

**Scaling the Mountain: The Topography of Disability and
Transition to Higher Education in Ireland**

VOLUME ONE

A thesis presented to the University of Dublin Trinity College
in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

2015

By
Alison Doyle

DECLARATION

I have read and understood the Regulations for submission of a Doctoral thesis. I undertake that all the material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination.

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SUMMARY

Recent research evidences that students with SEN encounter complex and circuitous transitions from post-primary settings to Higher Education (HE), and that they should be assisted with planning and recording the steps in the transition process, adapting goals and needs as they progress through school. Currently, inequitable access to Individual Education Plans, and a lack of policy infrastructure to provide a formal Transition Plan, means that transition journeys for students with disabilities are varied and uncertain.

Using a theoretical framework that incorporates Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory and Children's Geographies, the purpose of this research programme is to further establish the web of interactions between students, parents, practitioners, schools and HE institutions, and to identify junctures that function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transitions for young people with disabilities. Moreover, it aims to provide new insights into interest levels and engagement with a suite of web-based transition planning resources, designed and created uniquely for this research programme, and delivered via a third space Community of Practice.

A mixed methodology concurrent-triangulated-convergent-transformative design is employed within three studies: Study One investigates the viewpoints of disabled students, parents and practitioners prior to entry to HE; Study Two investigates post-entry reflections of current undergraduate students with disabilities approaching the end of the first year in HE. Data collection for both studies is captured through surveys and interviews. Quantitative data analysis from surveys is complemented by a deductive thematic analysis of open-ended questions and interviews, both of which are merged within the analysis and interpretation of results. A third study measures visitor engagement with the transition website, usage of a modularized transition planning tool, engagement with a transition blog / discussion forum, and participation in transition planning workshops for students with disabilities and their parents. Data from this study is analysed using a Web 2.0 enterprise class analytics system.

Results confirm findings identified in current literatures evidence: (a) disparate levels and quality of support and guidance for students and parents at post-primary level and from HE, (b) a mismatch between academic and personal skills required for post-primary and HE, (c) inequities within the Disability Access Route to Education, and (d) fissures in communication channels between parents, schools and HE institutions.

Findings also contribute new knowledge about the efficacy of web-based transition-specific resources for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland, which were accessed on a global scale and in significant numbers.

Empirical and practical implications point to: (a) an urgent need for development of self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy skills through a person-centred transition planning tool; this should be made available from the junior cycle of education onwards, (b) CPD and training opportunities to increase awareness and understanding of disability in schools and amongst practitioners, and (c) increased efforts from HE institutions to engage students, parents, practitioners and post-primary schools via structured pre-entry activities.

Recommendations include development of a national repository of transition planning resources, further development and piloting of the transition planning tool, and the creation of student-to-student recruitment strategies that will provide positive role models for students with disabilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their help and support:

My supervisors Dr Conor Mc Guckin and Dr Michael Shevlin, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin who provided thoughtful critique, continuous encouragement, and expert guidance throughout the research process. In particular, heartfelt thanks and sympathies to Conor for his tireless reading of numerous drafts of this thesis.

Sincere thanks also to Declan Treanor, Director of the Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin, who made it possible for me to become a Doctoral student; to Maura Horan and Jamie Farrell, Web Office, Trinity College Dublin who designed and constructed the Pathways website; to my colleagues in the Disability Service who assisted with interviews for Study Two.

I would also like to thank current and past post-primary students, undergraduate students in third level education in the Republic of Ireland, parents / carers, and educational practitioners, who gave so generously of their time and effort as participants in this work.

To Kevin, Hannah, Bethany and Jack, thank you for your love, faith and patience - you can have the kitchen table back, normal service has resumed.

To my mother, Anita June Forster Dickens, who did not have the educational opportunities that I have had. This is for you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education and Disability
AS/ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorders
ADD/ADHD	Attention Deficit Disorder
B /VI	Blind or Visual Impaired
CAO	Central Applications Office
COP	Communities of Practice
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to [Higher] Education
DCD	Developmental Co-ordination Disorder
DES	Department of Education and Science (Ireland post 2003)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Ireland pre 2003)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (UK pre 2007)
Df / HI	Deaf or Hearing Impaired
DPI	Disabled Peoples' International
EACEA	Executive Agency Education, Audiovisual and Culture
EADSNE	European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
EU	European Union
EUNEC	European Network of Education Councils
FE	Further Education
GC	Guidance Counsellor(s)
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICFDH	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IGC	Institute of Guidance Counsellors
IOT	Institute of Technology
IUA	Irish Universities Association

IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
ISSE	Irish Survey of Student Engagement
LC	Leaving Certificate
MHC	Mental Health Conditions
MM	Mixed Methodology
NAO	National Access Office
NC	Neurological Conditions
NCBI	National Council for the Blind of Ireland
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NIID	National Institute for Intellectual Disability
NLTS-2	National Longitudinal Transition Study-2
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NSTTAC	National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Physical Disability
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PL4SD	Peer Learning for the Social Dimension
QUAL	Qualitative method
QUAN	Quantitative method
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SLC	Speech, Language and Communication Disorders
SNS	Social Networking Sites
SOI	Significant Ongoing Illness
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulties
TY	Transition Year
TYP	Transition Year Programme
TYSS	Transition Year Support Service
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment
VT	Visiting Teacher
VTS	Visiting Teacher Service
WHO	World Health Organisation

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

This research programme examined the transition arc of students with disabilities as they move from post-primary to Higher Education (HE) settings, from the perspective of students, parents or carers, and practitioners working with students and their families. It explored the topography of disability and transition – a conceptual framework that encompasses access routes, transition pathways, and individual journeys – with the purpose of identifying enablers and barriers to HE for students with disabilities.

Its purpose was to establish the web of interactions between students, parents, practitioners, schools and Higher Education institutions (HEIs), and to identify junctures within the bioecology of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and aspects of personal geographies (e.g. Gough & Fleming, 2014; Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013; Shah, 2008) that function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transitions for young people with disabilities. The arrival of global economic recession in 2008 emphasised the financial barriers to educational transitions for young people and their parents (Cook, 2009; ESRI, 2012; HEA, 2014; Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010; McCoy, Calvert, Smyth, & Darmody, 2010; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014). Historically, comparatively little attention has been paid to capturing the additional complexity of personal ecologies and geographies of post-primary students with disabilities although more recent studies have re-focused attention on the personal experiences of transition (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Mill, Mayes, & McConnell, 2010; National Institute of Intellectual Disability, 2011).

Based on the pertinent literatures, three separate but concurrent studies were used to investigate this research area. Study One examined the experiences of students with disabilities, parents or carers, and practitioners in the field of education, prior to transition from post-primary settings; Study Two investigated the post-entry transition experiences of students with disabilities approaching the end of their first year in HE; Study Three measured engagement with transition resources specifically designed and developed by the author for this research programme. A brief description of the structure of this thesis, which is set out in seven chapters, is now provided as a guide for the reader.

Chapter One analyses the themes of disability and transition, and determines the language and definition of disability as it is used throughout this thesis. It presents an overview of models of disability and teases out differences between the concepts of access, progression, transfer and transition (section 1.2). A following section situates the research within the context of the education system in Ireland, providing a synopsis of: (a) curriculum and assessment in post-primary education, (b) post-secondary access routes for students with disabilities, and (c) national policy and practice relating to widening participation and access to HE (section 1.3). The core focus of this research programme was to establish the realities of transition experiences for disabled students and their parents or carers, thus section 1.4 presents the arguments for valuing personal perspectives and providing opportunities for the expression of these realities, which forms the backbone of the research design. The penultimate section in this chapter (1.5) introduces the logic of the research enquiry and the research design, before concluding with a brief statement on the scope of the research programme, and potential implications for future research. A final section (1.6) summarizes the material presented in Chapter One.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework for the research programme based on a review of the salient literatures relating to: (a) theories of educational development (Hegel, 1968; Hegel & Knox, 1942), (b) Bioecological Theories of Development (Lewin, 1951; Lerner, 1986, 1991; Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and (c) Children's Geographies (Jeffrey, 2010; Pyer, Horton, Tucker, Ryan, & Kraftl, 2010; Speraw, 2009; Valentine, 2003). It connects the theoretical framework to the research area of disability and educational transitions, which is used as a structure for exploring the research problem and organizing the findings of this research programme.

Chapter Three reviews and critiques the international and national literatures relating to: (a) policies and practices that relate to students with disabilities (DES, 2011; European Commission, 2012; Government of Ireland, 2007; HEA, 2008; HEA, 2014); (b) models of transition from post-primary school to HE settings (Aston, Dewson, Loukas, & Dyson, 2005; Lefever & Carrant, 2010); (c) individual transition experiences, viewpoints and journeys (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Redpath, Kearney, Nicholl, Mulvenna, Martin, Wallace, & Moore, 2013); (d) concepts of third places and communities of practice (Bhabha, 2004; Oldenburg, 1989), and the role of cyberspace

as a facilitator of transition planning spaces, tools and guidance (Gee, 1990; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006; Wilson, 2003); and (e) mixed methodology approaches (Creswell & Plano, 2007; Tashakkeni & Teddlie, 2003). It situates this material within each of the systems identified in the theoretical framework, with the purpose of providing a context for the research which is of particular relevance to the identification of the research aims, objectives and questions.

Chapter Four sets out the methodology employed for: (a) Study One – the experiences of students with disabilities, parents or carers, and practitioners in the field of education, prior to transition from post-primary settings; (b) Study Two – post-entry transition experiences of students with disabilities approaching the end of their first year in HE; and (c) Study Three – engagement with transition resources designed and created for the research programme. Section 4.1 reiterates the hypotheses, research aim, objectives and research questions as a precursor to a discussion of the methodological literatures in section 4.2, which informed the rationale for selecting a mixed methodology (Byrne, & Smyth, 2011; Day, Sammons, & Gu, 2008; McCoy & Byrne, 2010; McCoy, Byrne, O’Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010; Richter, 1997; Sammons, Day, Kington, Gu, Stobart, & Smees, 2007; Thogersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). Subsequently, section 4.3 explains the selection of a concurrent-triangulation-convergent design (Dovey-Pearce, Price, Wood, Scott, Cookson, & Corbett, 2012; Hossler, & Vesper, 1993; McAuley, & Bratman, 2002) situated within a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009; Sweetman, Badiie, & Creswell, 2010), and how this relates to the research topic. Sampling procedures for Study One, Study Two and Study Three are set out in Section 4.4, including identification of participants and the populations from which they were drawn. A subsequent section (4.5) provides a detailed description of quantitative (4.5.1) and qualitative (4.5.2) components of data collection and analysis, followed by a guide to the procedures and timelines employed in the delivery of Study One (4.6.1), Study Two (4.6.2) and Study Three (4.6.3). Section 4.7 examines the pertinent ethical considerations of working with vulnerable young people and adults, and the ethical guidelines that were consulted in pursuit of this. This is followed by an account of the creation of the research environment as both a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994a, 1994b; English, 2005; Gannon, 2010; Wilson, 2003) and Community of Practice (Bucholz, 1990; Gannon-Leary, & Fontainha, 2007; Giles, 2007) in section 4.8. It includes a technical description of the creation and

design of transition resources created for this research programme and their role as data collection instruments. A penultimate section (4.9) outlines the limitations of the research process together with suggestions for modifying the research design for further investigation, followed by a concluding section (4.10) which draws together the salient points of this chapter, as a framework for understanding the findings of the research programme.

Chapter Five presents an analysis of findings for Study One, Study Two and Study Three in response to five research questions distilled from a review of the literatures in Chapter Three, wherein reporting of quantitative and qualitative results are merged within each of the studies (sections 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3) and also summarized in an interpretation of the merged data as a concluding section for each study (sections 5.1.7, 5.2.3, and 5.3.5). Its purpose is to: (a) establish the promoters and inhibitors of transition from post-primary to third level education for disabled students, (b) frame these within the context of education systems in Ireland, and (c) provide evidence for responding to the research questions.

Chapter Six discusses the key findings from the research programme that support or extend existing knowledge about this research topic. This material is organized into six principle sections that address: (a) initiatives that address widening participation and access to HE, (b) formal transition planning policy and practice, (c) sources and quality of transition guidance, (d) communication between HEIs, schools and families, (e) personal geographies, and (f) the value of centralized transition planning resources.

Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the meaning and impact of the findings in relation to the research hypotheses and research questions, which purpose is to: (a) present the empirical, theoretical and practical implications, (b) provide recommendations for future policy and practice in Ireland, and (c) suggest modifications or extensions to the research process for further investigation and recommendations from this study. As the research programme originates from the author's professional work with students with disabilities, parents and practitioners in post-primary and HE settings, the possibility that an insider viewpoint might affect the data with subjective interpretations, was acknowledged from the outset, and therefore a reflexive analysis of the research journey is also included.

In summary, this section has introduced the theme, research context and intentions of the research programme, namely, an investigation of the transition journeys of students with disabilities to HE, and the variables that function as enablers or barriers to such transitions. It has clarified these by presenting an overview of the organisation of the material in this thesis, as a guide for the reader. The section that follows sets out the aims of this first chapter.

Chapter Aims

Introduced here are the thematic areas of disability and transition pathways to post-secondary education in Ireland, which are investigated in this research programme. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the research topic by interrogating, and to identify the research problem.

The following section (1.2) reviews perspectives on the language of disability, and continues with an exploration of definitions and models of disability as they are found in the literature and referred to throughout this thesis. Similarities, differences and intersections between special educational needs (SEN) and disability are noted. Additionally, meanings and understandings of educational transitions are defined as a precursor to establishing the theoretical framework for the research in Chapter Two, and a review of the international and national literatures in Chapter Three.

Section 1.3 situates the research within the context of the education system in Ireland, setting out the structure of post-primary education and the academic requirements for progression to HE. This is followed by an introduction to the Disability Access Route to Education [DARE] – a supplementary admission scheme for students with disabilities which recognizes the relationship between disability and educational disadvantage. Subsequently, national policies, strategies and targets surrounding access and widening participation are presented, prior to a summary of current national policy and practice relating to transition and students with disabilities.

Section 1.4 emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and including the viewpoints of the research population, as narrators of transition experiences that can shed light on potential enablers and barriers to transition, and a penultimate section (1.5) introduces the research problem and specifies the hypotheses, aims and objectives which informed the research design and methodology, and delineates the scope of the research programme. Additionally, it presents the theory surrounding identification and construction of a research environment that would best facilitate

investigation of transition to HE for students with disabilities. By extension, it briefly introduces the suite of transition tools for use by post-primary students with disabilities, parents or carers, and educational practitioners, which also functioned as methodological instruments for this research programme. A chapter summary is provided in section 1.6.

The following section defines the terminology and key concepts which are central to this research programme, to provide clarity around their use throughout this thesis.

1.2 Defining Disability and Transition

Disability is a vast and complex area, and thus it is useful to clarify: (a) the language and terminology used in relation to disability, (b) the spectrum of definitions of disability nationally and internationally which are referred to in legislation, (c) shades of meaning between disability and special educational needs (SEN), and (d) competing models of disability. Each of these has the potential to represent an enabler or barrier to educational opportunities for disabled students.

1.2.1 The Language of Disability

The language of disability has been the subject of much debate within the disability community (Coopman, 2003; Corker, 1998) and has been deconstructed and reconstructed in response to arguments about the “oppressive” use of language (Albrecht, 2001; Priestley, Waddington, & Bessozi, 2010; Shakespeare 2006; Thomas, 2004). Contemporary debates question the appropriateness of using “people-first” language (Sinclair, 2013), where “people with disabilities” is viewed as an offensive term promoted by powerful non-disabled people to emphasise disability as part of the person, rather than as a social construct which can act as a barrier to inclusion and participation (Harpur, 2012). Proponents of this perspective argue for the term “disabled people” (McCormack & Collins, 2010) which is evocative of the oppression that people experience due to a “disabling” society (Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003). In other words, “people with disabilities” suggests that the person “owns” the disability, as opposed to a person disabled by social and cultural attitudes or the physical environment.

