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The Student Survey in Germany: best3

Studying with health impairments





Executive Summary

The Student Survey in Germany: “best3 – Studying with health impairments”

Note 1: In this text, the label “students with impairment” refers to students who perceive their impairment as having adverse effects on their studies. “Students without impairment” either have no impairment or an impairment which they regard as not affecting their studies.

New survey design provides better understanding

“The Student Survey in Germany” offers insights into the living and studying conditions of students in Germany. With its new modularised design, the survey integrates three long-term surveys that have previously been conducted separately: the Social Survey, the Student Survey, and “best – Studying with health impairments”. The present report best3 contains important improvements which, compared to its predecessors best1 and best2, allow for a more profound understanding of studying with an impairment. Thanks to the new integrated database, the situation of students with health impairment can be

compared with that of students without health impairment. Just like the earlier reports, best3 looks at health impairments that, from the students’ point of view, have a negative impact on their studies, among them mental illnesses or movement impairments. Comparing the groups with and without impairments makes it possible to reliably identify specific challenges of studying with impairments. A total of around 188,000 students took part in the survey. Almost 30,000 of them were students with an impairment that has adverse effects on their studies.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as yet unclear

As the survey was conducted in the summer semester of 2021, the findings of “The Student Survey in Germany” should be viewed against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic-related changes in students’ everyday life. For students with impairment, who are considerably more likely to belong to COVID-19 risk groups than students without impairment (23.2 vs. 7.6 percent), everyday life during the pandemic was more challenging (Lörz et al., 2020). At this point, changes in relation to earlier best reports cannot be clearly categorised as pandemic-related exceptions or genuine trend reversals. This will only be possible with future data.

Students with an impairment that has adverse effects on their studies

Higher proportion of students with impairment

Overall, around 16 percent of students report having an impairment. In 2011 and 2016, it was 8 and 11 percent, respectively. Of the students with impairment, 69 percent have a single health issue, 31 percent have multiple impairments that impact their studies.

Impairments usually evident before starting university, mental illnesses particularly frequent

The largest increase can be observed in the group of students with mental illnesses: a rise of around 20 percentage points from 45 percent in 2011 to 65 percent in 2021. Whether the increase is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, or to a growing social acceptance of mental illnesses accompanied by an increasing openness in dealing with them cannot be determined at this point. A further 13 percent of the group with impairment have a chronic illness, and 7 percent have multiple impairments of equal severity. Other types of impairment are less common. Just under 17 percent of students have had the impairment since birth, while in around 63 percent, it occurred before starting university. For 59 percent of students, the impairment has a (very) severe impact on their studies. Students with equally severe multiple impairments (72.5 percent) or mental illnesses (66.1 percent) in particular regard the effects of their impairment as (very) severe.

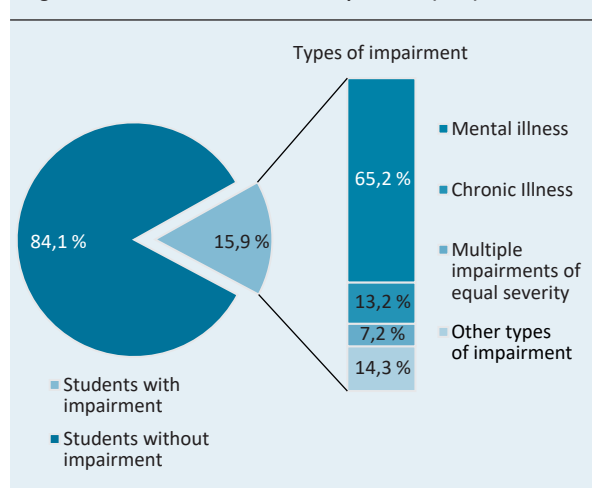
Many impairments not apparent to others

56 percent of students with an impairment report that their impairment is not noticeable to other people, even in the long term. The other 44 percent have a noticeable kind of impairment. With only 3 percent, the impairment is apparent at the first encounter; with 41 percent, it becomes noticeable after some time. 6 percent of the students with impairment have an officially recognised disability with a degree of less than 50. A further 4 percent report an officially recognised impairment with a degree of more than 50. These students have a disabled person's pass.

