or guardian who is very involved in the student’s life and this can really help in putting supports in place.

The majority of the libraries surveyed do not have their own specific disability policy but would refer to their overall college one and all work closely with their respective disability supports service. In one case the librarian interviewed draws up an ‘action plan’ every year
which contains plans for staff training, reviewing and implementing resources to assist students with disability. Organisations such as DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) and AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) provide advice and information to educational institutions on how to provide supports to students with disability. While four of the librarians interviewed have consulted these organisations directly, all were of the opinion that the disability support service would liaise closely with both DAWN and AHEAD. Each of the institutions involved in this research have dedicated disability support pages on their websites which explain to students what supports and resources are available to them and how they should go about securing them. Gaining access to special academic supports depends on whether or not a student decides to disclose their disability which leads into the research findings around Disclosure.

4.2.4 Disclosure

All the colleges involved in this research encourage students with disability to disclose their condition when completing their college application form. Doing so enables the college to put in place the resources and supports that will help them through their academic life. While a student cannot be forced to disclose, failure to do so means that the college is not legally obliged to provide the student with any support or reasonable accommodation (AHEAD, 2015). Students can have many concerns when it comes to disclosure, mainly the fear of being labelled or fear of being treated differently from other students. The academic librarians interviewed would be of the opinion that the benefits of disclosure far outweigh any possible negative repercussions that may result. From the discussion with the librarians it is clear that disclosure is treated in a very confidential manner. They receive notice that a student is registered with Disability Support Service (DSS) and this will appear as part of the student’s library record which provides confirmation to the librarians that the student is entitled to certain special provisions such as an extended loan period. None of the eight librarians interviewed receive details of a student’s disability and see no reason for them to either. Once they know a student is registered with DSS they can make special resources available to them in a discrete and confidential way. All the librarians interviewed emphasised the importance of disclosure at the application level as it enables the college to have supports and resources in place right from the start of the student’s course. The
provision of supports and resources is another crucial element for a student with disability and every effort is made to ensure that a student’s needs are met. This leads onto the next area of research: resources and best practices.

4.2.5 Resources and Best Practices

The interview participants were asked what resources and supports are available to them in helping them provide assistance to students with disabilities and if they could identify any best practices that they have found to work particularly well in their libraries. This is an area of great interest and gives an insight into how the theory is put into action. All the librarians had a lot to say on this topic and it gave them an opportunity to discuss in detail the experiences, both positive and negative, that they have had in the provision of supports for students with disabilities.

4.2.5.1 Disability Services Librarian

The general consensus among the librarians interviewed was that having someone working in the library with responsibility for liaising with the college’s disability support service and students with invisible disability would be very beneficial. Where such a role exists it tends not to be a dedicated role but part of a particular librarian’s overall role. While there tends not to be a dedicated role in this regard it would appear that the librarians actively liaise with their respective disability support service, access office and with their colleagues in other institutions.

4.2.5.2 Disability Support Service and Access Office

Both Disability Support Service and the Access Office were recognised as valuable resources to the librarians. From what participants said during the interview there is much collaboration between the DSS, Access Office and the academic librarians. The issue of collaboration will be discussed in more detail later on but suffice to say that having effective consultation with these three parties has proven to benefit greatly the students with disabilities and the librarians themselves. All the librarians mentioned the DSS and Access Office as their ‘goto’ place when they need advice on how to handle a particular problem or when looking for a new resource. Having somewhere to go to for advice on disability
resource and support provision is of enormous benefit for academic librarians because they know the advice they get is up to date and in line with legal requirements.

4.2.5.3 Assistive Technologies

Another resource that has proven to be most effective is the use of Assistive Technologies. All the libraries involved in this research avail of such technologies in various forms. Some of the technologies used include the following:

- **JAWS (Job Access With Speech)** provides computer users whose vision impairment prevents them from seeing screen content with speech and Braille output for the most popular computer applications.
- **Read and Write Gold** provides a floating toolbar to support writing and literacy skills for students with dyslexia and other literacy difficulties. It also provides speech feedback, word prediction, phonetic spell checker, talking dictionary and talking calculator. Another feature of this technology is the ability to convert scanned paper documents into word files that can be read aloud and edited.
- **MindView** is a computer mapping service which helps the student organise their ideas.
- **ZoomText** is an integrated magnification and screen reading program that enlarges, enhances and reads aloud everything on the computer screen.
- **Zoom-Ex** is a scanner which allows the user to convert any printed text into multiple accessible formats such as speech, large print, sound file, text file within seconds.

The use of technologies such as the above have proven to be of great benefit in the provision of supports to students with disabilities. One negative issue around the use of assistive technologies was brought up during several of the interviews. Having a segregated area for such technologies was not considered to be ideal. Students who wanted to avail of this specialised technology were put off by the fact that they had to go to a special room to do so. The librarians reported that the students did not want to draw attention to their disability or to the fact that they needed special resources. In fact one library went so far as to remove their assistive technology as no one was making use of it by virtue of the fact that it was all based
in a special access room. Instead they made laptops available to all students who registered with the DSS and each laptop was tailor fitted with assistive technology applications suitable to each student’s special requirements. This initiative was administered through the library and the students can pick up their laptop there. While this facility has proven more successful than having a designated assistive technology room, they have found that only 75% of those who registered with the DSS for such a laptop actually collected it. It is surmised that perhaps the other 25% already have their own laptop and therefore do not need another one but signed up for one anyway.