However, this “person first” construct is used in international and national legislation (e.g. Americans with Disabilities Act 1990, USA; Disability Act 2005, Ireland; Education Act 1998, Ireland; Individuals with Disabilities Education

Improvement Act of 2004, USA; National Disability Authority Act 1999, Ireland). In practice, both “disabled people” and “persons with disabilities” are used by organizations such as Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI), Inclusion Ireland (2013), the Disability Advisors Working Network in Ireland (DAWN, 2008), and within academic literatures (Elliot & Wilson, 2008; Hanrahan, 2005; Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, & Daly, 2000). Therefore, both constructs are used throughout the research programme and within this thesis where: (a) the term students with disabilities is used to distinguish this group from the general post-primary student population, and (b) the term disabled students is used in acknowledgement of disabling aspects within the educational environment, which may act as barriers to successful transition. Having discussed the appropriate use of language in reference to disability, the following section examines legal definitions of disability in Ireland relevant to the context of this research programme.

1.2.2 Defining Disability

This section establishes understandings and meanings of disability in relation to the research population, the research perspective, and the theoretical framework which is constructed in the following chapter. This is a precursor to the extrapolation of transition contexts in Ireland in section 1.3, which is particularly concerned with transition routes and schemes for students with disabilities.

The Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998, Part 1, Interpretation: 2.(1)) sets out a definition of disability which has been retained throughout subsequent legislation in Ireland (Disability Act 2005, Equal Status Acts 2000-2012):

- (a) the total or partial loss of a person’s bodily or mental functions, including the loss of a part of the person’s body, or
- (b) the presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness, or
- (c) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person’s body, or
- (d) a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction, or

(e) a condition, illness or disease which affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or which results in disturbed behaviour;

Whilst highly medicalised in its terminology (e.g. disease, illness, malfunction, malformation, disfigurement), the Act determined the right to access to education for children with disabilities. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Government of Ireland, 2004) relates to provision of support and resources in primary and post-primary education in Ireland, for pupils who are unable to access the curriculum without such provision. For example, pupils with a visual impairment or who are Blind may be provided with support from a Visiting Teacher and / or Braille materials. Section 1 of the Act defines SEN as:

A restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health, or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.

This moves away from medically specific terminology and towards the notion of enablers and barriers within the education system. However, whilst disability is used as an over-arching term, not all students with a disability have special educational needs (Keil, Miller, & Cobb, 2006), thus linking disability with SEN “obscures real differences between children who are not disabled but who need special educational provision and those who are disabled, but do not need special provision” (p. 170). Additionally, there are significant differences in terminology and categorization of SEN and disability, assessment policies and practices, across and within countries (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010), and identification of SEN in Ireland continues to operate on a deficit model, in contrast to “an increasing international focus upon learning difficulties arising within the context,” (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, & Harper, 2013, p. 2).

The Disability Act 2005 (Government of Ireland, 2005) sets out a number of statutory obligations for public bodies in relation to access to public buildings, services and information, and employment of people with disabilities, and stipulates

the requirement for individual assessment of need. The Act retained the EPSEN definition but omits reference to “any other condition” and its effect on learning, summarizing this as “intellectual impairment” (Disability Act, 2005, Part 1, Interpretation. 2.(1)). It focuses on environmental barriers such as restrictions in accessibility, using a broader definition of disability which is less medicalised:

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. (Disability Act, 2005, Part 1, Interpretation. 2.(1))

In relation to HE, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) in Ireland is an independent body promoting full access to and participation in FE/HE for students with disabilities. Responding to the individual needs of students with disabilities in HE, AHEAD (2008) suggest a definition based on the recommendations of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (DES, 2001) whereby:

A student is disabled if he/she requires a facility which is outside of the mainstream provision of the college in order to participate fully in higher education and without which the student would be educationally disadvantaged in comparison with their peers. (p. 38)

This shifts the definition of disability from the person, to enabling or disabling environments. By extension, the following section critiques competing models of disability and how these relate to social, cultural and physical environments, to assist with understanding their role as potential enablers or barriers to transition opportunities.

1.2.3 Models of Disability

The previous section demonstrated how definitions of disability tend to be situated principally within a medical model of disability (Barnes, 2012; Oliver, 1990; Reindal, 2008), which views disability as a negative attribute located within the individual. In this way, people who have difficulty with fulfilling life functions in an environment that is structured in a particular way are labelled and medicalised.

Models such as the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICFDH) describe functional impairments that are nuanced by levels of severity, which in itself is disabling. Speraw (2009, cited by McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2013, p. 63) argues that “by categorizing according to deficits, we disregard the most admirable qualities of human beings, and disregard their dignity.” Essentially, the medical model requires the disabled individual to be cured or remediated, and the cultural values of society determine the extent to which differences in thinking, learning and doing are accommodated (Falvo, 2014). Barton (1993) draws attention to the considerable research literature which identifies institutional discrimination surrounding “access and opportunities in relation to work, housing, education, transport, leisure and support services” (p. 242) and which “continues to exert a strong influence in HE” (Soorenian, 2013, p. 17).

An alternative viewpoint is that disability is a consequence of the structure and priorities of the society in which the individual lives, and “is culturally produced and socially structured,” (Oliver, 1990, p. 22). This social model views disability as an individual difference: disabled people are part of the economic, environmental and cultural fabric of society, and disability is caused by attitudinal and physical barriers to participation in that society (Oliver, 1990, 2013; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Responses to such barriers are viewed as the shared responsibility of the individual, the institution, and society. This was acknowledged in the DES report on access to third level education (DES, 2001) as:

socially constructed, and as such that the underrepresentation of people with disabilities in higher education is not a result of lack of ability but rather the consequence of attitudinal and environmental barriers, both within higher education and external to it, which preclude and diminish the possibility of students participating within that process. (p. 63)

Critics of the social model argue that whilst it reframes the definition of disability, it contributes little to defining social responses and responsibilities or policy direction (Samaha, 2007). Impairment, restriction, limitation or disability is experienced in different ways and to different degrees by different people, as a function of the geographical, environmental and cultural context in which they live (WHO / World

Bank, 2011, p. 22). Similarly, Finkelstein (2007) claims that “social models only really make sense when understood in particular contexts: change the context and the model may well become inappropriate,” (p. 2). In addition, there are aspects of interaction between the individual and the physical environment which may be impaired, and thus disabling, but which cannot be changed, modified or eradicated (French, 1993). The Nordic relational model of disability (Tøssebro, 2004, cited by Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2012, p. 3), defines disability as “a mismatch between the person’s capabilities and the functional demands of the environment.” This perspective focuses on empowerment of the individual, in parallel with normalisation of life tasks, to the widest extent possible.

Corker and Shakespeare (2002) argue that both the medical and social models of disability are insufficient in that they “Exclude important dimensions of disabled people’s lives and of their knowledge” (p. 15). Rather, they advocate for a postmodern or poststructuralist model of disability, which recognises the relationship between knowledge and power – “biopower” (Foucault, 1980), and its effect on the lives of people. This viewpoint acknowledges the relationship between discipline, control, reform and “normalisation” within society, where reform means living by society’s standards or norms (Foucault, 1980). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2012) assert that:

Nowhere is this growth of bio-power more evident than in the lives of disabled children. It is becoming increasingly apparent that distinct bio-political discourses are building up around disabled children at the same time as these children have become the focus of participation, policy and service provision. (p. 54)

Foucault (1980, cited by Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 8) uses the term “genealogies” to refer to the “making of identities, selves, social norms, and institutions”. Similarly, Goodley (2011, cited by Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2012, p. 104), states that:

Disabled people are inscribed with a thousand words that threaten to leave them with deeply disablist ‘epidermal schema’. Schemas are relics of societal

discourses, emanating from expert and lay knowledge, reproduced in institutions of family, school, prison, disability service and hospital.

These ideas of biopower, genealogies and epidermal schemas inform this research programme, and in particular, how they are situated within the bioecology of the individual, a theoretical framework which is discussed in the next chapter. They are also briefly introduced in the following section in relation to normative transitions across the lifespan.

In summary, this section has clarified the use of terminology and constructs associated with disability, and how these are viewed from a legal, social and cultural perspective. This is critical to understanding the relationship between identification of SEN and disabilities, eligibility for access to supports and resources in post-primary schools, and the extent to which this is dependent upon meeting medically-based criteria. Understanding differences between models of disabilities and how these are used in a range of contexts is also crucial, as both play a pivotal role in the scale and type of transition opportunities available to post-primary students with disabilities. By extension, the following section considers how the role of language, definitions and models construct individual perspectives on disability which in turn determine the nature and act of disclosure in HE settings.

1.2.4 Disability, Identity and Disclosure

Identity is constructed from ideas about the self, including identification of individuality, self-worth, beliefs, roles, and membership of particular social groups. Disability identity derives from membership of the disabled community and can be viewed from a positive perspective in terms of shared understandings, goals and experiences, or from a negative perspective, where the community experiences rejection, marginalisation or discrimination (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). Individuals with disabilities may therefore maintain positive and negative identities of disability simultaneously, depending upon specific circumstances, contexts, events or experiences. It is therefore imperative that schools, service providers, institutions and employers, are aware of the complexity of individual disability identities (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013). Such complexity is particularly tested in relation to disclosure of disability.

A "hidden disability" is one that may not be apparent to other members of the community, for example SpLDs such as Dyslexia or ADHD, and some sensory disabilities, Mental Health Conditions and Significant Ongoing Illnesses such as Diabetes. This affects management of disability identity (Valeras, 2013):

While persons with hidden disabilities are afforded a sense of anonymity, they must contend with different challenges, including learning strategic self-disclosure and impression management; when to disclose and make disability visible and when to "pass" and give society the impression of "able-bodiedness." The choice, to be or not to be disabled, has important implications for the way we conceptualize disability, and the concept of identity as a whole. (para. 1)

Disclosure is required in FE /HE in order to receive reasonable accommodations to support learning. Again, there is an inherent dichotomy in which the "simple and presumably liberating act of self-disclosure can in reality be a forced acceptance of socially and biotechnically created labels that bring along with them potentially dangerous assumptions and consequences," (Trammell, 2011, p. 26).

Fundamentally, if a student seeks accommodations in HE to enable them to access the physical environment and / or the curriculum, they must also accept an identity which may expose them to associated stigmas such as being needy, less able, demanding, and requiring significant adjustments to the learning environment.

Thus, disclosure may be accompanied by anxiety, stress, feelings of reduced self-worth, and fear of misunderstanding, in large part due to unfamiliarity with the differences between post-primary and third level settings. In Ireland, legal frameworks and the development of equity of access strategies have required HEIs to create new understandings of enablers and barriers within HE, which have outpaced practices in post-primary education. Essentially, transition to HE means a shift in support for post-primary students with SEN and disabilities from allocation of defined and restricted resources by government under EPSEN (2004), to provision of individualised reasonable accommodations through the European Social Fund and Equal Status Acts (2000 – 2004). This means that students with disabilities must acquire new skills of self-advocacy and disclosure, and make adjustments to their disability identity.

Nuances between definitions of SEN and disability are problematic for students, parents and practitioners and spill over into transition contexts, such as application to the DARE scheme (Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, & Casey, 2013, p. 101). For example, prior to their sixth year of education in post-primary school, students with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) may have received support in school as a student with SEN. By the close of application to the DARE scheme in February of their final year in school, these same students would be required to apply to DARE as a disabled student, under the category of Mental Health Condition (MHC) or ADD/ADHD. Similarly, students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) who may have received supports in post-primary school as a function of “learning differently from a person without that condition,” may not necessarily consider themselves to be “disabled.” Such difficulty in differentiating disability and SEN is exemplified in post-primary studies, where specific definition is required within the research context (McCoy, Banks, & Shevlin, 2012, p. 125).

Taking a decision to disclose is a critical aspect of the transition to HE both in terms of application to the DARE scheme, and receiving supports in HE. In essence, it entails letting go of one identity, and embracing an identity that may have been previously rejected or submerged. For these reasons, statistical observations relating to application to the DARE scheme and participation rates in HE discussed in later sections of this thesis, must be viewed with caution in terms of their representativeness. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a critical aspect of transition for students with disabilities, an in depth exploration of this aspect is beyond the scope of this research programme.

In continuation, differentiation is required between meanings of access, progression, transfer and transition, to explain the focus on transition throughout the research programme.

1.2.5 Defining Access, Progression, Transfer and Transition

In Ireland, the concepts of access, transfer and progression are defined in law under the Qualifications Act (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 1999) as:

Access: the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence required. Access means gaining entry to and participation in

education and training institutions or programmes. In certain circumstances specific admissions criteria may be required such as a particular entry level qualification, minimum education level, skills or work experience.

Transfer: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired.

Progression: the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

(National Qualifications Authority of Ireland [NQA], 1999, p. 6)

These concepts are linked to the idea that educational opportunities should be provided appropriate to the “ambitions, commitment and abilities” of an individual (NQA, 2009a, p. 3) throughout their lifetime, sometimes referred to as “lifelong learning”. The NQA addresses these opportunities through identified policies related to access programmes for education and training, transfer between programmes of education, and progression from one programme to another programme (NQA, 2009b). For the purposes of this research programme, progression and transfer are considered to be sub-sets of access and transition, which are explained in the following sections.

Access. National policy (HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014) seeks to broaden access based on the concept of “disadvantage” or “educational disadvantage.” The HEA (2008, p. 14) notes that this is consistent with the definition used by the European Access Network (EAN: <http://www.ean-edu.org/>), and O’Reilly (2008) points out that “In Ireland many initiatives focus on tackling barriers to higher education and, as a result, these barriers have served as a working definition of access” (p. 7). Access policy has broadened over time to include pre-entry activities and retention and attrition (Fleming, 2009; HEA, 2008; Skilbeck & Connell, 2000; Thomas, 2002) more recently defined as: “getting ready – reaching out to potential applicants, getting in – university admissions, staying in – student retention, getting on – student outcomes” (Milburn, 2012, p. 16).

Differences between access perspectives in Europe (Otero & McCoshan, 2005, p. ii) are derived from contexts where access is perceived to be: (a) participation in lifelong learning, with a focus on real time opportunities to experience an educational programme or training; (b) a more formal, rights-based perspective which stresses the importance of the right to participate in an educational programme, whether or not this right is exercised in practice; and (c) contexts where access includes the completion of a programme of study or training.

Transition. Theories of child and adolescent development (e.g., Erikson, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978) recognize the multiple transitions of a personal, social, psychological, physiological and environmental nature, which are also lifelong. Beach (1999) views personal transitions as: “the conscious reflective struggle to reconstruct knowledge, skills, and identity in ways that are consequential to the individual becoming someone or something new” (p. 30). Furthermore, Beach identifies sub-types which may be: (a) lateral: a movement between two historically related activities in a single direction, for example, primary to secondary school, post-primary to HE or employment; (b) collateral: simultaneous transitions between related activities, for example moving from one class to another within school, extra tuition outside of school hours; (c) encompassing: building new skills within an activity, which may be peer or mentor assisted, such as engaging with assistive technology; and (d) mediational: scaffolded transitions which facilitate the ability to acquire important skills for future deployment, for example engaging with academic or learning support. Such transitions result in a change in knowledge, skills, performance and identity, and consequently are closely tied to the development and progression of the individual. Within an educational context, transition refers to environmental changes that punctuate educational trajectories (Pallas, 2003, p. 165), for example, processes associated with post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities (Levinson & Ohler, 1998).

Thus transitions are a normative part of development and whilst each is experienced uniquely by the individual, they share a temporal commonality. For example, the transition from primary to post-primary school is shared by all children in Ireland between the ages of 11 and 12 years, however the emotional and practical considerations attached to that transitional moment or event, will not be experienced by all pupils or all parents, in the same way (Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling,

2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Therefore, in contrast to access, transition is more subjective and acknowledges the biopower, genealogies and epidermal schemas experienced by students, where “transitions are about a change in self-identity born out of uncertainty in the social and cultural worlds of the individual,” (Crafter & Maunder, 2012, p. 10).

In summary, educational transitions for students with disabilities are connected to: (a) legal constructs surrounding disability and educational provision, (b) competing models of disability that obfuscate how systems and policymakers should respond, (c) by extension, attitudes towards inclusion and exclusion within the education system, and (d) personal bioecologies. Each of these represents a potential enabler or barrier to transition, and therefore it is now pertinent to connect them to specific transition junctures within post-primary education in Ireland, reviewed in the following section.

1.3 Contextualising Educational Transitions in Ireland

Establishing the research problem requires identification and exploration of the research area, from which general and specific research questions can be distilled. In anticipation, this section presents an overview of the research context, explored in detail in a review of the pertinent literature in Chapter Three.