More female than male students with impairment

The proportion of individuals with impairment is lower among male than among female students (12.3 vs. 18.7 percent). For female students, the proportion exceeds the overall average of just over 16 percent. Female students also report mental illnesses more frequently than male

Figure: Students with and without impairment (in %)



Own calculation with weighted data from "The Student Survey in Germany" (2021). The analyses are based on data from 179,908 students.

Note: The results on types of impairment are based on data from 26,264 students with an impairment that has adverse effects on their studies. Due to rounding, values may not add up to 100.0 percent.

students (66.9 vs. 62.3 percent). Chronic illnesses, on the other hand, are similarly frequent among female and male students (14.1 vs. 12.5 percent); the figures roughly correspond to the overall average among students with impairment (13.2 percent).

Proportions vary according to socio-demographic characteristics and life situation

The proportion of students with impairment increases with age. Among students from Germany with a migration background, there are slightly more students with an impairment than among those without a migration background (18.2 vs. 16.3 percent). The proportion is lowest among international students (11.2 percent). Students with care responsibilities have a higher proportion of individuals with impairment than students without care responsibilities (21.2 vs. 15.3 percent). There are hardly any differences, however, according to educational background or parenthood.

Access to higher education and forms of studies

Access to higher education primarily via schools

Close to 97 percent of students with and without impairment gain access to higher education through a school-based higher education entrance qualification. Just under

3 percent do not hold a school-based entrance qualification but are professionally qualified to enter university. Around 25 percent of students with and without impairment completed vocational training or vocational further education before starting university (25.4 and 25.6 percent, respectively).

Campus-based studies predominate – differences according to type of impairment

Most students, both with and without impairment, study on campus. However, at a good 85 percent, the proportion is higher among students with than among those without impairment (around 78 percent). Accordingly, they are less frequently enrolled in a distance learning programme (7.9 vs. 10.7 percent), an extra-vocational (3.3 vs. 5.2 percent), or a dual study format (2.7 vs. 5.4 percent). Compared to other types of impairment, students with a mental illness are more frequently in a campus-based study programme (87.9 percent). Students with hearing impairments are slightly more likely than students with other types of impairment to be enrolled in a distance learning course (11.0 percent), while those with visual impairments are slightly more frequently in a dual study programme (5.0 percent) and those with mobility impairments in an extra-vocational course of study (6.2 percent).

Predominantly full-time programmes, but many de facto part-time arrangements

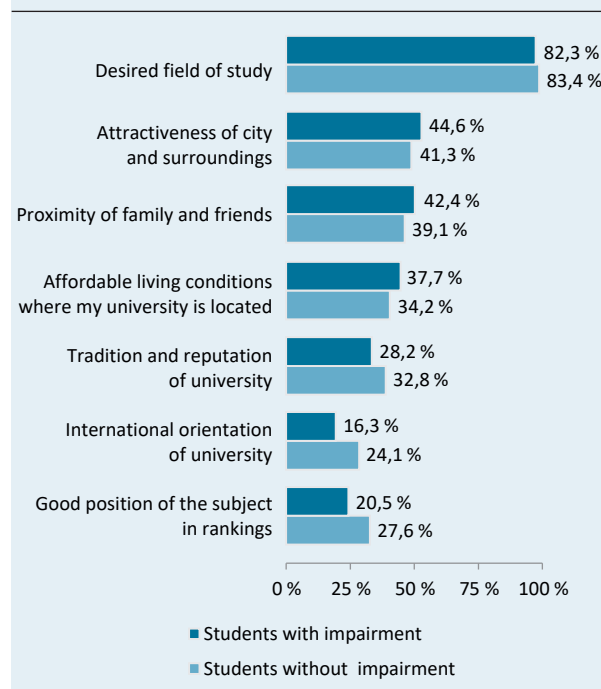
At just over 77 percent, the proportion of full-time students is lower among those with an impairment than among students without impairment (82.0 percent). Yet, students with impairment are not more frequently enrolled in part-time programmes, but in full-time degree programmes which they complete part-time, either in the framework of an individual arrangement or de facto, without such an arrangement (11.5 and 5.6 percent, respectively). On the other hand, in official part-time programmes there are slightly more students without impairment (8.6 vs. 7.0 percent of students with impairment).