Queen’s University Belfast has made assistive technology available on all their computers as a way around the issue of forcing students to use a designated area. There is an icon on each computer for assistive technology applications but the important point is that the student with disability can use any computer and does not draw attention to themselves by having to go to a designated area. While this solves one problem it also raises the issue of licence fees which can make such a facility an expensive one to operate. Trinity College Dublin have what they call Assistive Technology Information Centres (ATIC areas) where they house their assistive technology. These areas are located in three libraries within Trinity; Ussher Library, Hamilton Library and John Stearne Medical Library.

Some other resources that the libraries have in place include:

- Special study areas that are quiet
- Book borrowing privileges i.e. longer loan option
- Self-issue service
- One to one study and library skills support
- Hearing Loops
- Access to materials that normally have restricted access
- Alternative format for reading materials i.e. Braille or electronic formats
- Single point of contact within the library
- Improved signage
- Assistance with renewals and reservations
- Book fetching service
Having the right resources available to students with disability is a very important part of the service that academic librarians provide and they constantly review these resources to ensure that having the right impact on students with invisible disability. The Cregan Library in St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra is a relatively new building and is spread out over four floors. Library staff are placed in roles throughout the library that best suit their skill set and this appears to be working very well for them. The library in Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland will be moving to a new building shortly and a lot of work has been done with the architects in the design of the new building so as to ensure that the new space is one that works well for the librarians and all library users. Generally the resources discussed have a very positive impact on users but they can bring unexpected barriers too, some of which were brought to light during the interview process and will now be outlined.

4.2.5.4 Inductions

All the librarians interviewed recognise how stressful it can be for students commencing their academic life and this stress is often magnified for students who have an invisible disability. The librarians were asked if students with invisible disabilities are given an opportunity to visit the library before the start of their studies. The general pattern appears to be that all students regardless of whether they have a disability or not take part in induction which includes the library services. One librarian advised that students with a physical disability are given an opportunity to visit their library before the start of their course however there is no equivalent option for students with invisible disabilities. This being said, all of the librarians interviewed stated that should a student request a one to one orientation session they do everything they can to facilitate this. DIT Aungier Street have a special pre-induction session which is organised through the disability student support office. IT Blanchardstown often have students come to them before they start their course, asking if they can have a look around and they welcome any such enquiry. Students in Queen’s University Belfast can avail of one to one sessions on using the library catalogue and databases.
4.2.6 Unintentional Barriers

Resources, supports and procedures can be put in place with the best of intentions but unforeseen issues can arise when they are applied in real time. Such unintentional barriers came to light during the interview process with academic librarians.

4.2.6.1 Signage and Way-Finding

Three of the librarians interviewed spoke of problems with signage and way-finding where not only students with invisible disabilities experienced problems but all library users in general. These librarians spoke of the need for a review in this area but getting the time to do so is a challenge.

4.2.6.2 Self-Issue and Online Facilities

Recent years have seen the implementation of self-issue in academic libraries and while many have welcomed this service there are users for whom it has caused stress and anxiety especially if there is no one around to help them out when they experience problems. Depending on the nature of the disability some library users experience difficulties using online facilities such as renewing loans or paying overdue fines for example. The issues were more easily resolved if they occurred on campus where there was help readily available as opposed to being off-site which meant the student was unable to get help. The emergence of self-issue facilities has overall been a success but one librarian raised the issue of not becoming overly reliant on it to the point that it becomes the only way for students to issue and return books. It is important, especially for students with invisible disabilities that they know there is someone available at the desk that they can interact with as needed.

4.2.6.3 Physical Space

A library’s physical space probably has the most impact on its users. In the eight libraries visited during this research process the physical space was most appealing and appeared very conducive to studying and reading. Two librarians mentioned some unintentional barriers that exist within their respective libraries involving physical space which they see as having a negative impact on their users. One felt that the space within their library was somehow restrictive. While initially the library space was more than adequate, as the college itself grew and the library collection grew, space is now at a premium and users are beginning to
feel the impact of this. Another librarian mentioned that the upper floors of their library were in need of refurbishment and weren’t on par with the library’s ground level. Two librarians mentioned issues with noise pollution in some areas of their libraries and are currently addressing this to see if they can make better use of the space by perhaps moving group study areas to a different location within the library which would reduce the noise issue. While there are designated areas within the library for quiet study it can be a challenge to manage this especially when groups of students come together.

4.2.7 Collaboration between librarians and teaching staff
When asked if there was a consultative process between the librarians and the teaching staff with regard to specific students with an invisible disability, the answers were generally no but that such consultation would generally take place between teaching staff and the Access Office. National University of Ireland Maynooth stated that their Access Office have a very close relationship with the teaching staff. This consultative process continues with teaching staff liaising closely with the disability support service within the college. In each academic department in the National University of Ireland Maynooth there is an identified person in each academic department to help students with any course-related concerns. They also have an Educational Support Worker such as an academic/personal assistant, a note taker or a sign language interpreter to assist students. The librarian from National College of Ireland stated that they have on occasion had consultation from teaching staff with regard to assignments but it depends on each lecturer.