Educational systems function within socio-political contexts that vary across time, location, and culture (Darmody, 2012; Rogers, 2014); therefore, it is important to situate the context of this research programme prior to investigating the variables that function as promoters or inhibitors to transition, as observed by disabled students, parents or carers and practitioners. The first part of this section describes the structure of curriculum and assessment relating to the final three years of education in post-primary school, also referred to as the “senior cycle”. It provides a brief overview of the qualification framework which determines progression to post-secondary settings. This is followed by a review of the DARE scheme for students with disabilities in post-primary settings, which acknowledges the educational disadvantage experienced by students with disabilities during the senior cycle, in comparison to their peers. A third section examines national policy and strategic planning for access to HE in relation to students with disabilities, as it currently exists. Importantly, a final section sets out the factors considered to be enablers or barriers to educational transitions, in international and national studies.

1.3.1 Curriculum and Assessment in the Post-primary Education System

In the Republic of Ireland, the senior cycle of education in post-primary school is two or three years in duration (Department of Education and Science, 2004), depending upon whether students elect to pursue a fourth year, known as Transition Year (TY). This programme takes place immediately after the Junior Certificate (equivalent to GCSE examinations in the UK), and the curriculum is directed towards developing personal and social skills, building academic skills such as learning an additional language, and completing a period of work experience (NCCA, 1995). However, there is an ambiguity in its provision whereby: (a) it is available to all post-primary schools, but not all schools offer the programme (Clerkin, 2012, 2013), and (b) it may be optional or mandatory depending upon the policy of individual schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2014a), thus TY is not provided to all post-primary students (Jeffers, 2011). Therefore, access to a resource which has the potential to support transition is inequitable, and “deserves urgent attention” (Jeffers, 2002, p. 60). In the intervening decade, TY selection practices remain unchanged, as evidenced in parliamentary debates (Houses of the Oireachtas, Tuesday 26 February 2013) which draw attention to selection processes that apply no criteria or guidelines.

In fifth and sixth year, post-primary students study for the Leaving Certificate (LC) examination, an extremely competitive points-based examination taken at the end of the senior cycle of education. In practice, students usually study seven subjects and points are calculated on the best six results, which must include Mathematics, English and Irish. Assessment is based on written and oral, aural and practical examinations. Performance in the LC determines access to HE (DES, 2004), thus there are significant educational targets that must be achieved in order to qualify for post-secondary opportunities (Clerkin, 2012; Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011), which may also represent potential barriers for under-represented student groups in HE (Hyland, 2011; Smyth & Banks, 2012; Smyth & Hannan, 2012). Such disadvantage is recognized by the DARE scheme, which is introduced in the following section.

1.3.2 Post-secondary Schemes for Students with Disabilities

Students applying for entrance to courses in third level institutions in Ireland must apply through the Central Applications Office (CAO) – a clearing house for applicants to HEIs – rather than to individual universities, colleges or Institutes of Technology (IOT). The Admissions Office in each HEI offers places to students via

the CAO, if they meet the minimum requirements for the course of their choice.

Where there are more applicants than available places for a particular course, places are offered to those students with the highest score in the CAO points system.

Since 2004, HEIs have operated a supplementary admissions route for students with disabilities. This was envisaged as a third level admissions scheme for post-primary school students who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in HE, but who may not be able to meet the points for a third level course due to the impact of their disability. Students may disclose a disability in the category of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (AS/ASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/ADHD), Blind or Visual Impaired (B /VI), Deaf or Hearing Impaired (Df / HI), Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), Mental Health Conditions (MHC), Neurological Conditions (NC), Physical Disability (PD), Significant Ongoing Illness (SOI), Speech, Language and Communication Disorders (SLC), and Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD).

In 2010, the scheme was formally absorbed into the CAO application process as the DARE scheme (www.accesscollege.ie), which identifies LC students who are eligible to compete for an offer of a college place on reduced points. The rationale for this scheme is an acknowledgement that disability can have a negative effect on school and examination performance, and that this will determine opportunities to access HE, and there are currently 20 participating institutions, including universities, Institutes of Technology, and Colleges of Education (HEA, 2014). Each HEI allocates places to DARE eligible applicants and applies a non-specified reduction in points, according to their own admissions policy. Applicants must still meet matriculation and subject specific requirements.

Official statistics relating to DARE were not gathered prior to 2008; unpublished raw data was provided to participating HEIs by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the University of Limerick (UL) Admissions Office for the period 2008 – 2012, no similar data was available for the 2013 cycle, and in 2014 unpublished raw data was provided by the CAO. Key Performance Indicators for DARE have never formally been published, limited data is available in the sustainability report commissioned by the scheme in 2013 (Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, & Casey, 2013). This lack of monitoring and publishing of data by state agencies in relation to access routes is noted across the EU (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2014).

Application rates to DARE between 2008 and 2012 were extracted from unpublished raw data (IUA, 2008; UL, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). The number of applications to the DARE scheme between 2008 and 2012 (Table 1) did not increase significantly, in particular for students with sensory and physical disabilities, who continue to be significantly under-represented in HE, despite HEA targets to double the numbers of students in these groups by 2013 (HEA, 2008, p. 65).

Table 1

DARE Completed Applications to the Scheme 2008 – 2012

<u>Disability</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>
ASD	36	76	68	94	129
ADD/ADHD	40	107	70	114	148
B / VI	24	54	36	36	42
Df / HI	67	110	70	77	68
DCD	32	74	88	143	151
MHC	49	115	89	129	206
NC	0	43	39	36	79
PD	17	94	62	94	92
SOI	178	72	189	226	247
SLC	0	0	17	14	4
SpLD	1152	1560	1108	1197	1221
Total	1595	2305	1836	2160	2387

Note. The Neurological Conditions category was added to DARE in 2009, Speech, Language and Communications Disorders added in 2010.

There is a discrepancy between the numbers of students in particular disability cohorts completing full-time education (Central Statistics Office, 2008, 2012), and the number applying to DARE. One explanation might be the differences in terminology used in post-primary and third level environments (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010) which can affect statistical data. Firstly, whilst some students are supported in post-primary settings under SEN, at the point of applying to DARE and on entry to post-secondary settings, their “status” changes to one of disability and the nature of their SEN may be re-categorized, for example, from Emotional and Behavioural Disorder (EBD) to a Mental Health Condition. Secondly, schools can apply for additional teaching resources and supports for pupils who have special educational needs, but who also meet the diagnostic criteria for “low incidence disabilities” (DES, 2005b). This

reflects issues with the language, definitions and models of disability that were discussed in section 1.2, which is confusing for parents, school staff, and other professionals working in the education sector.

Essentially, the DARE scheme operates a medical model of disability (Byrne et al., 2013), requiring “evidence” from specialist, consultants and other professionals to confirm eligibility for the scheme. Eligibility for AS/ASD, ADD/ADHD, DCD, MHC, SOI, and SpLD categories of disability requires documentary evidence which is less than three years old (DARE, 2014). Therefore, the costs of consultant fees and psycho-educational assessments represent a barrier for socio-economically disadvantaged applicants (Cradden, 2014a; Long & McPolin, 2009; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Woods, 2007). This is further demonstrated in the profile of post-primary schools with the greatest number of DARE applications and DARE eligibility consistently over the last five years (Byrne et al., 2013; CAO, 2014; IUA, 2008; UL, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012) which are private fee-paying schools in Dublin and Cork. This suggests that “the application process is biased against students with lower levels of resources or information necessary to access the documentation necessary for application,” (Byrne et al., 2013, p. 90).

DARE applicants must also provide an academic reference from their school which confirms difficulties in relation to academic performance, however impact indicators that establish educational disadvantage as a function of a disabling environment, are not measured. Thus, there is robust evidence for specific pre-transition barriers and associated risk factors (Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014), which cannot be considered in isolation to national policies and strategic plans which are set out in the following section, and expanded upon in a review of the literature in Chapter Three.

1.3.3 National Policy, Disability and Access to HE

This section of the thesis presents data on formal policy relating to: (a) participation rates and national targets, (b) links between education sectors and institutions, and (c) provision of supports for equity of access in HE, as crucial factors at a national level for enabling successful transitions (AHEAD, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; DES, 2001; HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014; OECD, 2011).

National targets to increase participation rates for students with disabilities in HE (HEA, 2006, 2008) have been consistently exceeded, rising from 3,608 students in

2005 / 2006 to 9,082 students in 2012 / 2013 (AHEAD, 2013), an increase of almost 40%. However, the number of people with disabilities aged 15 to 19 years during this same period rose from 14,348 in 2006 (Central Statistics Office, 2008) to 22,712 in 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2012), an increase of 58.3%. This suggests that participation rates may not be sufficiently ambitious and “it remains the case that some groups in Irish society are not represented in the higher education population in line with their representation in the population more generally,” (HEA, 2014, p. 11). National Access Plans (HEA, 2008, 2010, 2014) have focused on doubling the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities – as under-represented cohorts in HE – and whilst these targets are more aspirational, as noted in DARE statistics provided in section 1.3.2, no real progress has been made (AHEAD, 2012, 2013; HEA, 2014). For example, comparing NCSE and AHEAD data for 2012, 407 students in post-primary schools were Deaf/HI (208 in HE) and 1,945 students in post-primary (495 in HE) had a physical disability (AHEAD, 2012; NCSE, 2013).

The HEA report on access to HE (HEA, 2006) proposed eight strategic actions, one of which was to “work with the Department of Education and Science and partners at primary level, second level and in further education to ensure effective links within and across the education system” (p. 54). However, an independent review of transition policy and practices aimed at the inclusion of disabled students in HE within European countries (OECD, 2011) noted the continued lack of communication between sectors and stakeholders. It specifically identified the role of schools and HEIs in assisting young people to transition from post-primary to HE and drew attention to the development of “synergies” between “actors” within different levels of education systems (p. 15). Consequently, the OECD recommended a number of actions to ensure “quality transition policies” (2011, p. 11), principally the need for more effective links across education sectors.

An additional strategic action (HEA, 2006, 2008) is to ensure that students with disabilities are appropriately supported in HE via dedicated Disability Services. The needs of students with disabilities in FE and HE are supported by the Fund for Student with Disabilities (FSD) financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). HEIs make group applications on behalf of students in respect of Assistive Technology, academic and personal support and transport. Whilst the range of potential supports available through the Fund are widely advertised (<http://www.studentfinance.ie>), the

continued decrease in available monies through the Fund, is not. Table 2 sets out the reduction in funding between 2008 and 2013, juxtaposed with an increase in student numbers across this period.

Tinto (2008) criticises unrealistic access policies that seek to increase student numbers while simultaneously reducing resources, and these observations apply equally to supporting students with disabilities:

It is not enough to provide low-income students access to our universities and colleges and claim we are providing opportunity if we do not construct environments that effectively support their efforts to learn and succeed once access has been gained. Simply put, access without effective support is not opportunity. [Web log message]

Table 2

Allocation of the Fund for Students with Disabilities 2008 – 2014

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of students</u>	<u>Funding Allocated</u>
2008-09	3,483	11.7m
2009-10	4,964	12.1m
2010-11	6,097	13.7m
2011-12	6,849	10.8m
2012-13	7,897	10.3m
2013-14	9,020	10.2m

Source: Minister Ruairi Quinn, Department of Education and Skills, Dail Debates, Written answers, Thursday, 8 May 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2014-05-08a.185>

In summary, this section has inspected the landscape of national policy relating to disabled students and access to HE and noted: (a) discrepancies between participation rates and national targets, in particular for specific categories of disability, (b) fractured links between post-primary and third level sectors and institutions which have a direct impact on broadcasting and supporting transition opportunities, and (c) provision of supports for equity of access in HE in terms of the “relationship between accommodations, supports and educational outcomes,” (AHEAD, 2012, p. 3). It also

reiterated the relationship between definitions and models of disability introduced in section 1.2, which cause uncertainty amongst stakeholders in connection with eligibility and knowledge of access routes such as DARE. Consequently, it is important to observe how these elements connect to the act of, and processes within, transition from post-primary school for students with disabilities. These are discovered in the following section.

1.3.4 Transition Planning for Students with Disabilities

Substantial international research exists in relation to transition from primary to post-primary school (e.g., Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Mac Iver, & Feldlaufer, 1993; Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Hargreaves & Galton, 2002) and more specifically within the Irish education system (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Shevlin, & Vahey, 2013; Darmody, 2008; Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004; Naughton, 1998). Such studies draw attention to the emotional significance of pre-transition experiences for pupils (Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; Graham & Hill, 2002), and how transition causes particular difficulties for certain cohorts of post-primary students (Smyth et al., 2004). Also highlighted is the role of parents as transition supporters (Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011b), and the anxieties and concerns associated with transitioning to an environment which has radically different structures, systems and expectations to those in primary school (Checchi, 2006; Dustmann, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, & O'Raw, 2010). Research on transition and disabled students principally focuses on specific disabilities (Adreon & Durocher, 2007) or the perspectives of institutional service providers (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Durlak, Rose, & Bursuck, 1994; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Whilst the post-primary transition experiences of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities have historically received less research attention in Ireland, recent studies (Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; Mc Guckin et al., 2013) have sought to address this gap in knowledge.

Transition assessment and planning for disabled students is legislated for across the United States of America (USA) via the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004, 2006). This is not the case in Europe, where disabled students encounter significantly more barriers than their non-disabled peers (Wray, 2013), principally due to a lack of focused and structured transition

planning (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Aston, Dewson, Loukas, & Dyson, 2005; Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie, & Dyson, 2004; Soriano, 2006; Ward, Mallett, Heslop, & Simons, 2003).

Recommendations from the OECD (2011) review of transition policy and practices for the inclusion of disabled students in HE in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Ireland and Norway, include: (a) the provision of formal transition planning, (b) the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and (c) an emphasis on guiding students along the transition route, as opposed to simply providing basic information to students and parents. Whilst acknowledging recent developments in Ireland around support for subject and college choices, and links between Guidance Counsellors (GC) and HEIs, the report stated that despite such initiatives, students with disabilities continue to be un- or under-prepared for third level education, and in particular Irish students reported the lack of a formal IEP as a barrier to transition (2011, p. 83).

Researching the access and progression to FE/HE experiences of students with SEN in Ireland, Mc Guckin et al. (2013) conclude that barriers exist at policy, institutional and individual levels (p. 69), and that significant progress needs to be made for transition planning early in post-primary school (p. 107). In particular, they make the point that whilst much useful information is available in schools and from HE providers, there is a general disconnect between these knowledge systems (p. 102), and the role of the school-based Guidance Counsellor is pivotal in linking this information and disseminating it to students and parents. Findings indicate little progress towards the action point stipulated by the National Access Office to: "Ensure that information and guidance on routes of access and progression to higher education are available to all learners through guidance counsellors and other educators," (HEA, 2004, p 17).

In summary, this section of the thesis has considered current national policy and strategic planning in relation to the progression of students with disabilities to HE in Ireland. It has juxtaposed policy and practice in Ireland with recommendations from the OECD (2011) and international and national transition studies, identifying aspects of the transition journey for students with disabilities, relative to the context in which these journeys take place, that function as promoters or inhibitors to transition, namely: (a) the academic requirements for entry to HE, (b) evidence of disability to

meet access route criteria, (c) inadequate transition planning policy and practice, and (d) restricted access to support and guidance in school.

These characteristics form the principle rationale for the investigation undertaken in this research programme, and for this reason it is critical to include the experiences, viewpoints and personal perspectives of students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and educational practitioners, at pre- and post-transition points. Capturing the voices of stakeholders adds resonance and depth to understanding the impact on outcomes of transition journeys, and this aspect is acknowledged in the following section.

1.4 Listening to Transition Stakeholders

Sontag (1996) notes that researchers seldom investigate the perception of disabled children with respect to events within their environment, and in particular relating to potential risk factors within school and the wider environment. Mc Guckin et al (2013) citing Farmakopoulou and Watson (2003) and Cook, Swain and French (2001), draw attention to the insufficiency of studies relating to transition that emphasise the importance of the student perspective. Providing opportunities for students with special needs and disabilities to voice their experiences and concerns is highlighted by Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, and Daly (2000), and extended through the work of Shevlin, Kenny, and McNeela (2002); Rose and Shevlin (2004) state explicitly that the opinions of young people from “marginalised groups” are neither acknowledged nor considered as part of educational policy or process, and that in effect this constitutes an exclusionary practice which negates any conversation about inclusion or equity of access (p. 155). Previous studies also make clear statements about the necessity to ensure that students are encouraged to voice their needs, intentions and aspirations for the future, including experiences of transition to HE settings (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Rose & Shevlin, 2010; Shah, 2008; Shevlin and Rose, 2008; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Rose and Shevlin (2010) specify the need for developing tools that permit pupils to engage in self-evaluation as a means of moving towards achievable goals using a “systematic approach to investigating pupil responses” (p. 131).