Choice of university guided by fields of study on offer

For more than 80 percent of students both with and without impairment, availability of the desired field of study is the most important reason for choosing a university. But for students with an impairment, the attractiveness of the city and its surroundings, proximity to family and friends, and affordable living conditions at the place of study are more important than for students without

impairment. The latter, on the other hand, more often regard the tradition or reputation of the university, a good position of the subject in rankings and an international orientation of the university as (very) important when choosing a university. Accessibility of the university is a (very) important factor for 6 percent of students with an impairment. Comparing the different types of impairment, this aspect is particularly important for students with a chronic illness or sensory impairment (11.0 and 11.4 percent, respectively).

Figure: Importance of selected reasons for choosing a university among students with and without impairment (in %)



Own calculation with weighted data from “The Student Survey in Germany” (2021). The analyses are based on data from a minimum of 26,593 students; the number of cases can vary (e.g., due to item non-response).

Note: The label “students with impairment” refers to students who perceive their impairment as having adverse effects on their studies. Percentages given are the sums for answers “important” and “very important”.

Reason for choosing a field of study: compatibility of impairment with future employment opportunities

For almost 25 percent of the students whose impairment existed before starting university, compatibility of the impairment with later employment opportunities is a (very) important motive when choosing a field of study. It is often decisive for students with chronic illnesses, sen-

sory impairments, or “other impairments”¹ (36.9, 34.3, and 31.6 percent, respectively). Also, compatibility with later employment is often (very) important for students whose impairment is (very) severe (26.4 percent).

Course of study and academic success

More frequent interruptions of studies and changes of major

Compared to students without impairment, more than twice as many students with an impairment have interrupted their studies at least once (22.0 vs. 9.0 percent). They have also more frequently changed majors (36.5 vs. 23.6 percent) or universities (27.3 vs. 19.2 percent) at least once than students without impairment. In the group with impairment, it is primarily students with equally severe multiple impairments or mental illnesses who have interrupted their studies (25.5 and 21.6 percent, respectively). Changing majors or universities is particularly common among students with multiple impairments of equal severity (38.6 and 28.9 percent, respectively) or with mental illnesses (37.8 and 28.3 percent, respectively). In terms of study progress, there are only minor differences between students with and without impairment (17 vs. 19 ECTS points per semester on average).

Hardly any differences in international mobility and academic achievements

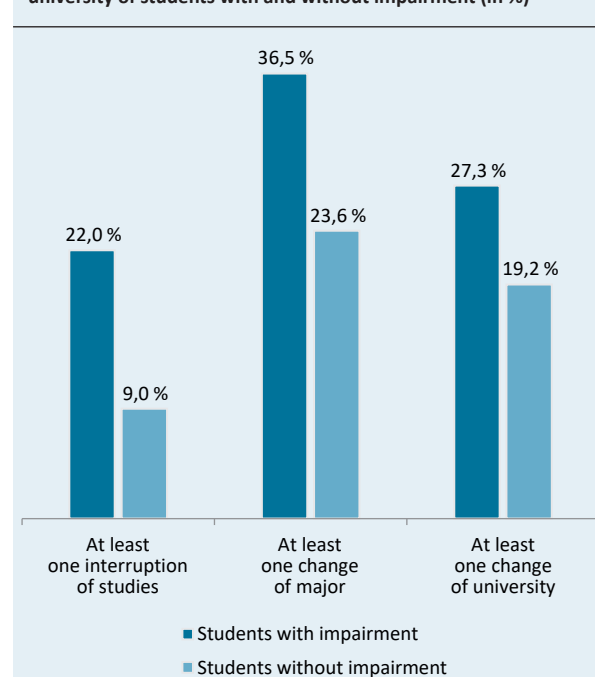
Around 17 percent of students with impairment and 19 percent without impairment in higher semesters have already completed a stay abroad. Within the group of students with impairment, those with a visual impairment or specific learning disability are particularly likely to be internationally mobile (19.6 and 18.2 percent, respectively). There is also no difference in academic performance between students with and without impairment: in the summer semester 2021, both groups have an average grade of 2.1. They also have the same final grades from previous degree programmes (average grade 2.0 for both groups).