4.2.8 Academic Librarians - Proactive or Reactive?
Participating academic librarians see themselves as being proactive when it comes to providing support to students with invisible disabilities and while every effort is made to ensure that all students’ needs and not just those with disability are met. They acknowledge that students with invisible disabilities can experience library anxiety but as a profession they are committed to helping them overcome this. It is not always possible to plan for every eventuality, as one librarian put it “We try to plan for not being able to plan!” They like the idea of their libraries being seen as a ‘neutral zone’ where students can come and feel comfortable asking for assistance. Providing support to students is important to them and
they will often go out of their way to do so. For example they are prepared to meet with students on a one to one basis if they request such a meeting and they consider it an important part of their role to ensure that their services are accessible to all users. If a situation arises involving a student with an invisible disability which doesn’t result in a positive outcome, the librarian team are always keen to learn from the experience so they can avoid a similar scenario in the future. The importance of disclosure was raised here as the librarians believe it can make a difference in how a situation is handled if the they are aware that the student is registered with the DSS.

Tying in with this desire to learn from their users the librarians are always keen to receive feedback about the service they provide. While some have carried out their own specific user satisfaction surveys in the past, others are incorporated into the general one for their respective colleges. IT Blanchardstown do short surveys which focus on particular areas rather than broader general ones as they feel this helps them address specific areas in more detail. In Queen’s University Belfast they have used Customer Journey Maps as a way to establish how their users reach their goal and how they felt as they did so. National University of Ireland Maynooth have used LibQual over the last three years to gauge their users’ experience within the library and they have also used heat maps.
4.3 Summary

This chapter addressed in detail the findings of interviews carried out across eight academic libraries (7 based in Republic of Ireland and 1 based in Northern Ireland). The analysis of these interviews resulted in the identification of eight areas all of which have an influence on how academic librarians overcome the unique challenges presented to them in providing support to students with invisible disabilities:

4. Awareness of invisible disabilities
5. Training
6. Policies and procedures
7. Disclosure
8. Best practices and resources
9. Unintentional barriers
10. Collaboration
11. Proactive/reactive roles

As a profession academic librarians maintain a keen awareness of their students’ needs regardless of whether they have a disability or not. There is a growing awareness of invisible disabilities and what they entail. The librarians themselves are keen to develop their skills in this area and welcome opportunities to learn more about such disabilities. While very few of the participating libraries have their own library-specific policies on disabilities there is an understanding of their respective institution’s policies and procedures and work closely with disability support services and access office to ensure that students’ needs are met. The area of disclosure is a challenging one. While every effort is made to encourage students to disclose their disability, not everyone will and this can present problems to both the student and librarians involved. However, the librarians accept that it can be a difficult decision for someone to decide whether or not to disclose a disability and realise that all they can do is encourage them to do so but respect their right to decide. There are many practices in place within academic libraries which are proving very beneficial to students with an invisible disability and a lot of resources have been put in place that are proving invaluable to both students and librarian staff. While acknowledging the many best practices and resources that are in place there can also be unintentional barriers present which can cause problems.
Academic librarians collaborate closely with the disability support services within their colleges so as to ensure that students receive the support they require and are a very proactive group of professionals when it comes to providing such support.
5 Conclusions

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the findings of the research undertaken and by linking these findings to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 will show how this particular research builds on the existing literature, while specifically addressing the current situation in academic libraries in Ireland.

The literature review focused on three separate research areas of providing support to students with invisible disabilities;

1. Training for academic librarians;
2. Higher/third level education for individuals with invisible/hidden disabilities;
3. Research where students with invisible/hidden disabilities themselves took part;

The literature material reviewed originated in Ireland, America and the UK. The first section of the literature review highlights the importance of providing training for academic librarians to expand their awareness and understanding of invisible disabilities which in turn will help them provide effective supports to students with such disabilities. The second part of the literature review emphasises the importance of having proper supports in place, looks at defining what is meant by invisible disability and how a student with an invisible disability experiences the transition from second level education to third level which can directly impact their academic life. Finally the third section looks at the importance of inclusion and looks at how students with an invisible disability experience learning.

The main purpose of this research project was to gain an insight into how academic librarians in Irish third level educational institutions are addressing the challenges posed to them in providing library supports to students with invisible disabilities. A total of eight academic librarians took part in one to one semi-structured interviews, seven of which were from the Republic of Ireland and one from Northern Ireland. Given the nature of the research topic it was thought that one to one interviews would provide the best opportunity for engaging with
the librarians in a way that would allow for an in-depth view of their experiences. All the librarians interviewed have direct experience in dealing directly with students who have invisible disabilities. While some no longer work at front of desk, they have done so in the past and would still have involvement in providing services to such students.

5.2 Addressing the research title

The title of this research project is:

*Students with Invisible Disabilities: Unique Challenges for Academic Libraries in Ireland*

The areas specifically addressed were:

- **Awareness** of invisible disabilities among academic librarians;
- **Training** or lack of, in the area of invisible disabilities;
- Awareness of **policies and procedures** pertaining to disabilities either visible or invisible;
- **Disclosure** of a student’s invisible disability;
- **Best practices and resources** in the provision of library services to students with invisible disabilities;
- **Unintentional barriers** within academic libraries which may affect students with invisible disabilities in particular;
- **Collaboration** between teaching staff and library staff;
- Librarians’ role - **proactive, reactive or both**;

5.2.1 Awareness of invisible disabilities among academic librarians

Two out of the eight librarians interviewed had never heard of the term invisible disability but were able to make an educated guess as to what is meant by the term and while the remaining six had heard of it, three only had a vague understanding of it. So it appears that it is something academic librarians have heard mentioned but the level of understanding varies. Academic librarians are faced with many challenges when it comes to invisible disabilities, for example:
1. There are a great many conditions that can be classified as an invisible disability;
2. They can affect an individual in many ways, none of which will be immediately obvious;
3. Not everyone who has an invisible disability will want it known;
4. Not everyone who has such a disability knows that they have one;

Just taking these four aspects into account highlights the complexities faced by academic librarians on a daily basis in providing supports to students with invisible disability. While awareness levels vary from a vague to a more informed understanding, it is clear that training plays a key role in this area and the librarians interviewed all expressed an interest in learning more about invisible disabilities.