Adoption of a phenomenological approach has been recognized in international (Article 12, UNCRC, 1989) and national legislation (Government of Ireland, 1998), and theoretically forms part of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. The

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland published “Guidelines on the IEP Process” (NCSE, 2006a), and suggests that “Some schools have found it useful to ask the student to join the meeting at the end of the process” (p. 55).

Arguably, such directives are vague and thus open to varied interpretation and / or implementation. It is imperative, therefore, to investigate the transition experiences of students with disabilities and those of their parents or carers, and to triangulate these perspectives with viewpoints from practitioners within post-primary settings. Such an investigation will determine enablers and barriers, potential agents and agencies of change, and inform future practices. Thus, the following section establishes the research problem, and extrapolates the hypotheses, aims and objectives to which a methodology is applied in Chapter Four.

1.5 Identifying the Research Problem

This chapter has explored factors associated with transition from post-primary to post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities, which may function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transition outcomes. The emerging hypotheses are that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, which are determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors – principally beyond their control – which may effectively act as an enabler or barrier, and (b) a dedicated, targeted transition planning strategy for post-primary students with a disability, built on a framework that considers the circumstances, experiences, competencies, opinions and needs of stakeholders, can promote, encourage and assist disabled students in their transition journey. In order to test these hypotheses, a research aim and objectives were established to investigate the nature, magnitude, distribution and location of transitional factors for students with disabilities, and these are presented in the following section.

1.5.1 Research Aim, Research Objectives and Research Questions

The aim of this research programme is to explore the relationship between disability and transition to HE in Ireland, with a focus on investigating: (a) the effectiveness of current transition policies and opportunities, (b) the nature of current links between education sectors, (c) the quality of transition support and guidance, and (d) competing factors in the transition journey for post-primary students with disabilities. It acknowledges OECD (2011) recommendations for the development of formal transition planning and guidance throughout the transition journey for students

with disabilities, together with directives from the National Access Office (HEA, 2006) which advise HEIs to seek the personal perspectives of individual stakeholders (p. 13).

The principal research objectives are based on the rationale of collating and examining evidence that will inform future practice, for both HEIs and post-primary schools, with the purpose of forging links between these two sectors. Thus the stated research objectives are: (a) to document access to initiatives, advice, support and guidance using online surveys to students, parents / carers, and practitioners, embedded within a dedicated transition website; (b) to investigate personal perceptions of transition and disability via in-depth interviews with students, parents / carers, and practitioners; (c) to examine transition experiences of students with disabilities at the conclusion of their first year of undergraduate education; and (d) to use an emancipatory methodology that permits students with a disability and associated stakeholders to voice their experiences of transition.

Consequently, five research questions were extracted from this conceptualization of the research problem, and are identified as:

- Are students with disabilities, their parents, and other stakeholders in the transition process, provided with access to disability-specific transition advice and guidance?
- Do all stakeholders have equal access to the same quality and quantity of transition support?
- How useful / effective is this advice and guidance, what form does it take, and who provides it?
- What are the enablers / barriers to transition identified by students with disabilities, their parents and practitioners?
- Is there a need for dedicated, transition-specific resources, for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland?

This constitutes the framework for the research programme and therefore a methodology is required that uses instruments to test and answer these questions.

Due to time and resource constraints, the scope of the research programme does not include viewpoints from policymakers and HEIs, as attention is directed towards transition from within a post-primary perspective. However, the researcher acknowledges that this would be a valuable continuation for future research.

1.5.2 Research Design

This research programme used a mixed methodology (MM) (Creswell, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, 2011; Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003; Hossler & Vesper, 1993) concurrent-transformative-triangulation-convergent design, where qualitative and quantitative approaches are used simultaneously to “confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within a single study” (Creswell, 2003, p. 217). The design was delivered in three separate but concurrent studies, described in detail in Chapter Four. Study One, collated pre-transition data obtained from survey responses, interviews, and discussion forum / blog postings from students, parents or carers and practitioners; Study Two, post-transition reflections, was collated from surveys and interviews gathered from students with disabilities approaching the conclusion of their first year in college. Data for Study Three investigated engagement with a suite of transition resources designed specifically for this research programme, and which constitute the research environment described in the following section.

1.5.3 Research Environment

“Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality” (Oldenburg, 1989), a theory later refined by Bhabha (1990) and referred to as “third space”. Whilst Bhabha’s discussion referred specifically to post-colonial cultural differences, Internet sites, discussion forums and blogs are examples of Communities of Practice (COP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and can be considered a third space (Gannon, 2010; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Wilson, 2003). The Internet is a third space that is neither home, nor school, nor work, and thus is potentially emancipatory as: (a) individuals with disabilities, parents / carers, practitioners and professionals, are free to participate without the constraints and boundaries of traditional communication models; (b) high quality third spaces provide access to concrete resources and materials, first-hand accounts and expertise, which help to build particular discourses

for members of a community; (c) the Internet is accessed by more young people in Ireland, than in any other EU country.

The Equality Challenge Unit is a registered charity, funded by grants from the HE sector in the UK. Their guide “Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education” (Felsing & Byford, 2010) identified pre-entry activities as a reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities and found that “the most commonly cited mechanism of communicating disability . . . is the institution’s website” (p. 22). This guide also recommended that strategic actions should include public dissemination of information on requesting reasonable accommodations, entitlements, and supports.

In Ireland, 81% of 6 – 17 year olds use the Internet which is 6% higher than the EU average (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009), and 75% of LC students Melrose (2012) use the Internet as a learning resource, both formally (teacher-directed) and informally. The Irish Universities Quality Board “Public Information Project” (IUQB, 2011) surveyed post-primary students and Guidance Counsellors throughout Ireland, to ascertain the type of information that should be available on university and other websites, in a format that is clear and accessible. Students stipulated a need for information on course content and entry routes, clearer and simpler use of language, explanation of higher education jargon or key words, and provision of a site specific search engine. Guidance Counsellors identified a need for course specific information, a glossary of key terms, realistic accounts of programmes, entry routes, and student supports. The IUQB (2011) also recommended inclusion of feedback on the experiences of students in college with regard to specific courses and campus life. Thus a transition website that meets the desires and needs of senior cycle students, parents and practitioners, is the most effective method of disseminating transition information and promoting a collaborative space for all stakeholders.

Consequently, the design of the research environment is critical, and for this reason, the website was designed in a way which: (a) met the data collection requirements of the research programme, and (b) provided opportunities for engagement between all stakeholders in the transition process, namely, students, parents, practitioners and HEI staff. The recommendations, proposed actions and strategies proffered by national and international bodies (AHEAD, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; DES, 2001; HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014; OECD, 2003, 2011), and the resources identified by stakeholders in post-primary education (IUQB, 2011), were

incorporated into the design of a website “Pathways to Trinity” (www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity) that functions as the vehicle for this research. Specifically, they are interpreted as linked site sections under the headings My College Application, My Course Choice, My Life on Campus, Pathways Forum/Blog, which additionally includes a comprehensive Transition Planning Tool. Additionally, transition planning workshops were provided to senior cycle post-primary students with disabilities, parents and practitioners, to complement the online resources. A detailed technical description of the design and creation of this suite of transition resources is provided in Chapter Four.

The following section sets out the scope of this research programme, clarifying the methodological parameters of the investigation.

1.5.4 Scope of the Research Programme

It is important to note at the outset the limitations of the research programme. Firstly, this research programme did not include the perspective of state agencies, policy makers, HEIs or Disability Services. Rather, the research focused on data sources from students, parents and post-primary practitioners, which has implications for the scope of the analysis undertaken. One such limitation includes the low number of practitioner respondents in the available survey data, which therefore impedes generalizability of viewpoints across all post-primary practitioners.

Secondly, given the limited responses to invitation to interview, the qualitative data that was collected was small-scale in nature, and therefore similarly limits the generalizability of viewpoints from students with disabilities, parents or carers, and post-primary practitioners. Whilst the surveys were made available to all members of the public, the transition website was embedded in the website of one university in Dublin, and thus response rates were dependent upon website visitors investigating resources associated with that university. Given both institutional and regional variations, both quantitative and qualitative data from interviews should therefore be viewed as exploratory in nature, and the conclusions and policy recommendations provided in the concluding chapter, are bounded by those factors.

Therefore, the research topic would benefit from further investigation on a national scale, rolled out via a transition website that relates to all HEIs and geographical areas. A full description of the research limitations is provided in

Chapter Six, section 6.4. The following section provides a statement in regard to the potential influence of the research in regard to transition resources and programmes.

1.5.5 Potential Influence of the Research

The purpose of the Pathways to Trinity web suite, is to provide a connection between stakeholders in progression to third level education as a Community of Practice, encouraging the sharing of personal and material resources, and providing stronger links between post-primary and tertiary education, whilst operating within a third space. The significance of the findings is discussed in relation to access policy and practice, and international studies of transition experiences. This research programme creates a new understanding of existing issues around transition and access to third level education, and identifies emerging issues worthy of future investigation. Critically, findings draw attention to the thoughts, concerns and opinions of stakeholders in the transition process, and emphasizes the fact that acting upon those concerns and opinions, is crucial to progressing transition initiatives.

It is anticipated that research findings and recommendations will facilitate discussion which includes, but is not limited to: (a) establishment of a framework for transition assessment and planning for students with disabilities, (b) development of a modularized transition planning tool, (c) identification of appropriate content and resource requirements, (d) improved dissemination of information to all stakeholders in the transition process, and (e) improved and sustained links between different education sectors, agencies, and institutions connected to transition for students with disabilities. The following section concludes the introduction to the research programme and summarizes the elements therein, each of which is expanded in subsequent chapters.

1.6 Chapter Conclusion

The first section of this chapter explored competing definitions and models of disability used nationally and internationally, as: (a) they have direct relevance to the structure of access policies and initiatives reviewed and investigated in this research programme; (b) it is essential to provide clarity around terminology as it is used throughout this thesis; and (c) differences in meanings and understandings also function as enablers and barriers for students with disabilities. It has established that there is a significant relationship between definitions of disability and access to

supports and resources within an educational context, and that competing models of disability shape attitudes towards inclusion and exclusion within those contexts.

This chapter also introduced the context of the research problem as a precursor to a more extended debate in a review of the pertinent literature in Chapter Three. It provided an overview of curriculum and assessment in post-primary education in Ireland, and how the highly competitive nature of the post-primary qualification framework, determines progression to HE. In response, national policy has attempted to ameliorate barriers to transition for students with disabilities, by setting HEI targets to increase participation rates and promote alternative access routes. However, an overview of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), a supplementary admissions scheme that is unique to Ireland, established that: (a) the parameters of DARE replicate a medical model of disability, (b) eligibility criteria are biased towards applicants from advantaged backgrounds, and (c) it does not take into account indicators of the impact of disability on educational achievement. Furthermore, statistical data illustrating the scale of participation in this scheme indicates that students with sensory and physical disabilities continue to be under-represented in HE.

Findings from studies that investigate transition planning practices in post-primary schools draw attention to restricted access to IEPs and formal planning processes for students with SEN and disabilities. Additionally, whilst there is substantial information available to facilitate transition planning, inadequate links and communications channels between second and third level sectors, and variable levels of guidance in schools, affects equity of access to opportunities. In tandem, the importance of listening to disabled students, their parents / carers, and professionals who are actively engaged in the transition process, was highlighted as an integral aspect of transition planning.

A final section set out the research problem, its situation within the recommendations of international bodies concerned with economic and educational development, and its relationship to national policies which address access to HE. The aim and objectives of the research programme were specified, prior to a description of the environment within which the research was conducted, and a brief introduction to the research design. Potential influences of this research on future transition initiatives

were briefly outlined in terms of models of practice. These themes are explored in depth in a review of the literatures in Chapter Three.

Consequently, it is now appropriate to situate these factors within a theoretical framework that provides structure and depth to the research perspective. In the following chapter, theoretical models of human ecology are examined in relation to the life trajectory of the disabled individual, and in particular, how they may justifiably be used to explore variables that affect the transitional aspirations and choices of post-primary students, such as school ethos, quality of guidance, parental influences, and quality and availability of information pathways. These theories are also complemented with an exploration of the ways in which “insider” viewpoints of disability and transition can be examined, by applying a lens that focuses on personal geographies.

CHAPTER TWO – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chapter Aims

The purpose of this chapter is to determine the theoretical framework which makes explicit the conceptual basis for understanding, analyzing, and designing the methodology of this research programme. Mc Guckin and Minton (2013) provide clear evidence for the use of theoretical frameworks, both to examine the environments experienced by young people and how these can be understood, but also how theory may be used “in a practical and unrestricted manner so as to consider and understand an issue” (p. 4). This chapter begins with an introduction to three theoretical models that underpin this research programme (2.1 to 2.3) followed by a section which situates these perspectives within the context of post-secondary transitions for students with disabilities in Ireland (2.4). A concluding section demonstrates how these have informed the research design, data collection and analysis.

Greene (1994) draws attention to the connection between individual, cultural and national transitions, whereby “The culture of any nation or community is constantly evolving and exists only in the thoughts and actions and creations of its participants” (p. 354). Therefore, it is appropriate to examine theoretical models concerned with multiple transitions across the lifespan (Conger & Little, 2010) and that can best explain the relationships between the variables in this research programme. Conceptual frameworks adopted in previous research relevant to child development within an Irish context were investigated, for example, the national longitudinal study “Growing Up in Ireland” (Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010), transition from primary to post-primary school for pupils with special educational needs (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Shevlin, & Vahey, 2013), and transition from post-primary to FE and HE for pupils with special educational needs in Ireland (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013).

Consequently, three perspectives were deemed to be most relevant to this research programme: (a) the role of education in relation to development across the lifespan (Hegel, 1942/1921; Sorkin, 1983; Van Crombrugge, 2011; Van der Rest, 2011; Wood, 1998); (b) Bioecological Theory which positions such development within multiple inter-connecting and intersecting environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); and (c) Children’s Geographies

(e.g. Bunge, 1969; Geldens & Bourke, 2008; Skelton & Valentine, 1998) a conceptual tool for exploring the personal experiences of children within socio-cultural frameworks. The following sections presents each of these perspectives as a theoretical layer which texturizes the research context, building upwards from a broad base of empirical evidence, to the specificity of personal journeys.

2.1 *Bildung* and Transition

Bildung (Humboldt, 1767 – 1835) is based on an ideal of human development that encompasses qualities of citizenship, critical judgement, creativity, values, general knowledge, and ability to engage with the diversity of culture and tradition (Sorkin, 1983). There are two key facets to *Bildung*: it is a lifelong process, and it is both individual but simultaneously collective. Contemporary definitions attach a content aspect “a broad view on the world, a kind of compass” (European Network of Education Councils [EUNEC], 2011, p. 45), and a process aspect, incorporating dimensions of self-awareness, self-discovery and the recognition of values as a worldview (EUNEC, 2011).

Van Crombrugge (EUNEC, 2011, p. 7) discusses the relationship between educational systems, learning processes, the needs and viewpoints of society, and individual development and opportunities. Attention is drawn to the inherent tensions within such a model, specifically those occurring between education and training systems, societal and cultural values in education, and individual, social and professional competencies required for employment. The EUNEC (2011) seminar “*Bildung* in a Lifelong Learning Perspective” acknowledged the mismatch between the needs and worldviews of young people, and the available formal and informal learning opportunities. An additional push-pull factor is the requirement or perceived desire for specific skills and knowledge – both academic and professional – versus the development of broad competencies that constitute *Bildung* (academic, soft, generic, social and emotional development, health and civic).

Therefore, it makes sense to recognize the concept of lifelong human development from an individualistic perspective, but simultaneously to view this within the reality of the ecology of the individual. Humans exist within intersecting environments which can either promote or hinder the ideal of *Bildung*, none more so than those of home and school. Van der Rest (EUNEC, 2011) highlights the importance of the teacher as a guiding force, and in particular that:

Schools must create a social environment where everyone feels that they are noticed and are taken seriously. Schools cannot choose between concentrating on knowledge transfer or concentrating on *Bildung*. They must do both . . . Parents cannot do it by themselves. They really do need the school to help them. (p. 50)

Therefore, the quality of both educators and institutions is crucial, particularly in terms of empowerment, cultural capital, and inclusion. Hegel (cited by Wood, 1998) views the role of school as a facilitator for development, placed between the family and society.