Markedly higher intention to drop out of university, fewer plans to take up a master’s programme

Students with an impairment more often think about dropping out of their current studies than students without impairment (13.0 vs. 4.7 percent), even if their academic performance is the same. In the group with impairment, students with equally severe multiple impair-

ments (15.5 percent) or mental illnesses (14.8 percent), in particular, are thinking of leaving university without a degree. Around 48 percent of bachelor’s students with and a good 58 percent without impairment state that they are (very) likely to start a master’s degree programme after their current study course. Despite having the same academic achievements, the percentage is markedly lower for students with an impairment.

Figure: Interruption of studies, change of major and change of university of students with and without impairment (in %)



Own calculation with weighted data from “The Student Survey in Germany” (2021). The analyses are based on data from a minimum of 137,455 students; the number of cases can vary (e.g., due to item non-response).

Note: The label “students with impairment” refers to students who perceive their impairment as having adverse effects on their studies.

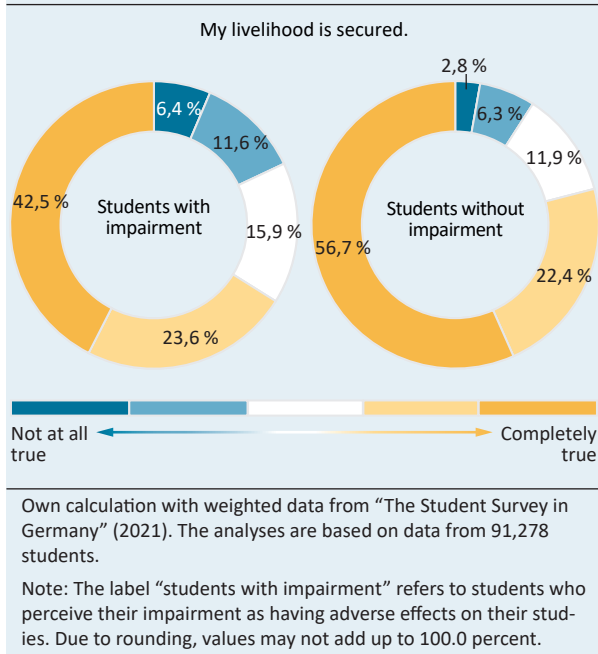
Financing of studies and students’ economic situation

Only minor differences in students’ income and expenditure

On average, the total monthly income of students with impairment is slightly lower than that of students without impairment (1,078 vs. 1,112 euros). Some students with an impairment receive monthly social benefits in connection with their health impairment (306 euros on average). Monthly health expenditures (e.g., health insurance, medication) of students with and without impairment are comparable (106 vs. 99 euros).

¹ For more information see “Note 2” on page 8.

Figure: Assessment of own financial situation by students with and without impairment (in %)



BAföG and gainful employment important sources of income

More students with than without impairment receive BAföG², i.e., governmental funding (15.8 vs. 12.3 percent). But the employment rates hardly differ between the two groups (64.6 vs. 62.6 percent). Students with an impairment are more likely to have a job alongside their studies than those without impairment (34.0 vs. 30.6 percent) and are more likely to work freelance (10.1 vs. 7.5 percent). In contrast, students without impairment are more likely to work in their trained profession (19.9 vs. 14.7 percent) and to complete vocational training (0.8 vs. 0.4 percent) or a paid internship (2.3 vs. 1.3 percent).

Different motives for employment

More students with than without impairment state that they need to work alongside their studies to cover their living expenses (68.3 vs. 55.9 percent). In contrast, students without impairment more frequently work to be able to afford something extra (67.0 vs. 58.1 percent), to gain practical experience (61.1 vs. 54.5 percent) or further qualifications alongside their studies (48.2 vs. 44.4 percent).

² BAföG is a publicly subsidised student financial aid that is means-tested and administered under the Federal Training Assistance Act (BAföG). Half of the support is provided in the form of a grant/stipend, and the other half is an interest-free loan that must be repaid.

Perceived financial situation more difficult

Fewer students with than without impairment state that they are able to cover their living expenses (66.1 vs. 79.0 percent), and they less frequently assume that they can get by with the money they have (75.0 vs. 84.3 percent). In addition, they more often report current financial difficulties (21.4 vs. 11.4 percent). While almost 16 percent of students with an impairment state that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they cannot proceed with their studies without supplementary financial support, it is only 9 percent of students without impairment.