5.2.2 Training
Three out of the eight librarians interviewed had received training in the area of invisible disability and reported that they found it to be extremely beneficial. Such training has raised awareness levels in and around invisible disabilities and has also provided a deeper understanding of specific disabilities. For example Queen’s University Belfast hold regular training sessions which focus on particular conditions such as mental health or Aspergers Syndrome and in doing so participants get a much better understanding of the conditions and how they may impact on a student living with them. Even something as simple as customer service training or policy training can have a positive impact on how services are provided in an academic library. All the librarians interviewed mentioned the importance of having good collaboration between themselves and the disability support service and access office within their respective colleges. Because the librarians do not receive details of a student’s disability they rely on the DSS and Access Office to inform them of what supports need to be in place for specific students who have registered with them. The disability support network within the college is in an ideal position to provide training and knowledge to academic librarians to help them provide effective supports to students with invisible disabilities.

5.2.3 Policies and Procedures
Policies and procedures are important as they ensure that the colleges and universities are meeting their legal requirements when it comes to treating students with disability equally to
other students. All but one of the colleges visited are bound by Irish Equality Legalisation with Queen’s University Belfast being bound by the UK equivalent, SENDO - Special Education Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2010). The majority of the librarians interviewed said they have an awareness of their legal requirements and one had participated in formal policy training which was found to be of great benefit. There are organisations such as DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) and AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) who provide policy and practical advice to educational institutions to help them fulfil their legal requirements. Some of the librarians interviewed have sought advice from these organisations but in general it would be the DSS or Access teams that would have the most contact. It would appear that in general academic libraries tend not to have their own library-specific disability policy. However, two of the libraries involved in this research do have their own library disability policy. All eight librarians emphasised the importance of having a close partnership with their disability support services.

5.2.4 Disclosure

From a student’s perspective deciding whether or not to disclose their disability is a big step. The fear of being stigmatised or labelled is ever present. The academic librarians who participated in this research are very much aware of the anxiety around making such a decision but actively encourage any student with an invisible disability to do so through the Disability Support Service and/or Access Office. Confidentiality is strictly maintained and only the fact that a student is registered with the DSS appears on the student’s library record which informs the library staff that the student is entitled to avail of specials services such as book borrowing privileges or access to assistive technology within the library. The student does not have to advise staff that they have a disability and this is seen as an important part of registering with the DSS. All the librarians interviewed are happy with this system and see no reason for them to know the details of a student’s disability.

5.2.5 Resources and Best Practices

As discussed in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.5, there are many resources and practices in place within academic libraries which are designed to assist and support students with invisible
disabilities. Having a ‘Disability Services Librarian’ is one resource that would be welcome in an academic library and where such a role exists it has proven to be most valuable. In reality however, it appears that this role does not exist as a dedicated one but instead is part of a particular librarian’s overall role. This being the case having good collaboration between the academic library and the DSS and Access Office is found to be most beneficial.

The use of Assistive Technologies within academic libraries has proven to be one of the greatest resources available to students with invisible disabilities. Examples of such technologies is provided in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.5.3. What appears to be a key element in their use is the way in which they are made available. It has been found that locating such technologies in a designated area away from mainstream facilities can have a negative impact on students with invisible disabilities who feel that having to go to a special area or room to use such equipment draws attention to the fact that they have a disability and that they are different from their peers. Two libraries have addressed this issue in very different ways. One made assistive technologies available on all computers so students do not have to go to a special area to use it and another library has done away with their assistive technology room and instead offers students who are registered with DSS the use of a laptop which is programmed to their specific requirements.

All the librarians interviewed hold library induction sessions for new students at the start of a the academic year. Generally such induction sessions do not discern between students with an invisible disability and those who do not. While some do facilitate a pre-induction session through the Access Office or Disability Support Service for students with a disability, the librarians who took part in this research project stated that they are always open to holding one to one inductions with students if required and this is usually organised through the Disability Support Service.

There are many other resources available within academic libraries as can be seen in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.5 and collectively they go a long way to assisting students with invisible disabilities. The increase in the number of students with invisible disabilities attending third
level education has meant that academic librarians are having to constantly review their resources in an effort to provide the best possible supports for them.

5.2.4 Unintentional Barriers
While it is acknowledged that academic librarians are faced with many challenges when it comes to providing library supports to students with invisible disabilities, there can be unintentional barriers present which can cause problems. Examples of such barriers were discussed in Chapter 4 and include issues with signage, way-finding, self-issue and physical space. Not all the librarians interviewed could think of any unintentional barriers but felt if they gave the matter some time they could probably come up with some. Issues around signage and way-finding were causing problems for students generally and also teaching staff. A library’s physical space can be problematic as can be seen in Chapter 4 with librarians mentioning noise pollution and space restrict as their main issues.

5.2.5 Collaboration
From talking to the librarians it is apparent that there is much sharing of knowledge and expertise taking place both formally and informally within the academic librarian community who are very focused on providing effective supports to all students. However it appears that such collaboration tends not to take place to any great extent between the librarians and teaching staff but instead exists more between the Access Office and Disability Support Service and teaching staff. Some librarians mentioned that their respective colleges offer students with disabilities the services of an educational support worker who would work closely with the student’s lecturers. Other libraries have a librarian tutor who would liaise closely with a student’s lecturer.