The school stands between the family and the real world . . . It is the middle-sphere which leads the human being from the family circle over into the world (Werke 4, p. 348-349). This is why he regards the responsibility for the education of children as a delicate matter, which must be shared between parents and civil society. (Wood, 1998, p. 21)

Hegel does not discount the importance of developing individual values, but places the responsibility for such development on schools, where teaching of soft skills and core life competencies allows young people to function fully in the social world. Gilham (2012) views the potential of adopting a *Bildung* perspective within special education as “a shift toward understanding inclusive practices as practices informed by shared wisdom – multiple truths – rather than grand unified theory as truth, like models of best practice tend to strive to be” (para 48).

Melhuish (EUNEC, 2011) extends this responsibility beyond the education system, and emphasises personal, academic and social development with an emphasis on the early years of life, dependent upon the quality of three key early experiences: (a) a positive home-learning environment, (b) exposure to good pre-schools for a longer duration, and (c) effective primary education. Children who benefit from all three of these elements “out-perform those with two, who will out-perform those with one who will out-perform those with zero, all other things being equal” (p. 34). Thus whilst *Bildung* can be used to understand the role and

influences of educational systems in the acquisition of skills that are valued within society (Archer, 2013), it is less useful in explaining idiosyncratic development in terms of the multiple influences of individuals, agencies, policies and practices (Rogoff, 1990, 1993, 2008), across contexts and over time, as a true representation of the transition experience.

There are wider social constructs and forces at play in the human universe, with transactions that occur across political, geopolitical, economic, social and cultural boundaries. Such transactions affect individuals uniquely and therefore a broader perspective is required, in order to examine transition enablers and barriers. Bioecological Theories of Development permit “an analysis of the levels and direction of power and control which operate in an individual life” (Tobbell & O’Donnell, 2005, p. 9), and these are examined in detail in the following section.

2.2 Bioecological Theories of Development

Theories of organizations as social systems which focus on group culture, aspirational planning and collaborative problem-solving (Lewin, 1951) describe the “force field” of an individual or social group, a psychological environment which is fluid and can be affected by events and experiences over time. Once fully developed, this force field becomes the “life space” of the individual, which is shaped from all aspects of personality, behavior, physiology, interactions and experiences. The life space is in turn affected by factors (forces) that influence behavior, events, interactions and circumstances, which can be either positive (helpful forces), creating opportunities and pushing the individual towards achieving goals, or negative (hindering forces) that create barriers and prevent the individual from achieving goals.

Lerner (1986, 1991) contextualizes such forces within a developmental perspective, where “parent-child relations, and interpersonal and institutional networks, are embedded in and influenced by particular community, societal, cultural, and designed and natural environments, all changing across time” (Lerner, Castellino, Terry, Villarruel, & McKinney, 1995, para. 18). Similarly, life course theory (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) suggests that understanding individual life trajectories requires consideration of policy, social context, family and social networks within which life decisions are made. Elder et al (2003) propose five interconnecting principles: (a) life span development – patterns of being and behaviour across the life span, (b) agency – action and interactions by the individual which shape life

trajectories, (c) time and place – recognition that the individual is also shaped by their historical context, (d) timing – where the timing of an event affects antecedents and consequences in the life of an individual, and (e) linked lives - individuals do not live in a vacuum but are part of an interdependent social network.

Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) develops and strengthens these interconnections between the individual and the environment, providing a framework within which to examine the impact of external forces. Early models (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979) considered the “development” of a child as being impacted by four nested systems: (a) the Microsystem, (b) the Mesosystem, (c) the Exosystem, and (d) the Macrosystem, extended by a fifth layer – the Chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), which sees each layer operating simultaneously and across the lifespan (Figure 1). Each of these systems interacts with the other with varying degrees of impact at different times, which may result in either a ripple effect – for example, policy changes that affect curriculum content and assessment, or a more forceful backwash of consequences – for example a reduction in the number of Guidance Counsellors in post-primary education in Ireland.

Consequently, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model provides opportunities for identifying enablers and barriers to individual transitions, and to locate them within precise contexts.

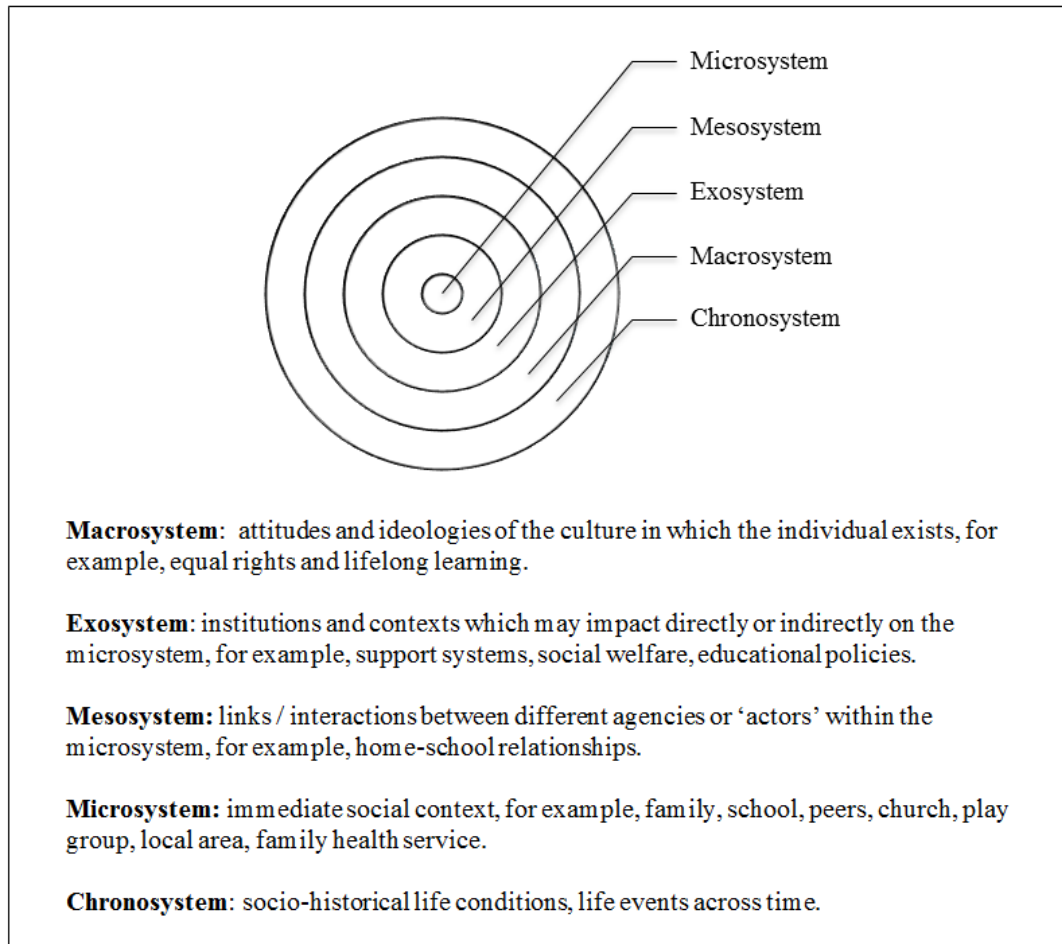


Figure 1. Interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) bioecological theory.

A revised and extended model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) included two propositions that focus on human interactions with the environment described as “proximal processes” which involve four underpinning components: *Process*, *Person*, *Context*, and *Time* (PPCT). Proposition 1 argues that the trajectory of human life is conducted through increasingly complex interactions with elements within the environment, over time (p. 797). Proposition 2 states that the form, power, context and direction of such proximal processes are fluid in that they are shaped by the person and the context in which they take place (p. 798).

Process comprises all interactions between the person and their environment over time. The strength, power, effectiveness, and ultimately the ramifications of such processes are dependent upon the person, context and time period within which they take place. For young people, such processes result in the generation of ability, motivation, skill, knowledge and demand, which enables independence and fosters

development. *Person* characteristics of disposition, ability, knowledge, experience and skill are relevant here, and relate to all individuals operating within a particular sub-system, and who interact with each other over the lifespan. “Demand” characteristics of the person can have either adverse or productive effects within the social environment. *Context* refers to the setting within which interactions take place – including objects and symbols within the environment – potentially further complicated by the “the growing hecticness, instability, and chaos” of modern life (p. 796). The fourth element of *Time* significantly extends previous versions of Bronfenbrenner’s model, in particular the dimensional aspects of microtime (continuity or discontinuity of episodic events), mesotime (extension of episodes across longer time periods such as days, weeks or months) and macrotime (changes in the individual, group, community and society across the lifespan / generational changes). Using such a model means that individual transitions can be studied microscopically, enabling the researcher to pinpoint temporal and systemic disruptions to or diversions from these proximal processes, and which in the context of this research programme, may limit transition opportunities for students with disabilities.

Sontag (1996) discusses Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework in relation to disability research and in particular the need to re-conceptualize the interaction between children with disabilities and their environments using the “prism of the ecological model” (p. 340). Dunst, Trivett, and Cross (1986) suggest that whilst type and degree of impairment have a significant effect on functional development and constitute a risk, aspects of the familial environment such as parental support are qualified as assets, and provide a counterbalance to developmental liabilities. However, this assumes that parental / familial support is positive in nature, or even exists, so it follows that lack of such support may equally represent a liability. It is crucial, therefore, to include an examination of the role of parental attitudes and expectations in the research programme.

Blalock and Patton (1996) present a theory based on vertical and horizontal transition events, with reference to students with learning disabilities. Vertical events describe expected age and developmental markers, whilst horizontal events are those which are theoretically anticipatory at some point in life (e.g., marriage, job change, house move) and other unexpected and essentially traumatic events, such as acquisition of a disability at a critical transition point. Thus the coincidence of a life-

changing event (diagnosis / change in prognosis), with a potentially difficult environmental transition (change in post-primary school / parental circumstances), at a time of significant biopsychological change (adolescence), has a significant impact on the individual. If, in addition, these events are situated within politico-economic systems where changing policies and practices affect, for example, access to experts and intervention, and provision and quality of supports, they impose a level of risk to the equilibrium of the microsystem.

In summary, this section has reviewed theoretical models within which to examine, discuss and explain the findings of this research programme. It has established that whilst *Bildung* is a useful perspective for reflecting upon the influence of socio-cultural expectations and contexts, principally it relates to education and the role of the institution in shaping social development. Other studies highlighted the importance of group dynamics and forces (Lewin, 1951), localized social networks and communities (Lerner, 1986, 1991), family (Dunst, Trivett, & Cross, 1986), the additional complexity of life transitions and disability (Blalock & Patton, 1996), and personal assets and liabilities (Sontag, 1996). Life course theory (Elder et al., 2003) draws together many of these aspects by focusing on policy, social context, family and social networks within which life decisions are made. Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979) proposed the ecological framework as a conceptual model, and revised this from the 1980s onwards into a theoretical model placing more importance on the role of the individual and their interaction with the social, cultural and political context within which they function.

As this research programme investigates intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting transition, including the influence of policy and practice, peer groups, school ethos and culture, family guidance and support, in addition to individual differences, bioecological theory provides an ideal structure for framing this research. It is an appropriate model with which to examine the interactions between systems that affect the educational transitions of disabled students, with a focus on investigating: (a) the effectiveness of current transition policies and opportunities, (b) the nature of current links between education sectors, (c) the quality of transition support and guidance, and (d) competing factors in the transition journey for post-primary students with disabilities.

Researchers seldom investigate the perception of disabled children with respect to events within their environment (Sontag, 1996, p. 328), and at the level of the Microsystem and Mesosystem it is crucial that attention is paid to risks within the proximal processes (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009) which may constitute barriers or enablers to educational transitions. This can be most efficiently achieved through the study of Children's Geographies, a sub-discipline of Human Geography and Childhood Studies that examines "children's encounters with the world, but also the processes, decisions and events that shape the world they perceive, interpret and act upon" (Ansell, 2009, p. 23). The following section sets out the relationship between the bioecologies and geographies of young people with disabilities, as complementary tools with which to examine the research topic.

2.3 Children's Geographies

The study of young people has historically been a part of sociology and social research, although Bunge (1969a, 1969b) first applied the discipline of Geography to researching the lived experience of human social life in a study of Detroit youth. Children's Geographies has rapidly gained in momentum since the 1990s (Matthews, 2003). Notable are international studies on childhood as a social phenomenon (Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994), and social and contextual environments such as family, school, and community (Aitken, 1998, 2001; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). They investigate global experiences of identity, ethnicity, relationships, culture and local communities in the USA, UK, Mexico, Sudan, and the UK.

Kay, Tisdall, and Punch (2012) discuss the "new" sociology of childhood (p. 249) which acknowledges that as children's lives are socially constructed, they should be viewed as independent social actors, with concordant rights. Lee (2001) cited by Kay et al. (2012) argues that supervising adults themselves are essentially a work in progress, and yet they are bestowed with levels of expertise that frequently determine the policies, practices and pathways that are offered to young people. Furthermore, distinctions can be drawn between the concept of "actor" and "agency" (Mayall, 2002), and in particular the idea of "thin" levels of agency – decisions and actions taken on a regular or every day basis, with restricted choices – and "thick" levels of agency – the opportunity to select from a broader range of options (Klocker, 2007), which operate within Bronfenbrenner's nested systems:

It is possible for a person's agency to be 'thickened' or 'thinned' over time and space, and across their various relationships. Structures, contexts, and relationships can act as 'thinners' or 'thickeners' of individual's agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices. (2007, p. 85)

Understanding such nuances illuminates the effects of fluctuating empowerment and agency throughout the life course (Uprichard, 2008), and by association "greater emphasis is needed on the intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people's lives" (Kay et al., 2012, p. 259). Pyer, Horton, Tucker, Ryan, and Kraftl (2010) discuss the "lifeworlds" of children and young people with disabilities from diverse settings including examples from Canada, Botswana and the UK, and in particular state that:

Greater attention should be paid to the geographies of children and young people who are effectively marginalised as a consequence of their 'disability' – even within sub-disciplinary contexts which are ostensibly committed to the inclusion of diverse younger people. (p. 1)

In particular, several foci are suggested for geographers of children with disabilities, one of which is the investigation of transitions across the lifespan, which are multiple, complex and unique to the individual (2010, p. 3). Similarly, in a phenomenological study of 30 children across the US, Speraw (2009, cited by McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2013) makes the point that individuals themselves are "the most expert, the most capable of telling what it is like to be them, living in their bodies, requiring assistance or accommodation, often on the margins of childhood or young adulthood" (2013, p. 65). On a cautionary note, Tangen (2008) suggests that specifically focusing research on special needs may inadvertently support the notion of stereotyping, and draw attention away from individual differences.

Pyer et al. (2010) point to the importance of participatory research within policy-making contexts, specifically recognition of the "practices, processes, actors, relationships, norms and institutions which constitute 'disability' – and indeed policy relating to 'disability' – in different spaces and at different times" (p. 5). In the

editorial to a volume of UK studies, Holloway, Brown, and Pimlott-Wilson (2011) argue that Children's Geographies should "foreground young people as the subjects rather than objects of education, demanding that attention is paid to their current and future life-worlds, in geographies of education" (p. 1). Importantly, they draw attention to the lack of focus on environmental factors which impinge upon educational trajectories, which include policies, practices and institutional cultures and attitudes.

Thus, Children's Geographies explore the lived experiences of young people within a nested systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989) acknowledging that "although children's lives are often focused on the home, school and the neighbourhood, these geographies are contained within much wider structures such as the economy, the state, etc.," (Valentine, 2003, p. 39). Prout (2005, cited by Ansell, 2009) exemplifies how transactions between and across systems affect individual lives:

Schools, for example, are related to other schools, to households, playgrounds, after-school clubs, firms, local authorities, trades unions, ministries, courts and so on. People cross these boundaries bringing with them different and conflicting ideas, experiences, ideals, values and visions (all the things that make up discourses) and different material resources. Things also pass across the boundaries and play no less a part. These include texts, such as the curriculum guidelines, teaching materials, letters laying down funding policy and so on (p. 82).

Therefore, Children's Geographies can be usefully incorporated into the research framework as a vehicle for voicing experiences and opinions, and by extension, can provide a narrative for the geography of the transition journey.

