Opinion piece from AHEAD on the assumptions about disability

Extract from "Going to the Edge: a toolkit for international officers to improve access for students with disabilities on study abroad programmes"

Life runs on assumptions. When we wake up in the morning, we assume the clock is correctly telling the time. Assumptions get us through every day without having to re-examine our thinking. Most of our assumptions are based on our experience - if we see a Rottweiler dog in the park, we know not to go up to it and pet it. However, many of our assumptions are not based on any real evidence. We often make assumptions about people based on very little, the way they dress or talk. These assumptions can have a huge impact on the lives of others we come into contact with.

Most people make assumptions about people with disabilities. For example, if the disability is physical, they can assume the person needs help, or deserves sympathy, or is sick, or is a problem. These assumptions can kick in even when the person is not there, for example when we see an application or a CV of someone who wants to be a nurse, or an engineer. If we see any reference to disability, we may assume that their disability means they won't be able or won't be as good as another non-disabled person. Someone once said that there is an answer to every problem that is simple, straightforward and wrong. The same is true of assumptions, they are simple, straightforward and wrong.

AHEAD works with staff throughout the higher education sector to alert people to their assumptions about disability and to ask people to take a step back and re-examine their initial assumptions. After all, someone with a disability will be just as able as anyone else to perform a demanding job and if we could see this, then we would make a profound difference to the lives of very talented people held back by assumptions made about their disability.

For more information, visit www.ahead.ie or by email to ahead@ahead.ie