5.2.6 Proactive or Reactive
The librarians who were interviewed for this research project came across as having a very proactive approach when it comes to providing library supports and resources to students with disabilities regardless of whether they are visible or invisible. They collaborate with one another, are very open to meeting with students on a one to one basis, they welcome and encourage feedback from students with regard to library services and are very keen that their
library services are inclusive and accessible to all users. They acknowledge that it is not always possible to plan for every eventuality so there has to be a reactive element to their role too.

5.3 Recommendations

Collectively the eight academic librarians who were interviewed during this research project contribute to the provision of library services to over 85,000 students which is no mean feat. Based on earlier figures, over 10% which equates to over 8,500 students will have an invisible disability which brings a further challenging dimension to an academic librarian’s role. Chapter 1, Section 1.5 gave just a small sample of 21 conditions that come under the classification of invisible disability. The impact on any individual having just one of those conditions can be severe and at the same time not outwardly noticeable. Academic librarians are successfully interacting on a daily basis with students, many of whom are living with such conditions. The overall findings of this research show that academic librarians are very much aware of the challenges involved in providing library supports to students with invisible disabilities. They actively seek out innovative ways to improve their services to all students and work to ensure that students with all forms of disability do not feel singled out or disadvantaged when using library facilities. The recommendations below are made with a view to enhancing a service which is working effectively but also to act as a reminder that when it comes to the provision of supports for students with invisible disabilities, complacency is not an option and as a profession, academic librarians cannot take their eyes off the ball when it comes to providing library services to students with invisible disabilities.

**Firstly** the appointment of a ‘Disability Services Librarian’ within each academic library is highly recommended. Whether this is a full-time, dedicated role or included as part of an existing librarian position would most likely depend on the size of the academic institution. The responsibilities of such a role would include:

- Liaising with the Disability Support Service and Access Office within the college;
- Co-ordinating trainings sessions for library staff on various aspects of disability;
- Be a single point of contact within the library for students with a disability;
- Review the library’s disability service on an annual basis;
Liaising closely with Disability Support Service and the Access Office would place a Disability Services Librarian in an ideal position to provide more effective library supports to students with an invisible disability.

A **second recommendation** is the introduction of a regular training programme for academic librarians with a focus on invisible disabilities. Such a training programme could include sessions with a condition-specific focus as done for example in Queen’s University Belfast. They could also address disability policies, assistive technologies or other initiatives that work well or not so well in the provision of supports to students with invisible disabilities. These training sessions could be facilitated through each individual academic library or on a rotational basis with each academic library taking turns to host and facilitate a training session which enables an active sharing of knowledge and experience, while at the same time raising the awareness levels around invisible disabilities. There is an opportunity here for the disability support services within each college to engage more in the area of training and for them to pass on their wealth of knowledge.

The **third recommendation** addresses the area of Assistive Technologies. All the librarians who took part in this research process commended the use of these technologies and there is no denying the value they add to the students who use them. It is recommended that Assistive Technologies be made accessible as standard on all computers within academic libraries. While acknowledging that there are financial implications involved with licensing requirements which may not make this feasible it is worth serious consideration. Students with invisible disabilities do not want to be treated any differently than mainstream students and do not want to have to go to a ‘special room’ to use a computer for fear of being stigmatised or singled out as being different. Having such technologies installed on all library computers is the ideal but where this is not possible consideration should be given to moving computers with assistive technologies to an open access area.

The **final recommendation** may seem obvious but it is an important one and serves to tie all the other recommendations together. The biggest resource available to academic librarians when it comes to providing library supports to students with invisible disabilities are their
students who are living with invisible disabilities. They are the experts in their own disability and as such are in an ideal position to explain how they experience learning. An academic library can have a great many resources in place but if no one is asking these students what they think of these resources or what they find helpful or unhelpful to them in their academic endeavours, then it is a lost opportunity. An active engagement with students who are living with an invisible disability is recommended; whether through the Disability Support Service, Access Office, one to one meetings between a librarian tutor, through casual conversation within the library setting or all of these, involving students in assessing which supports work and which do not. Such student engagements currently exist in various forms but it is recommended that they be built upon because there is no better resource available.

5.4 Summary
In conclusion, this dissertation examined how academic librarians in Ireland are overcoming the challenges presented to them in their provision of library supports to students who have invisible disabilities. Through the course of this research it has become apparent that the number of students with invisible disabilities attending third level education is increasing and academic librarians are faced with more challenges as a result. The literature reviewed emphasises the value of providing training for academic librarian to help improve awareness and understanding of what having an invisible disability can entail from a student’s perspective. It also drew attention to the importance of fostering an inclusive environment for these students, one where they do not feel segregated or self-conscious about their need for special supports. Learning from the students themselves about how they experience learning can be the most valuable resource available to academic librarians. The literature also underpins the importance of having supports in place for students with invisible disabilities from the start, as this can help lower students’ stress levels as they settle into academic life. Academic librarians are to be commended for the dedication and the enthusiasm they put into their efforts to support all students but in particular those with a disability. Their work is made extra challenging by virtue of the fact they while they may know that a student is registered with Disability Support Services, they do not know what that disability is. Those who have had specialised training in this area have found it to be invaluable and those who have not had any training would welcome it. There is much
collaboration within the academic librarian sector and the willingness to share knowledge and experience is ever present and a testament to their desire to help their students.