Jeffrey (2010) discusses the transition of young people in relation to educational and employment opportunities, drawing on examples from across the globe, and argues that approaches to research in these areas are premised on the notion that: (a) all young people reach adulthood, (b) transitions follow highly structured and linear life stage models, and (c) there is a normative progression from dependence to independence. Critical events in the geographies of young people represent "vital

conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), which are shaped by influence of social structures on social actions (Bourdieu, 1977; Sewell, 2005). These educational conjunctures function as “sites of youth struggle” (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 500) and are instrumental in shaping the lives of young people, where educational opportunities are contested and contradictory “providing certain social opportunities while also drawing young people more tightly into systems of inequality” (2010, p. 500). There are similarities here with Blalock and Patton’s (1996) bioecological model which acknowledges the impact of vertical and horizontal transition life events.

Drawing on a diverse range of international studies, Valentine (2003) points out that life course theories are a more useful framework within which to study transitions, rather than focusing on defined periods of childhood or adulthood, arguing that “changes associated with growing up may or may not be connected, and may occur simultaneously, serially or not at all” (p. 37). The entities that are childhood, youth, adolescence and adulthood, cannot be ring-fenced into defined periods of homogeneity, with individuals transferring from one period to another in broadly the same fashion, at the same moment. Longitudinally, research on young people within the discipline of Geography has been an “absent presence” (Shilling, 1993, p. 9). Valentine (2003) explains this as the lack of acknowledgement of the relationship between young people and their immediate social contexts and wider environments, together with a compartmentalization of research that is focused on topics such as race, gender and social class, rather than a broader investigation of the experiences of young people in their own space. Valentine (2003) also points out that research into post-secondary transition and college experiences, is scant, and yet it is these transition conjunctures or life events that are most closely tied to identity, self-esteem and well-being.

However, if education is one site of conjuncture, the family is another equally important variable in transition aspirations and success. Interdependent family relationships are negotiated across the lifespan Punch (2009), and this is particularly relevant for children with disabilities whose sense of agency in determining and achieving personal aspirations, may conflict with parental viewpoints (Mill, Mayes, & McConnell, 2010; Pilnick, Clegg, Murphy, and Almack, 2011). Individual perspectives of young people are a critical aspect of research into the relationship between family and “imagined futures.” A UK study of children’s opinions on parental

employment (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011, p. 111) demonstrates that, whilst the family habitus is a key influence on the nature and structure of those futures:

The dispositions which are incorporated into the habitus are not a simple reflection of familial practices, and that children actively calculate the costs and benefits of particular courses of action, based in the experiences of family members but also other influences as they grow up. (p. 115)

In a study of youth in the USA, the experience of “going to college” is closely tied to new opportunities for independence, and the exploration of new identities and ways of being (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). This may represent a particular conflict for young people with disabilities, for whom “mobility” has a particular resonance, and who may have anxieties about the emotional and practical aspects of going to college (Dent & Coles, 2012; Fier & Brzezinski, 2010). Whilst such concerns are shared by all young people, the relationship between young disabled students and parents or carers, throws up particular difficulties in terms of expectations and the potential replication of dependency models (Mc Guckin et al., 2013).

This section has outlined the importance of understanding the relationship between (a) Children’s Geographies, (b) the transactions and transformations that take place within bioecological systems, and (c) how these connect to transition to HE. This relationship is discussed in the following section using the foci of disability and educational systems in Ireland.

2.4 The Geography of Disability and Educational Transitions in Ireland

Bronfenbrenner (1976, 1979, 1989) points out that, often, each of the systems within which individuals are bounded are treated as separate entities. Within the mesosystem, there may be a separation between the culture of the family and the culture of school (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001), and conflict may arise in relation to trust (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005), beliefs and commitments (Clarke, Sheridan & Woods, 2010). Parents are a child’s first teachers, and the home their first school (Berger, 1995) however the relegation of this role to other adults once formal education begins, may in itself cause difficulties (Crozier, 1999; Vincent & Mertens, 2008). Further tension is created when this conflicts with the cultural values of the

Macrosystem, for example, the principles of family and education as set out in the Constitution of Ireland (Government of Ireland, 1937), where the family is the fundamental unit of society (Article 41), and is also the primary educator of the child (Article 42).

This tension may be replicated at entry to and progression through HE, where systems and services view students as adult learners in isolation to other elements of their life or background. When critical events occur within the microsystem of the student, a push-pull tension is created within the complex web of relationships between service provider, access or disability services, student, parents, academic staff, HEI regulations and external health providers (Thomas, Quinn, Slack, & Casey, 2002). For students with disabilities this can be further complicated by levels of disclosure and confidentiality (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Sometimes the student's wants or needs, or perhaps the original event or query, becomes forgotten or overshadowed by the escalating complexity of this web.

“Constructing and strengthening interconnections between ecological systems is crucial to the development of social policy” (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, p. 14) and thus strengthening the interconnection between post-primary and third level education systems during both the period and “act” of transition is imperative for students with disabilities. However, there is a significant information gap between post-primary and third level systems in terms of process and expectations (Mc Guckin et al., 2013). From a *Bildung* perspective, equipping disabled students with skills of self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy during the final two years of post-primary education enables them to deal with the multi-layered systems of independent adulthood. Bioecological systems theory is ideally suited as a vehicle within which to explore the effects of variables such as school ethos, quality of guidance, parental influences, and quality and availability of information pathways associated with school transitions (Leonard, 2011; Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), and students with disabilities (Dente & Coles, 2012; Salmon & Kinnealey, 2007).

Greene and Moane (2000) identify Bronfenbrenner's model as a “ready framework for discussing the ecology of the Irish child” (p. 123), drawing attention to the social inequity of childhood, leading to educational disadvantage which impacts on post-secondary expectations. Their observations are contrasted with an earlier

discussion (Greene, 1994) that also explored the applicability of Bronfenbrenner in an Irish context, highlighting the positives and negatives of socio-economic changes in Ireland between 2002 and 2008, and how these have affected the lives of Irish children, across systems and across time. In conclusion, they make the point that:

Children live their lives in families, schools and neighbourhoods but the quality of their daily experience is influenced by the political, legal, educational and social welfare systems put into place in their society. These systems in turn reflect the values of society. (p. 135)

Figure 2 illustrates the nested systems within the educational landscape in Ireland, and specifically as it relates to students with disabilities and SEN. It includes the addition of event markers, experiential artefacts that transverse each of the systems, over time, where such events may occur separately or simultaneously, but which may also be affected by any of the systems, separately or simultaneously.

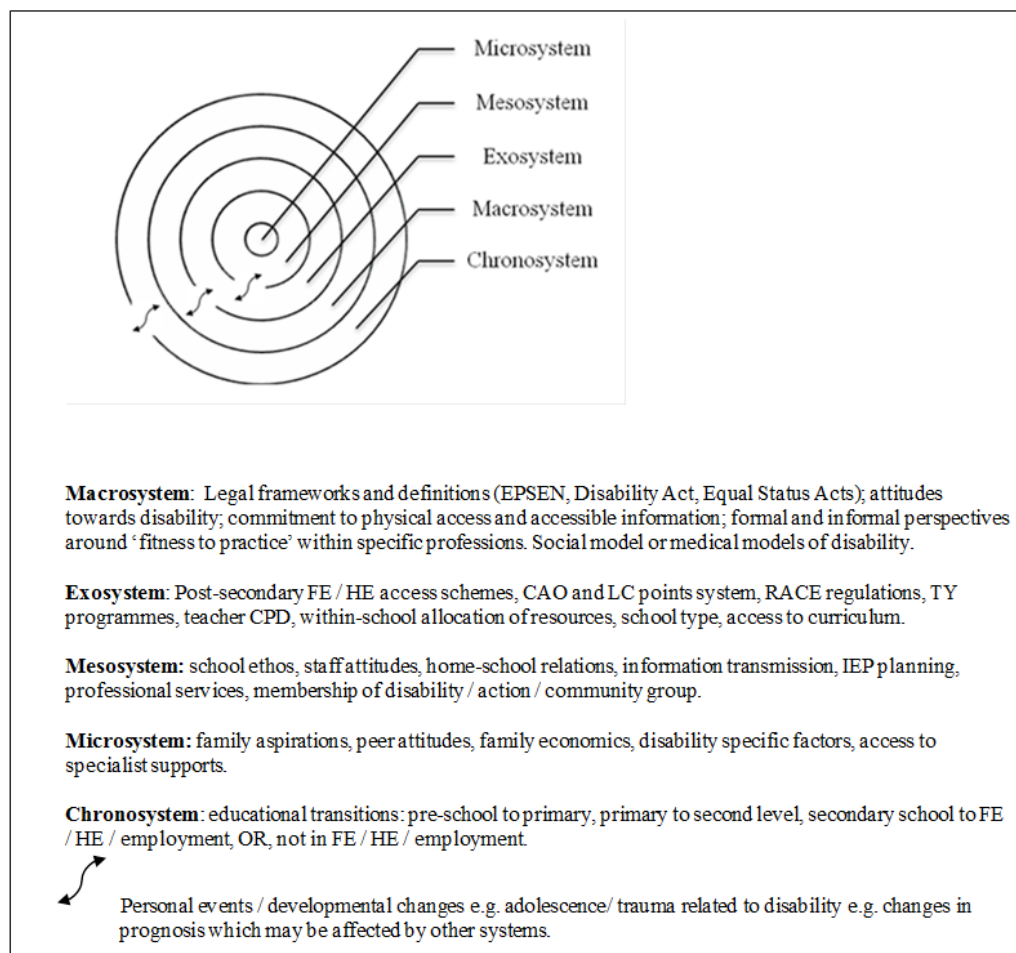


Figure 2. A re-conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) nested systems.

At the macro level, attitudes towards equal opportunities, the rights of disabled people, and to what extent they are “able” for, or entitled to, equal treatment, permeate through to the Exosystem. They determine the degree of importance and commitment attached to removing barriers, and therefore the ethos, practices and mechanics of the Exo- and Mesosystems, are coloured by the underpinning disability model in operation, which may differ within and between agencies, institutions and individuals. Consequently, the viewpoints, interaction and co-operation of the actors within the mesosystem – which may encompass a range of positive and negative attitudes simultaneously – are absorbed into the microsystem. For example, global economic crises that impose financial restrictions on governments, result in reactionary policies which directly affect elements within the Exosystem (Mc Guckin & O’Brien, 2013), such as restricting allocation of resources to students with disabilities, and setting a cap on the number of psychologists within the National Educational Psychological Service, which in turn limits access to Individual Education Plans (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). The effects of these changes in access to resources and supports filter down through the mesosystem, to students and families.

Within the microsystem, a lack of supports, expectations, transition opportunities and inclusive environments and practices for disabled students, can be described as “extremes either of disorganisation or rigidity in structure or function [which] represent danger signs for potential psychological growth” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 820). In addition, biopsychosocial resources (assets and liabilities) located within the person can negatively affect proximal processes as a limitation or disruption, and the cumulative effects of such resources impact on development of the individual (p. 812).

Finally, event markers might include successes or traumas particular to the individual (e.g., personal / educational achievements or failures), their family (e.g., marriage, divorce or bereavement), or their neighbourhood (e.g., opening / closure of community centres or support groups). Developmental changes include adolescence, a period in human development, differentially between the ages of 10 to 19 years (WHO, 2012), which marks the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood. The physical and psychological changes occurring in this period, affect perceptions of independence and self-identity, peer and family relationships, and external appearance

(Lerner, Brennan, Noh, & Wilson, 1998). These event markers may be the source of additional frustration for students with disabilities (Hughes, Russell, Patterson, 2005; Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007), and in particular where changes to prognosis and / or treatment create further barriers to managing this potentially hazardous period (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2008). Adolescence is a time of opportunity and of risk, a period of experimentation and ideation (Michaud, Blum, & Ferron, 1998). Most importantly, it is a period during which most young people are homogenised as “adolescents”, or as exhibiting “adolescent behaviour”, when in fact the uniqueness of their personality, family background, health, economic status and education will result in quite diverse experiences amongst this group, where “even two boys of the same age, growing up in very similar circumstances, may grow and develop in different ways and time lines” (2012, p. 2).

In relation to the life trajectory of disabled individuals, consideration of the “degree of stability, consistency and predictability over time” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 820) of ecological systems is required, and thus:

It is crucial that we move beyond a simplistic microsystem approach to one that critically reflects on the multiple dimensions of transition. Meaningful outcomes for students with disabilities can be achieved when transition teams are informed by careful examination of the facilitators and constraints at all contextual levels. (Salmon & Kinnealy, 2007, p. 1)

This statement encapsulates the hypotheses identified in this research programme: (a) that students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, which are determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors that reach far beyond the microsystem, and which effectively act as an enabler or barrier, and (b) dedicated transition planning for post-primary students with disabilities that considers the circumstances, experiences, competencies, opinions and needs of stakeholders, can promote, encourage and assist with the transition journey.

In summary, this research programme examines a specific instance in the Chronosystem of the individual – the transition from school to HE, and the proximal processes related to this transition. Transition is a fluid process involving a plethora of internal and external factors that are changeable across time and contexts (Erikson,

1975; Vygotsky, 1978), and which may vary in their stability and predictability. Thus, applying an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) enables an investigation of the transactions and transformations that take place within and around students with disabilities, at key transitional moments (Beach, 1999). Equally, individuals have unique personalities, physiologies, assets and liabilities, experiences and backgrounds (McAuley & Bratman, 2002), which determine the nature and direction of the transition journey (Crafter & Maunder, 2012; Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-Hessling, 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Consequently, it is vital that students and their families are provided with opportunities to voice their experiences (Lewis & Porter, 2007; Quicke, 2003; Riley & Docking, 2004).

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has compared theoretical models that would usefully inform a framework for researching education, person and disability. The first section examined the ontology of *Bildung* which represents a broader view of the relationship between education and transition. Whilst it acknowledges socio-cultural influences, the role of institutions and development of intrinsic skills such as self-awareness and self-determination, it lacks a structure within which factors that impede or promote transitional opportunities for students with disabilities, can be explored. Following on from this, ecological theories of development were compared (Elder et al., 2003; Lerner, 1986, 1991; Lerner et al., 1995; Lewin, 1951), culminating in a detailed analysis of Bronfenbrenner's (1976, 1979, 1989) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) bioecological framework, which develops and strengthens the interconnections between the individual and the environment, identified in earlier models. Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model and propositions were discussed in relation to transitions, and re-worked from the perspective of disability and education in Ireland. Finally, Children's Geographies (e.g. Jeffrey, 2010; Pyer et al., 2010; Speraw, 2009; Valentine, 2003) were introduced as a perspective ensuring a participatory approach for the research programme. Consequently, this combination of approaches was applied to the research design for this research programme, which investigates the individual trajectories of students with disabilities, and how these are impacted by proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009).

The following chapter presents a review of the literature relating to disability and transition, specifically (a) comparison of international and national policy, practices, and access schemes, (b) examination of international and national transition models, (c) personal viewpoints on the transition journey, and (d) the efficacy of using third spaces and Communities of Practice to support students with disabilities and their families.

CHAPTER THREE – LITERATURE REVIEW

This research programme examined a specific instance in the Chronosystem of post-primary students with disabilities – the transition from school to HE – and the proximal processes related to this transition. The purpose of the literature review is to inspect the topography of disability and educational transitions, and the potential of virtual or third spaces / places, both to assist with transition journeys, and as a means of gathering knowledge about the transition experiences of students with disabilities. Literature is examined that reflects the epistemology of Bioecological Systems Theory (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and Children's Geographies (e.g. Bunge, 1969; Geldens & Bourke, 2008; Skelton & Valentine, 1998), which were scrutinized in the previous chapter.

Topography is a conceptual metaphor used in this chapter to assist with determining the scope of the research problem, and is particularly relevant to the discussion of theories and models in Chapter Two. It describes the shape and features of the research context, together with localized detail which includes historical, political, cultural and personal perspectives. Topographically, mountain contours are represented by concentric circles, with the degree of space between each circle, reflecting the steepness of the terrain. This is a useful metaphor for understanding post-secondary pathways for young people with disabilities, where scaling the mountain of transition is dependent upon many factors, including the internal and external resources available to each individual, and difficulties inherent in the terrain which are often beyond their control, and which draw attention to the fragility of transition journeys for vulnerable individuals “Everybody has their own pathway and many are circuitous and unpredictable, involving individuals, chance and opportunity” (Rea, Messner, & Gipey, 2008, p. 10). These pathways are often represented as journeys that follow an indirect or “scenic” route (Mc Guckin et al., 2013, p. 47), but as any journey must be considered within the geography of its landscape, it makes sense to investigate the opportunities and challenges that may be encountered on such journeys.