Barriers and needs*

Almost half (very) satisfied with conditions at the university

Around 48 percent of students with and around 64 percent without impairment are (very) satisfied with the conditions at their university. In the group with impairment, students with hearing impairments and those with “other impairments” indicate the highest levels of satisfaction (56.5 and 58.5 percent, respectively). But only around 22 percent of students with an impairment are (very) satisfied with the compatibility of their studies and their impairment. Overall, around 26 percent of students with impairment are (very) satisfied with the impairment-related support services on offer. This applies most frequently to visually impaired students (51.3 percent). In all aspects considered, students with mental illnesses and those with equally severe multiple impairments are by far the most dissatisfied.

Impairment-related requirements and needs for support vary

Around 27 percent of the students with impairment have disability-related needs for support or requirements regarding the university’s buildings and equipment. Above all, quiet areas and retreat spaces (14.9 percent) as well as support with e-learning (11.0 percent) are considered important. But there are differences according to type of impairment: accessibility of the buildings is most needed by students with mobility impairments (12.2 percent), as can be expected. Visually impaired students, on the other hand, are more dependent on special technical equipment (e.g., large-screens; 15.8 percent), while the majority of hearing-impaired students have special demands for good visibility, acoustics, and low-noise ventilation (40.3 percent). Overall, the requirements and needs have

* Focus on students with an impairment that adversely affects their studies.

rarely been implemented satisfactorily according to the students. One exception is the need for accessibility of the buildings, which has been (completely) fulfilled most frequently (56.4 percent). On the other hand, demands for quiet areas and retreat spaces have been met least often to a (fully) satisfactory degree, although they are needed most.

Numerous difficulties in studying

92 percent of students with an impairment report difficulties in at least one of the three areas *organisation of studies, teaching and learning* or *tests and exams*. Specifically, most frequent problems concern the workload or official study regulations in the degree programme (66.0 percent), phases of independent study (49.5 percent), and the number of examinations (44.3 percent). Difficulties in one of the three areas mentioned above are particularly frequent among students with “other impairments” (95.6 percent), mental illnesses (95.1 percent), or equally severe multiple impairments (95.0 percent). Overall, around 40 percent of students with impairments state that the organisation and regulations of their study programme cause difficulties. This is most frequent among students with equally severe multiple impairments or mental illnesses (48.2 and 41.6 percent, respectively).

Digital teaching: more flexibility, but lack of personal exchange

46 percent of students with impairment and 56 percent without impairment are (very) satisfied with the range and the implementation of digital courses offered at their university. For digital tests and exams, the proportion is again smaller among students with an impairment than among students without impairment, but the difference is less pronounced (35.7 vs. 42.0 percent). Experiences with digital learning are similar for both groups: they report most frequently that digital learning formats have brought more time-flexibility (74.1 percent of students with impairment and 78.1 percent without impairment, respectively) but that they often missed meeting other students in person (72.9 and 77.5 percent, respectively).

Extensive experiences of discrimination

Around 73 percent of students with and a good 58 percent without impairment have experienced discrimination during their time at university. These figures show that students with impairment are affected by discrimination considerably more often than students without impairment. This also applies to specific experiences: for example, 26 percent of students with an impairment report that others did not expect them to perform well or

that their performance was belittled, while it is only 15 and 17 percent of students without impairment. Overall, 15 percent of students with impairment have experienced discrimination due to their physical and/or mental disabilities at least once during their studies. This applies most frequently to students with equally severe multiple impairments (27.6 percent), who also have the highest percentages for experiencing the various forms of discrimination: they report more often than others that they have been excluded or ignored (25.9 percent), portrayed in a stereotypical or degrading manner (27.8 percent) or laughed at (22.5 percent).

Counselling, compensation for disadvantages, and social integration*

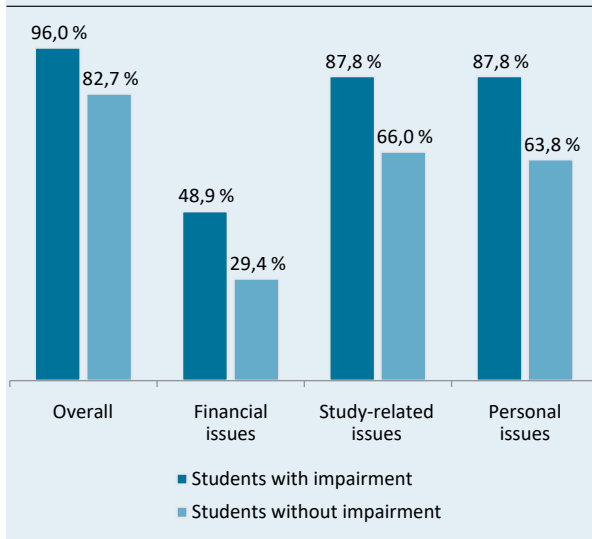
Need for counselling and support generally high