The value of this study is that it has served to highlight the positive work being done by academic librarians in their support of students with invisible disability and their willingness to learn more about the subject. Many of the librarians who participated in this research mentioned that the interview process has reminded them to review their current policies and resources. They acknowledge that complacency is not an option and that they must constantly review the library resources to ensure that they are effective for their students with disabilities, visible and invisible. The enthusiasm the librarians showed for this research subject serves to affirm their dedication to life long learning. The role of an academic librarian is not a static one but one that is dynamic in nature and one that is open to new ideas.

From the perspective of the students who have an invisible disability the value of this study is that it highlights ways to raise awareness of their needs and the many different disabilities that are invisible in nature. It also serves as a reminder that the students with invisible disabilities are themselves, the most valuable resource available to academic librarians when it comes to putting in place library resources. Through their own voice they can inform the librarians and the disability support services how they experience learning, what does and does not work for them.

Although this study was limited to only eight academic libraries it has highlighted the many resources that are in place within the libraries, some more beneficial than others. The librarians face the challenges before them with enthusiasm and professionalism. No one claims to have all the right resources in place or that they have all the right answers but there is a willingness to share what works as well as what is less successful. Academic librarians exemplify life long learning while the students with invisible disabilities are a reminder that there is no one right way to learn. Embracing diversity, fostering inclusion and respecting differences are good foundation stones in the provision of learning supports for students with invisible disabilities.
Bibliography


Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

Name: ____________________________________________
Location: ____________________________________________

5. Have you heard of the term ‘invisible’ or ‘hidden’ disability before?

   Yes ☐
   No ☐

6. How many students attend your college?

   ____________________________________________

7. To the best of your knowledge how many students have an invisible disability in your college?

   ____________________________________________

8. Have you received any specialised training in the area of invisible disabilities?

   Yes ☐
   No ☐

9. If yes, was it beneficial? If no, would you like to receive such training?

   ____________________________________________

10. What, if any, resources and supports are available to you as a librarian to help you assist students with invisible disabilities?

   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________
11. Can you identify any best practice(s) that work particularly well in your library when dealing with students with invisible disabilities?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

12. Is there a disability officer working in your college?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

13. If yes, is there consultation between you and the disability officer?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

14. Is there a specific individual such as a ‘Disability Services Librarian’ within the library responsible for liaising between students with invisible disabilities?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

15. In your role as an academic librarian how many students have disclosed an invisible disability to you in your role of librarian?

________________________________________________________________________

16. Does your college actively encourage students to disclose if they have a disability?
   Yes ☐ No ☐
17. Are you informed directly if a student discloses that they have an invisible disability?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

18. Do students with an invisible disability have the opportunity to visit your library before starting their studies in the college?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

19. Does your college have a written disability policy for providing services to students with a disability visible and/or invisible?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

20. Does your library have its own specific disability policy?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

21. If yes do you take advice from any disability organisation such as DAWN (Disability Advisors Working Network) or AHEAD (Assoc for Higher Ed Access & Disability)?
   Yes ☐ No ☐

22. How often is the policy audited and by whom?
23. Is there a consultative process between you and the teaching staff with regard to specific students with an invisible/hidden disability?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

24. Do you receive details of assignments given to students with invisible disabilities?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

25. Does the library provide a peer mentoring service for students with an invisible disability?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

26. Is there an annual budget reserved for the needs of students with disabilities?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

27. Do you consider your role as an academic librarian to be proactive or reactive in identifying the needs of students with invisible disabilities?

   PROACTIVE ☐ REACTIVE ☐
28. Do you play an active role in making services to students with invisible disabilities explicit and if so how?

   Yes ☐  No ☐

29. Do you believe there are any unintentional barriers present for students with invisible disabilities accessing the library services within your college?

   Yes ☐  No ☐

30. If a situation arises in your library, involving a student with an invisible/hidden disability which doesn’t work out well how do you deal with the lesson/s learnt?

31. Does your library collect service quality expectations from students with disabilities?

   Yes ☐  No ☐
Appendix 2 - *Introduction Email*

Dear

My name is Grainne Mooney and I am a student on the MSc in Information and Library Management programme in Dublin Business School. I am currently at the dissertation stage of my Masters and carrying out research on how academic librarians manage students with invisible disabilities. The title of my dissertation is “*Students with invisible disabilities: unique challenges for academic libraries in Ireland*.” I am looking to carry out a one to one interview with academic librarians from various third level institutions with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges they face in this area and also to explore areas such as the policies in place within academic libraries in this regard, how much awareness and understanding there is of such disabilities, what works well and what doesn’t work well when working with students with invisible disabilities and I would also like to see what kind of collaboration exists between teaching staff and academic librarians when it comes to assisting such students.

With this in mind I would like to ask if you would be willing to take part in a one to one interview with me, at a time and place convenient to you as part of my research? The interview will take less than one hour and your time and input would be greatly appreciated. I fully understand that you may not have time to participate in my research but if you know of a colleague who would like to do so perhaps you could refer me to them.

Before you agree to participate in the interview I would like to confirm that:

- You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation required from you.
- You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn/ destroyed.
- You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.
- You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered.
- If you have any questions, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.
The data I collect will not contain any personal information about you. Your anonymity will be maintained at all times and no comments will be ascribed to you by name in any written document or verbal presentation. Nor will any data be used from the interview that might identify you to a third party, however the names of all participating universities/colleges will be included in the dissertation.

Should you wish to assist me in my research by taking part in an interview with me I would be delighted to set up an appointment for a date and time that suits you.