Contour maps – and the use of contour lines – are not limited to cartography or meteorology, but are also used in social and human geography where isopleths are drawn to represent population density, and isochrones, isotims and isodapanes are

used in the study of economic phenomena. To provide a structure for this research programme, the specific social contours of disability and educational opportunities are mapped, by examining variables and factors across the terrain of the political and socio-cultural landscapes. They represent the transition pathways or channels made available to students with disabilities, by various agencies, institutions or individuals.

Above and surrounding the physical landscape is cyberspace, a virtual environment created, hosted and maintained by a vast network of technological structures and information superhighways, known as the Internet. The underpinning concept of cyberspace is to facilitate participation and collaboration between individuals, and within virtual communities that is open and meaningful, which functions as an information repository or exchange that may initiate or drive change. In this sense it is a third place (Oldenburg, 1989) or third space (Bhabha, 2004), that sits outside of the physical environment of home and school.

Finally, the perspective of the traveller cannot be ignored. The success of any journey depends upon realistic and attainable destinations, planning and preparedness, and the necessary skills and equipment with which to resource such expeditions. For students with disabilities, personal geographies are of particular importance, in terms of family and social contexts, the interplay of layered environments (home, school, neighbourhood, street, city, country, continent, cyberspace), and levels of agency (self-determination, self-awareness and self-advocacy). Each of these plays a significant part in the life transitions of children and young people, but “While these spaces are not simply “local”, they seldom afford children opportunities to comment on, or intervene in, the events, processes and decisions that shape their own lives” (Ansell, 2008, p. 190). Transition is one aspect of an individual’s geography that takes place within the micro and mesosystems, determined, shaped and facilitated by actors that impact on the epistemic identity of the individual (Claxton, 2013). This identity is formed from epistemic apprenticeship (activities associated with thinking, learning and knowing), and epistemic mentality (ways of approaching problem solving), resulting in “the development of a set of beliefs and attitudes about one’s own rights and capabilities as a thinker, learner and knower” (p. 3). Furthermore, the type, quality and level of exposure to this apprenticeship, is critical in providing “a more focused, practical and relevant send-off on their journeys through the rest of the 21st century” (p. 17).

This introductory section has explicated the themes selected as a focus for a review of the literatures, and in continuation the following section sets out the structure of this chapter and how the content is mapped to the theoretical framework.

Chapter Aims

The literature reviewed in this chapter explores the topography of disability and educational transitions internationally and nationally, and the parameters for the selection of pertinent literatures are presented in section 3.1. Subsequent sections situate these literatures within the theoretical framework established for this research programme in terms of enablers and barriers to transition. Beginning with an inspection of the Macrosystem in section 3.2, the political terrain of international and national policy concerned with widening participation and access to HE is juxtaposed with the mechanics of post-secondary schemes in Ireland with a focus on the DARE scheme, an access route for post-primary students with disabilities. This is followed by an interrogation of the Exosystem in section 3.3, the landscape of transition, in which international and national transition processes, procedures and models, transition assessment tools, and planning programmes, are compared and contrasted. Subsequently, section 3.4 examines the Mesosystem and Microsystem, within which personal assets and liabilities, the influences of family and school, socio-economic contexts, and aspirations and expectations, determine the efficacy of transition journeys.

Section 3.5 explores the idea of third places as neutral and geographically independent spaces within which to build Communities of Practice, and the role of the Internet in making such space available. As a timeless and boundless entity it represents the Chronosystem. This section presents the literature which informed the rationale, design and content of the research environment for the research programme, namely: (a) the use of a third place Communities of Practice to support transition aspirations and post-secondary planning for students with disabilities, (b) the use of Social Networking Sites to facilitate closer engagement between HEIs and stakeholders in the transition process, and (c) the efficacy of virtual transition planning. Additionally, it introduces the suite of transition planning resources designed specifically for this research programme, as methodological tools for

investigation of the research questions. A concluding section (3.6) summarizes the content of this chapter.

3.1 Selection of Literature

The focus of this research programme is concerned with the experiences and viewpoints of disabled students, their parents or carers and educational practitioners associated with educational transitions from post-primary to HE settings. The literature review therefore focuses on the chronological development of research into post-secondary transitions for students with disabilities in published literature, including material available on websites in the forms of blogs or opinion pieces. As there is a dearth of research studies within this topic area, particularly in the Republic of Ireland, no publishing timeframe was applied.

A comprehensive search of literature relating to transition from post-primary to HE for disabled students with all types of disabilities included: (a) international databases and electronic journal archives from health, medicine, psychology, education and social sciences, (b) web bibliographies such as <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com>. The search encompassed international, EU, national and sectoral policy, government and institutional strategic planning and guidelines, commissioned research via State agencies, and independent research studies. Reference lists of retrieved journal articles and book chapters were also investigated. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (Figure 3), from which search keywords were developed and used singly or in phrases, principally: “transition”, “disability”, “planning”, “students”, “assessment”, “models”, “education”, “post-primary”, “secondary”, “Higher Education”, “College”, “third level”.

Initially, abstracts from searches were reviewed to determine if they met inclusion criteria. Suitable articles were retrieved in full, reviewed and annotated, and then entered into EndNote, a document and web-based programme for organizing references. A descriptive review was conducted and the material organized into the principal themes of the literature review which are: (a) international and national transition policy and practice, (b) transition programmes, models and planning, (c) post-primary opportunities for disabled students, and (d) personal viewpoints of disabled students, parents / carers and educational practitioners pre- and post-transition.

Literature was selected on the basis of quality and relevance to the research study, and provides a context for the Methodology presented in Chapter Four. It is also relevant to Chapter Five in which the research findings are analysed and discussed in relation to the existing literature. Parameters were identified to eliminate texts that did not meet the specific research criteria. The first of these was that previous studies / research consulted should include qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodologies. Secondly, that the corpus of text should not be limited to published academic texts, but should include conference proceedings, media commentary, legal and policy documents, biographical and case studies, and social media and computer mediated communication. The subject matter of this corpus encompasses the psychology of education, child development, life transitions, disability models, educational policy, ethnographic and emancipatory research, and post-secondary trajectories for students with disabilities. Texts examining transition models – as interventions or modelled initiatives – from special needs education and career guidance, are also included.

Inclusion Criteria

- Evidence-based research relating to transition (no publishing timeframe); relevant legislation and governmental policy; articles or works referencing the theoretical frameworks used in this research programme Children's Geographies and Bioecological Systems.
- Evidence based references which include research studies, evaluations of transition schemes, policies, strategies and initiatives. Additionally, included are review articles, research and policy in relation to transition planning, best practice approaches to post-secondary transition, and transition assessments and models.
- Studies should include mixed methodological approaches.
- International scope focused principally on the US, Europe, UK and Ireland.
- Literature that examines transition to HE relating to young people with disabilities aged between 17 and 23 years of age, their parents or carers, and practitioners working with young people during the transition period.
- Articles need to specify "transition", "disability", "planning", "assessment", "models", "education", "post-primary", "secondary", "Higher Education", "College", "third level", "tertiary" or similar or associated phrases or terms.

Exclusion Criteria

- Literature that discusses post-primary transitions to FE/HE from a purely theoretical or conceptual perspective.
- Literature that is focused on the perspectives of service providers such as medical services, mental health services, HEIs, education authorities, post-primary schools, that relates to progression to HE and experiences students with disabilities in HE, but which is not directly focused on the period of pre-transition (final years of post-primary education) and post-transition (first year experience).

Figure 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the Literature Review.

Having specified the parameters of the literature consulted in this research programme, the following section maps the contours of disability and educational opportunities, by examining variables and factors across the terrain of the political and socio-cultural landscapes of Europe and the Republic of Ireland (ROI), representing the Macrosystem within which the transitions of disabled students take place.

3.2 The Political Terrain (Macrosystem)

This section of the literature review examines the development of access policies, initiatives and strategies that target the progression of post-primary students with disabilities to HE. Firstly, policy is discussed within the context of EU directives and country specific practices, followed by a review of policy and

practices within the ROI. These include the national post-secondary qualification framework, post-secondary options, education routes for non-traditional students, and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), a targeted access route for students with disabilities.

3.2.1 Policy and Practice in Europe

Understanding the trajectory of policy development situates current strategic planning in Ireland, in comparison to other EU states. In 2007, EU education ministers agreed strategic goals for HE, stating that “the student body entering, participating in and completing HE at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations”, and that students should be able to “complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (European Commission, 2007, p. 5). The London Communiqué (European Commission, 2007) stipulated that more flexible pathways to HE should be created, in tandem with appropriate student services (p. 16), and a later review identified formal targets for widening participation of under-represented groups in HE (European Higher Education Area, 2009).

A comparative study of educational demographics within the European Higher Education Area (EACEA, 2012) reviewed the progress of implementation of the 1999 Bologna Agreement across 47 HEIs, with access to HE for students with disabilities reported in Chapter 4 (Social Dimension in HE) and Chapter 6 (Lifelong Learning). Drawing on earlier data (EACEA, 2010, 2011), the review noted that despite changes in HE practices over time, few countries had implemented strategic plans related to under-represented groups. In particular, “while special measures to assist specific groups based on socio-economic status, gender, disability, ethnicity and so forth exist in many countries, these are rarely a central element of higher education policy” (EACEA, 2012, p. 71).

Alternative access routes target HE candidates who cannot meet traditional entry requirements. Ireland is one of 22 countries that have at least one alternative route to HE, but only the United Kingdom (UK) reported a significantly higher proportion of students entering HE through a non-traditional route (approximately 28%). Whilst many countries had identified policies for under-represented groups, Ireland was one of only five countries (Switzerland, Georgia, Ireland, Moldova, Ukraine and Scotland) that had taken steps to target such groups in which “students

with disabilities are the most common group targeted by specific measures”, and was also one of the few countries that identified quantifiable and measurable targets (EACEA, 2012, p. 81).

Pre-entry access programmes for non-traditional students are an important aspect of widening participation and commonly aim to address the skills gap for students who may not have completed education to the end of senior cycle, or may not have achieved the academic requirements to enter HE (p. 85). In the UK, Finland, Ireland and Sweden, 20% to 30% of students entered HE via non-traditional routes, and more than one in three are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or experienced a “delayed transition” (p. 85 – 87). Whilst progress has been made towards widening participation “the goal of providing equal chances for all has not yet been achieved” (p. 100). The role of HEIs in successful transitions is paramount in providing pre-entry preparation and ensuring that HE is fully inclusive (EHEA, 2009, 2012).

EU states have committed to providing equal access to HE for all groups in society since the Prague Communiqué (European Commission, 2001). The Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning Working Group (2012 – 2015) has reiterated this commitment through the Peer Learning for the Social Dimension (PL4SD) Project, the purpose of which is to “collate and catalogue measures which have the objective of reducing barriers to higher education entry,” (European Higher Education Area, 2013, p. 5), with the DARE scheme referenced in the catalogue of good practices. The Europe 2020 strategy (http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm) draws attention to continued efforts to increase participation in HE, and the “Higher Education System Performance Framework 2014 – 2016” (Department of Education and Skills, 2013) intends to evaluate Ireland’s performance against Europe 2020 recommendations and targets. Currently, Ireland is one of sixteen EU States to have third level attainment rates above the Europe 2020 target of 40% (European Commission, 2013). Whilst widening participation to under-represented groups is noted, no disability-related data is provided.

This section has examined widening participation policy within the EU. The main points identified are: (a) there is great variability in the number and quality of access opportunities for under-represented student cohorts across countries, (b) despite improvements to strategy and policy over the past seven years continued

attention to this area is required, (c) access routes are instrumental in facilitating non-traditional students, and (d) widening participation policy in Ireland compares favourably to that of other EU nations.

Governments promote the desirability for progression to HE as a route to achieving personal and national prosperity (Bradley, 2012), but the ideology of HE as a vehicle for personal growth and development is being “replaced by a market narrative” (p. 103). The marketing of HE on the basis of highly valued qualifications and financial benefits, omits the complex decisions involved in choosing to go to college or university, choices for which many young people are unprepared (Bradley, 2012). Universities in Northern Ireland are oversubscribed (Redpath, Kearney, Nicholl, Mulvenna, Martin, Wallace, & Moore, 2013) enabling them to request higher entrance grades from applicants than might otherwise be required (Osborne, Smith, & Hayes, 2006). Therefore, initiatives to promote and provide equity of access to post-secondary education must take into account the competitiveness of entry to HE at a local level (Dorrity & Maxwell, 2010; Hyland, 2011; IUA, 2011; McCoy, 2011; O’Connell, Clancy, & McCoy, 2006; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014), and the additional social, economic and cultural complexities experienced by students with disabilities (Hughes, Russell, & Patterson, 2005; Stewart, Freeman, Law, Healy, Burke-Gaffney, Forhan, Young, & Guenther, 2010).

The following section continues this interrogation with a closer examination of the development of access policy in Ireland over the period 2004 - 2013, as it relates to students with disabilities.

3.2.2 National Policy and Targets in the Republic of Ireland

The key illustrative themes presented here are: (a) the identification and achievement of HE targets for disabled students, (b) progress on developing synergies between the post-primary sector and HE, and (c) collation of data to monitor participation rates, as crucial factors at a national level for enabling successful transitions (AHEAD, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; DES, 2001; HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014; OECD, 2011).

The HEA has consistently evaluated progression on access and widening participation over the past ten years (HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010) setting targets and action plans for increasing the participation rates of non-traditional students.

Four targets to be achieved by 2013 (HEA, 2008) were identified as: (a) evidence-based strategies based on collection of real data, (b) development, implementation and evaluation of institutional access plans within the HE sector, (c) non-standard entry routes to HE accounting for 30% of all entrants, and (d) to double the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities (p. 65). In particular, the National Plan drew attention to transition specific actions such as collaborative pre-entry programmes and initiatives between post-primary schools, HEIs and community stakeholders (2008, p. 85). Statistical targets were devised by dividing the total number of new entrants of all ages by estimated national population rates for the cohort aged 17-19 years, based on CSO statistics for 2006 (Table 3).

Table 3

HEA Participation Targets for Students with Disabilities 2006 – 2013

<u>Target groups</u>	<u>2006 Base</u>	<u>2013 Target</u>	<u>2010 Outcome</u>
National Participation Rate (includes mature students)	55%	65%	72%
National Participation Rate (17-to-19-year-olds)	44%	53%	53%
Non-standard entry routes (estimate)	24%	30%	25%
Students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities (combined)	466	932	668
Of which			
Students with physical disability/mobility impairment	190	380	235
Students who are deaf/hard of hearing	126	252	173
Students who are blind/visual impairment	65	130	116
Students with multiple disabilities	85	170	144

Source: National plan for equity of access to higher education 2008 – 2013: Mid-term review (HEA, 2010).

The mid-term review of the 2008 – 2013 Plan (HEA, 2010) acknowledged that pre-entry initiatives had not progressed and that proposed targets for students

with disabilities had not been met, and that the participation of students with sensory and physical disabilities was “unacceptably low” (2010, p. 20). A structured work agenda for 2011 – 2013 highlighted the need for integrated access plans that include quantitative and qualitative targets for each HEI, and enhancement of the quality and comprehensiveness of data collection. Additionally, disability targets for 2013 should be monitored specifically those for students with sensory and physical disabilities, together with a focus on “improving coherence between different levels of the education system for students with disabilities” (2010, p. 25).

The National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008 – 2013 has concluded, and the HEA and DES are developing a new plan for 2014 – 2017 (HEA, 2014), which is informed by targets from previous plans and associated policy documents in Ireland, such as the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 – 2016 (Government of Ireland, 2007), the National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan 2013 – 2015 (National Disability Strategy Implementation Group, 2013), and the Higher Education System Performance Framework, 2014 – 2016 (DES, 2013). This latter document sets out key performance indicators to assess and measure equity of access to HE and will reflect input at an institutional level. Under-represented groups in HE within the cohort of students with disabilities are identified as those with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities. The intention is to continue focusing on these groups and increase targets for entry to HE by 1% (to 2%), and the overall number of students with disabilities from 6% to 8% (HEA, 2014, p. 22). Each HEI has responsibility for incorporating strategies for widening participation and access into institutional strategic plans, and the HEA oversees and monitors such plans via a quality assurance procedure.