Overall, 96 percent of students with and around 83 percent without impairment state that they need information and counselling on a topic to do with *financing, studying* or *personal issues*. In all three areas, the need is greater among students with impairment than among students without impairment (*financial issues*: 48.9 vs. 29.4 percent, *study-related issues*: 87.8 vs. 66.0 percent, *personal issues*: 87.8 vs. 63.8 percent). Among those with an impairment, students with mental illnesses indicate a particular need for information and counselling in at least one of the three areas (98.0 percent), followed by students with equally severe multiple impairments (96.4 percent) and mobility impairments (96.3 percent). In addition, students with an impairment also make significantly more use of counselling services than students without impairment (71.1 vs. 42.6 percent).

Psychological counselling services well-known

Around 66 percent of students with impairment are aware of the psychological counselling centres of the student services association (Studierendenwerk) or the university. Other impairment-related counselling services are much less known among students. In all, proportions vary from just under 17 percent (student self-help groups for people with disabilities) to almost 45 percent (counselling centres run by the university for students with disabilities). The service most frequently used by students are the psychological counselling centres (29.9 percent); they are particularly well-known among students with mental illnesses (70.1 percent). These counselling services are also rated the best: around 50 percent of the students who consulted this service found it (very) helpful. A good 24 percent of students also make

Figure: Need for information and counselling of students with and without impairment (in %)



Own calculation with weighted data from “The Student Survey in Germany” (2021). The analyses are based on data from a minimum of 15,702 students; the number of cases can vary (e.g., due to item non-response).

Note: The label “students with impairment” refers to students who perceive their impairment as having adverse effects on their studies.

use of the university’s counselling centres for students with disabilities, and around 50 percent of them consider these services to be (very) helpful.

Few applications for compensation for disadvantages

Of the students with impairment who report difficulties in at least one of the areas *organisation of studies*, *teaching and learning*, or *tests and exams* (92.3 percent), only around 21 percent have applied for individual adjustments or measures to compensate for disadvantages. Most of these applications concerned *tests and exams* (21.1 percent). In the area of *study organisation*, the figure is 10 percent, and around 8 percent for *teaching and learning*. Applications were more frequently approved in the area of *tests and exams* (for 75.2 percent of students vs. 68.8 percent in the area of *study organisation* and 46.8 percent in the area of *teaching and learning*). Almost 74 percent of students who were granted individual adjustments or measures to compensate for disadvantages concerning *tests and exams* report that they perceive these measures as (very) helpful. Percentages are slightly lower for *study organisation* and *teaching and learning* (68.0 and 61.6 percent, respectively).

Reasons not to apply for compensation for disadvantages

More than half of the students with an impairment did not apply for measures to compensate for disadvantages or individual adjustments because they did not regard themselves as sufficiently disadvantaged (58.7 percent). Almost 57 percent have doubts whether they are eligible or whether their application would have a chance of being approved. Students with equally severe multiple impairments or mental illnesses, in particular, refrain from applying for individual adjustments or compensation for disadvantages, although they report the most difficulties in their studies.

Social integration fairly low, perceived support higher

A large proportion of students have little or no contact with their fellow students: about 59 percent of students with and 47 percent without impairment. Contact with teachers is also low in both groups: around 81 percent of students with and a good 78 percent without impairment have no or infrequent contact with teachers outside of classes. Around 27 percent of students with impairment state that they can discuss impairment-related difficulties openly with their fellow students. But for 53 percent of respondents, this applies rather not or not at all. 34 percent report that their teachers show (full) understanding for their study situation, while 66 percent say that this is rather not or not at all the case.

Note 2: “Other impairments” is a collective category of impairments and disabilities that were reported too infrequently to be recorded as separate categories. These include, for example, tumour diseases or autism spectrum disorders.

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