If you have any queries regarding my research and your participation please do not hesitate to contact me at this email address. I am happy to forward a copy of the interview questions ahead of any planned interview.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you most sincerely for taking the time to consider my request and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Gráinne Mooney
INFORMATION SHEET FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Student Name: Gráinne Mooney
Course: MSc. Information and Library Management, Dublin Business School.

DISSEPTION TITLE
Students with invisible disabilities: unique challenges for academic libraries in Ireland.

You are being asked to take part in a research study on the challenges that Irish academic libraries face in managing students with invisible disabilities. This study involves an exploration of the policies in place in academic libraries pertaining to students with invisible disabilities, examining the awareness and understanding of such disabilities among academic librarians, establishing what kind of collaboration exists between the various support networks with the university/college with regard to these students and to ascertain if academic librarians receive appropriate specialised training on how best to assist students who have an invisible disability.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN
In this study, you will be asked to take part in a confidential one to one interview with the researcher. The purpose of this interview is to gain as much insight as possible into how academic libraries in Ireland provide support to students with invisible disabilities and to ascertain what challenges this presents to academic librarians.

TIME COMMITMENT
The interview is intended to take no longer than one hour to complete.

PARTICIPANTS’ RIGHTS
• You may decide to stop being a part of the research study at any time without explanation required from you.
• You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn / destroyed.
• You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked of you.
• You have the right to have your questions about the procedures answered (unless answering these questions would interfere with the study’s outcome. A full de-briefing will be given after the study).
• If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, you should ask the researcher before the study begins.

CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY
The data I collect does not contain any personal information about you. Your anonymity will be maintained at all times and no comments will be ascribed to you by name in any written document or verbal presentation. Nor will any data be used from the interview that might identify you to a third party, however the names of all participating universities/colleges will be included in the dissertation.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
I or/and Caitriona Sharkey will be glad to answer your questions about this study at any time. You may contact my supervisor at caitriona.sharkey@dbs.ie or DBS + 353 (0) 1 4177500 or you can email me at grainne.mooney@gmail.com
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE:
Students with invisible disabilities: unique challenges for academic libraries in Ireland.

PROJECT SUMMARY:
The purpose of this dissertation is to establish what policies are in place in academic libraries for students with invisible disabilities, ascertain how much awareness and understanding of invisible disabilities there is among academic librarians, to find out if there is effective collaboration between the different support mechanisms within the university/college with regard to students with invisible disabilities and to seek evidence or lack of for a coherent, sector-wide approach to assisting such students and finally to find out if academic librarians receive appropriate specialised training on how to best assist students with invisible disabilities.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

(1) you have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, (2) questions about your participation in this study have been answered satisfactorily, (3) you are aware of the potential risks (if any), and (4) you are taking part in this research study voluntarily (without coercion).

_________________________________  __________________________________
Participant’s signature          Participant’s Name (Printed)

_________________________________  __________________________________
Student Name (printed)            Student Name signature

_________________________________
Date
Appendix 3 - Personal Reflection

1. Introduction
In 1983 I sat my Leaving Certificate and to say I didn’t cover myself in glory would be an understatement. It wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy secondary school, quite the opposite actually but my exam results never reflected my ability. It wasn’t until 2004 that I made one of the biggest decisions of my life and took a career break so I could go to college and study for a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Psychology. Those four years were probably the most challenging and rewarding of my life. It was always my intention to study for a Masters degree once I had my Bachelor’s degree but I had to return to my career in the financial sector and spent the next five years meeting the many challenges which resulted from the economic crisis. However, the thought of going back to college was ever present in my mind and when I got the opportunity to leave my job it seemed the ideal time to finally make good on my intentions. Choosing a Masters programme was more difficult than I expected. There were so many to choose from but in the end I decided to apply for the Master of Science in Information and Library Management. Even though the programme focused on library and information skills I felt that these skills would be transferrable to many professional areas and would be a great asset to me in my future career. As one would expect, studying for a Masters is not a walk in the park and I have faced many challenges along the way but as I approach the finish line of this long distance marathon I feel I have pushed myself out of my comfort zone and in doing so have achieved academic and personal success.

2. My Learning Experience
There were ten modules altogether in the programme and each one of them brought their own unique set of challenges. The most challenging aspects of the programme for me included:

- Presentations
- Group work
- Information overload
- Work placement
- Assignments and exams
- Dissertation
3. Presentations

Group and individual presentations were an integral part of the programme content and over the two years I presented, either individually or part of a group, on a variety of topics such as: Quality Circles, Librarian Ninjas, Lesson Plans, ACCR2. I have given many presentations in my time but there are none so stressful as those that are being graded. If it is part of a group presentation you have the fear of letting your partner down while at the same time having the comfort of knowing that you are not on your own under the spotlight. I gave a total of nine presentations over the two years of the programme and while they were all nerve wrecking in their own way, I found them to be an invaluable learning tool on many levels. The time limit attached to presentations gave me the skills to select the pertinent points of a given subject matter. Having to stand before an audience, present and take questions has given me confidence, not only for any future presentations but for any future job interviews. It also helped me greatly when I was holding the interviews for my dissertation. Preparing for presentations helped me focus on the subject at hand and learn more about it so I could answer any questions put before me. The entire process of presenting has helped me become more confident in myself and the skills learned helped me greatly when conducting my research interviews in the dissertation process.

4. Group Work

Group work is extremely challenging especially given the part time nature of the programme which I undertook. It can be very difficult to organise meeting times when you have people working full-time alongside fitting in two evenings of classes per week, studying and fulfilling family commitments. These obstacles aside I found it easy working with my classmates and the main benefit I gained from such work was witnessing the many different learning styles that people have. Group work also helped the class to get to know one another and enabled us to support each other through the sharing of knowledge. I have a lot of experience of working as part of a team having done so for thirty years but it can be tricky especially if there is a clash of personalities involved. I like to think I have good people skills which came in useful during group work.
5. Information Overload

I came to this programme with no library work experience and very little knowledge of any of the subjects covered. There were times when I felt overwhelmed by all that had to be learned and the number of assignments that had to be done was extremely daunting. I have good time management and organisational skills. I am also a good notetaker so the combination of these skills were very helpful to me and were definitely fine tuned as a result of my participation in this programme. To overcome the information overload I set up a well organised folder structure on my laptop which enabled me to store my notes, handouts, assignments etc in a way that made the content easily retrievable. This also helped me keep track of all the dissertation research material I accumulated as I progressed through the course. I had a fairly good idea of the subject matter of my dissertation from an early stage so I was always on the look out for material of interest. It was important to have a well structured filing system where I could save and retrieve the information with ease.

6. Work Placement

The work placement element of the course was one of the underlying reasons why I chose this programme. As I stated earlier I came to the course with no practical library work experience so I was keen to dip my toe in the water and see what it was like. It gave me the opportunity to put theory into practice, so to speak. Although the tasks I was given during the three week placement were, understandably very basic in the overall scale of library work, they nonetheless provided me with a good overview of a librarian's work. I also had an opportunity to complete a five week library work placement during Semester 3 which gave me the chance to do some cataloguing. Being able to do some ‘real life’ cataloguing really helped me gain a deeper understanding of the process. As a result of both work placements the theory I had learned during the year made a lot more sense to me. It also gave me some insight into whether or not I would like to work in the library sector. When deciding on my dissertation title it also provided me with a practical view of how librarians provide services and supports to students in a real world setting.
7. Assignments and Exams

Obviously assignments and exams are an important part of any course as it gives students the opportunity to show their understanding of the subject. I found some assignments were more enjoyable than others to complete and the ones I found most challenging tended to be ones in which I did particularly well. There were only three exams on this programme, one of which was three hours in length and given that I hadn't sat an exam that long in over 30 years I was concerned about being able to keep the momentum going throughout the duration of the exam. I felt a great sense of achievement when I passed these exams but I do not feel that they are the best or fairest method of assessment as so much depends on how you feel on the day, the environment of the room etc but I viewed them as another challenge that had to be faced.

8. Dissertation

The dissertation was, for me, the biggest challenge of the entire Masters’ programme. From day one it was never far from my mind. I recall a very good piece of advice from Research Methods 1 and that was to pick a dissertation topic that was of great interest to me and one that I could continue to develop and work on after finishing the programme. So keeping this in mind I thought long and hard about what I would like to do and it wasn’t long before I decided to focus on the area of invisible disability. For the last ten years I have been very involved in a group (22q11 Ireland Support Group) which provides support to individuals affected by a genetic condition called 22q11.2 DS Syndrome and for many of these individuals it is not immediately apparent that they have a condition and this can add greatly to the challenges they face on a day to day basis. Finding a way to link this in with the library sector was my next step and it soon became clear that I would have to narrow my focus to one aspect of the librarian sector. Following some more research which highlighted that more and more individuals with disabilities are availing of third level education I decided it would be interesting to see how academic librarians in Ireland are meeting the challenges of providing library support to this cohort of college students.

The research process of my dissertation was long and arduous. First of all I had to wade through a lot of research material in order to find material that was pertinent to my topic.
Over the two years leading up the dissertation phase I spent a good deal of time sifting through material, dismissing some and filing away relevant material. Having decided to go down the route of holding one to one interviews with academic librarians I set about deciding which colleges/universities to contact. Initially I got a good response and managed to secure three interviews but after that I hit a stumbling block. In some instances I got no reply to my requests, even after sending follow up emails and in other instances it was a case of people being on holiday or too busy to participate in an interview. As a result of this I had to spend a lot more time than I had intended securing interviews but with the help of my supervisor and the Head of Library Services in DBS managed to set up five more.

Despite this set back all my interviews went really well and I actually found them to be the most enjoyable part of the dissertation process. I have no experience in conducting formal interviews and felt very much out of my comfort zone but as each interview took place I got more comfortable with the process. All the librarians I met showed great enthusiasm and interest in my topic and this gave me great encouragement. An unexpected upside to the interviews was getting to see inside the libraries themselves which really helped in visualising how the academic librarians worked. Initially I had planned on doing online surveys as a way of gathering my research data but I believe the one to one interviews gave me a much more in-depth insight into the research topic and the experience of conducting these interviews lifted me out of my comfort zone. The process not only added greatly to my research but also gave me a confidence boost on a personal level too.

9. Summary

I have experienced a great many challenges over the two years of this Masters’ programme. There have been many highs and lows throughout the entire process. I have made new friends, learnt new skills, completed 21 assignments, passed 3 exams, stepped out of my comfort zone, completed a dissertation, laughed and cried (a lot) but as I reach the end of this experience I am looking forward to starting a new career and putting my skills to good use in all aspects of my life. I firmly believe that the skills I have learnt over the last two years will benefit me greatly in my future working life. The personal development I experienced during this time will stand to me in both my personal and professional life.