A profile of HE in Ireland published in December 2013 (HEA, 2013) set out an initial performance evaluation framework in the context of implementation of the national strategy to 2030. This document reported that in the academic year 2010 – 2011, across all HEA funded institutions, an estimated 2,538 (6% of all entrants) of HE entrants are disabled, which conflicts with data for the same cohort from AHEAD (2011), who stipulate a figure of 6,932 (3.9%), representing a very significant discrepancy. Similarly, data for Dublin City University (HEA, 2013, p. 86) states that this HEI had no students with disabilities registered to the university in 2010 – 2011, despite the fact that in the same year, through the DARE scheme

alone, 35 students accepted an offer to DCU (UL, 2010). The Association for Higher Education and Disability in Ireland (AHEAD) has reported on participation rates since 2008, based on self-reported data submitted by HEIs. They provide the only nationally collated statistics for students with disabilities in HE, quoted extensively in HEA reports. Despite a commitment to developing a national repository for participation data (HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010), this has not been progressed. Greater accountability is required to provide a clearer picture of transition issues for students with disabilities.

The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) aims to transform the HE system in Ireland, over the next 20 years. Implementation of the strategy is monitored by the Department of Education and Skills via an Implementation Oversight Group. Principally, the strategy identified three key requirements: (a) more flexible systems, with a greater choice of provision and modes of learning for an increasingly diverse cohort of students; (b) improvements in the quality of the student experience, the quality of teaching and learning and the relevance of learning outcomes; and (c) more effective connection with wider social, economic and enterprise needs through staff, graduates, programmes and research, translated into high value jobs and benefits for society. There is no specific reference to students with disabilities; other than the revision of funding models to broaden access for “people from lower socio-economic backgrounds or other under-represented groups (by additional weighting)” (2011, p. 28).

This section has explored widening participation policy in Ireland, since 2004. National targets that were set in 2008 for students with disabilities have not been met, and data collection on student participation is principally statistical, relying on self-reported data by HEIs with little evidence that illustrates the student experience of the transition process. Additionally, the accuracy of these statistics is questionable as no central data repository exists for collating access and admissions data across the sector, despite a commitment to develop central data collection in the National Access Plan (HEA, 2008). Some synergy between post-primary and third level sectors exists through school-linked access programmes and more recently through the National College Awareness Week (<http://www.collegeaware.ie>)

initiated in 2014, but robust links between all post-primary schools and all HEIs, have failed to materialise.

To address potential educational inequalities for students with disabilities, a supplementary college admissions scheme for both Irish and EU students was introduced by a number of HEIs in Ireland. The efficacy of this initiative is described in the following section.

3.2.3 Post-secondary Schemes in Ireland

In Ireland, the senior cycle of education in post-primary school spans two or three years depending upon whether students elect to pursue fourth year as a Transition Year (TY). In fifth and sixth years, students study for the Leaving Certificate (LC) examinations, an extremely competitive points-based system. Entry to HE is determined by matching points achieved with course choices identified on the Central Applications Office (CAO) application form. In principle, performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations determines access to undergraduate degree programmes in Institutes of Technology, Colleges, and Universities. The points range is significant and is determined by the overall performance in each LC year, and the number of students applying for each course in that year. Required points can be as few as 225 (Business, Dublin School of Business, 2013) and as high as 740 (Medicine, Royal College of Surgeons, 2013). For this reason, alternative access routes provide additional opportunities for students with disabilities or from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not meet the points requirement due to educational disadvantage.

Most HEIs provide access courses for school leavers that are designed for students who aspire to study in HE, but who may not have achieved sufficient points to meet admissions requirements, or are unable to participate due to social and economic reasons. These courses target students who are under-represented at third level and who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in HE, and bridge the gap between the traditional LC entry and Mature student routes (age 23 years and older). Access courses usually span one academic year and expose students to “taster” or foundation courses related to their interests and future subject choices – usually within an Arts or Sciences stream. It provides an opportunity for students to make subject choices related to their abilities and to avail of supports to develop academic skills. Additionally, they help to foster an understanding of the skills and discipline

necessary to manage their time in college, and to develop confidence in using IT. Students who successfully complete an access course are eligible to apply for direct entry to full-time degree courses.

In 2009, HEIs in Ireland progressed an additional supplementary admissions route for disadvantaged students through the Higher Access Route to Education (HEAR), and an additional route for students with disabilities, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), which is reviewed in the following section.

Disability Access Route to Education (DARE). In recognition of the competitive LC system as an admission route to HE, a number of equity of access schemes have evolved including the HEAR, DARE and Mature entrant schemes, which acknowledge that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, students with disabilities, and mature learners, may experience barriers to reaching their full educational potential. Both HEAR and DARE were formally absorbed into the CAO in 2010, and in 2014 responsibility for managing the schemes was transferred to a DARE HEAR Shared Operations Service Unit (DHSOSU) with the intention of progressing this to a permanent unit within the CAO, by 2016.

DARE (<http://accesscollege.ie/dare>) is a third level admissions scheme for post-primary school students who have the ability to benefit from and succeed in HE, but who may not be able to meet the points for a third level course due to the impact of their disability. DARE identifies LC students who are eligible to compete for an offer of a college place on reduced points. The rationale for this scheme is an acknowledgement that disability can have a negative effect on how school and examination performance and will determine opportunities to access HE.

Each of the twenty HEIs currently participating in the DARE scheme allocate a proportion of college places on a reduced points basis for students with DARE eligibility. Students who wish to apply to DARE scheme must do so through the CAO, by submitting documentary evidence of a disability which identifies significant impact on educational attainment, however applicants must still meet the minimum entry and subject requirements of individual institutions. Applications are assessed by professionals who have an expertise and an in-depth knowledge of the impact of disability on educational attainment. To be eligible for an offer on reduced points, applicants must meet specific criteria which have been developed by HEI

Assessment Boards, which included HEI professionals and representatives from expert external organisations. The following sub-section provides a statistical analysis of applications, eligibility and transition to HE by disability. A key to abbreviations is provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Abbreviation Codes for Disability Categories

<u>Code</u>	<u>Disability Category</u>
AS/ASD	Asperger's Syndrome/Autistic Spectrum Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
B/VI	Blind or Visually Impaired
DCD	Dyspraxia
Df/HI	Deaf or Hearing Impaired
MHC	Mental Health Condition
NC	Neurological Condition
PD	Physical Disability
SOI	Significant On-going Illness
SLC	Speech, Language and Communication Disorders
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulty

DARE entry statistics. Statistical data from an analysis of the 2011 DARE application process (University of Limerick, 2011, 2012) indicates that 15.3% of students with disabilities, whilst indicating a disability on their CAO form, did not complete the DARE application process, so were automatically deemed ineligible. Arguably then, more focus is required on assisting applicants with completing applications, including early request / acquisition of documentation from specialists. However, perhaps of greater concern is the small numbers of applications from particular disability cohorts, together with an unacceptably high level of ineligibility amongst these cohorts (Table 5). Of the 12 Deaf / Hearing Impaired applicants who represented only 0.5% of all applications to DARE, 25% were deemed ineligible on the basis of inadequate evidence of disability, having failed to provide an audiogram.

Table 5

DARE Eligibility Rates 2011

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Ineligible</u>	<u>Ineligible %</u>	<u>Eligible</u>	<u>Eligible %</u>
AS / ASD	94	8	8.5	86	91.5
ADHD	114	11	9.6	103	90.4
B/ VI	9	9	0.0	0	100.0
D/HI	12	3	25.0	9	75.0
DCD	143	35	24.5	108	75.5
MHC	129	17	13.2	112	86.8
NC	36	2	5.6	34	94.4
PD	94	8	8.5	86	91.5
SOI	226	26	11.5	200	88.5
SLC	14	0	0.0	14	100.0
SpLD	1197	449	25.9	748	74.1
Total	2068	568	40.8	1500	59.2

Source: Unpublished raw data, University of Limerick, 2011, 2012.

Nine B/VI students were deemed eligible, this group accounted for only 0.42% of all applications to DARE, compared to a ratio of 55.5% for Specific Learning Difficulties (students with Dyslexia or Dyscalculia). Despite interventions such as the DARE scheme, and identification of the need to prioritize admission of students with sensory and physical disabilities by both the HEA and HEIs, statistics indicate that these strategies are not making a substantial difference to applications from these groups (Table 6). The DARE 2012 mid-season report (UL, 2012) provides comparative data on the eligibility of applicants to the scheme for 2011 and 2012 (Table 7), highlighting significant decreases in the eligibility of students with sensory disabilities, compared to significant increases in eligibility for students with mental health and neurological conditions.

Table 6

DARE Applications as a Percentage of all CAO Applications 2008 – 2012

Disability	<u>2008</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>%</u>
AS / ASD	36	2.2	76	3.4	68	3.7	94	4.3	129	5.3
ADHD	40	2.5	107	4.8	70	3.8	114	5.2	156	6.5
B/ VI	24	1.5	54	2.4	36	1.9	36	1.6	1	0.04
D/ HI	67	4.2	110	4.9	70	3.8	77	3.5	70	2.9
DCD	32	2.0	74	3.3	88	4.7	143	6.6	153	6.3
MHC	49	3.0	115	5.1	89	4.8	129	5.9	226	9.4
NC	0	0.0	43	1.9	39	2.1	36	1.6	36	1.5
PD	17	1.0	94	4.2	62	3.3	94	4.3	92	3.8
SOI	178	11.1	72	3.2	189	10.2	226	10.4	269	11.2
SLC	0	0	0	0	17	0.9	14	0.6	26	1.08
SpLD	1152	72	1560	69.9	1108	60.3	1197	55.4	1199	50.0
Total	1595		2229		1836		2160		2397	

Source: Unpublished raw data, Irish Universities Association, 2008; University of Limerick, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Table 7

DARE Eligibility Rates 2011 and 2012

<u>Disability</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>% Increase / Decrease</u>
AS / ASD	94	129	37.23
ADD / ADHD	114	148	29.82
B/ VI	36	42	16.67
Df / HI	77	68	-11.69
DCD	143	151	5.59
MHC	129	206	59.69
NC	36	79	119.44
PD	94	92	-2.13
SOI	226	247	9.29
SpLD	1184	1221	3.13
Total	2133	2387	11.91

Source: Unpublished raw data, University of Limerick, 2011, 2012

Furthermore, although DARE offers and acceptances increased from 2009 to 2012, they did not do so in proportion to the rise in overall applications to the scheme within the same period (Table 8).

Table 8

DARE Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2009 – 2012

<u>DARE</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>
Total initial applications	3346	2324	2551	2942
Total completed applications	1636	1836	2160	2397
Total eligible applications	701	953	1279	1515
Offers to eligible applicants	254	303	473	431
Acceptances by eligible applicants	239	251	419	390

Source: Unpublished raw data, University of Limerick, 2011, 2012

Knowledge and understanding of the scheme. Disability personnel within DARE participating HEIs are responsible for creating, maintaining and disseminating information materials to the public, to promote the DARE scheme and to clarify understanding of its operations and the application process. These materials include guides in multimedia formats downloadable from the DARE website and available to view on YouTube, an application guide which is also available from the CAO website and which is mailed to Guidance Counsellors in every school each September, and Powerpoint presentations for schools. DARE also provides information stands at Higher Options in September of each year, and Better Options in November of each year, and nationwide DARE clinics between September and January of each application year. The specific criteria for eligibility under DARE for each disability are provided at

<http://www.accesscollege.ie/dare/applications-processed.php>.

Despite these strategies, the CAO and HEIs receive significant numbers of telephone and email queries from practitioners and parents each year, about even the most basic aspects of application to DARE. A high degree of uncertainty or lack of knowledge might be anticipated on the part of students and parents/carers each year, as potential newcomers to the scheme. Confusion arises in part due to misleading advice that is circulated in public forums ranging from eligibility criteria to application dates, but more significantly due to errors on the part of school staff.

“Didn’t read the form properly. Teacher gave the wrong date [affecting several other students]” (Maxpower18, 2010). These are basic aspects of the application procedure which are available in print and on the Internet.

Finally, whilst DARE does make very specific information available in relation to eligibility criteria, there is significantly less clarity available in relation to: (a) the mechanics of the points reduction in each institution, (b) the number of places allocated by each HEI under the scheme, and how these are allocated at the offers stage, (c) next steps for students who have been deemed eligible, and (d) published statistics on eligibility, offers and admissions. These points are highlighted in the first formal review of the efficacy and sustainability of the DARE scheme conducted in 2012 – 2013, and is discussed in the following sub-section.

Effectiveness and sustainability of the scheme. In 2012 the HEAR / DARE Strategic Development Group commissioned an examination of the effectiveness and sustainability of both schemes, and a final draft was received in October 2013 (Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, & Casey, 2013). The report discusses the demographics of applications and eligibility for DARE, institutional admissions policies amongst participating HEIs, progression to HE, and effectiveness of the schemes.

Relative to other CAO applicants, the DARE scheme is capturing a less diverse student than the typical CAO applicant, for example, students attending private (fee-paying) post-primary schools and “grinds schools”, are five times more likely to apply to DARE, and this skew towards school type is more evident among DARE eligible applicants, than all other CAO applicants. Similarly, applications originate from a significantly higher proportion of non-DEIS schools than DEIS second level schools, and numbers are significantly lower amongst vocational schools. In addition, applicants with physical or sensory disabilities are significantly less likely to be attending fee-paying schools, and more likely to be attending vocational schools, relative to other DARE applicants. The DARE scheme is of limited effectiveness with regard to students with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities, as progression to HE for these cohorts is related to academic attainment at post-primary level. Furthermore, whilst 88% of applicants who received and accepted a DARE offer made the transition to HE in 2010, this only represented 1.9% of all CAO acceptances, this figure rising to only 3.3% by 2012.

In relation to areas of study, DARE eligible applicants are under-represented in a number of fields of study including Education, Law, Dentistry and Medicine, this last approaching levels of significance. Of note, DARE eligible applicants have significantly higher application rates for courses which offer an alternative or supplementary application process, for example, portfolio submission, interviews, and auditions. Byrne et al. (2013) also raise the issue of transparency between HEIs in regard to offers and admissions practices, and the disparity in weighting that occurs at the offers / admissions stage (p. 142), where institutional selectivity of DARE eligible applicants in institutions ranges considerably from 8.3% to 29.7%. Byrne et al. (2013) make the point that, whilst many HEIs are achieving and exceeding a target of 5% student intake for HEAR similar targets have not been achieved via the DARE scheme.

There is significant confusion arising from a lack of alignment in allocation of places and reduction of points, matriculation and subject specific requirements amongst participating HEIs. In effect, DARE operates an additional “mini-CAO system” (p. 150), According to the DARE website, the LC points reduction is dependent on the number of places on the course, the number of reserved DARE places on the course, and the number of DARE eligible applicants competing for those places. However, there is no transparency in relation to the percentage of places allocated or points reduced by HEIs, creating significant levels of doubt, mistrust and confusion amongst students, parents and professionals.

Most students DARE students described positive experiences of transition to third level, principally attributable to the provision of orientation or induction programmes by Disability or Access Offices. For others, however, the gap between academic skills, levels and expectations, together with learning to navigate an unfamiliar environment, was very unsatisfactory, with significant dissatisfaction with the way in which they were prepared for third level in their post-primary schools (p. 175). All students identified supports provided via Disability or Access offices to be “vital to their initial experience of higher education” (p. 176), even where students had no or little current contact with services. Identity and relationships were a key theme across the interviews. For some students with a disability disclosure in HE was complex: students with high needs as a function of

reduced mobility or physical access have little choice; for others it was an identity best protected.

Byrne et al. (2013) conclude that the application process may be biased in favour of those with greater financial resources at their disposal, to access evidence of disability, namely medical or psychological reports. Therefore, DARE has – unintentionally, but certainly over time – adopted a “medical model” approach. The scheme is not capturing greater numbers of students with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities over time. The report also draws attention to the “double allowance” of compensation for educational disadvantage, in terms of: (a) reasonable accommodations provided during senior cycle and in the LC examinations (RACE), and (b) the points reduction through DARE, thereby confusing the criteria for educational disadvantage. Recommendations included: (a) increased outreach activities by third level institutions to address barriers to HE for students with disabilities; (b) the need for the HEAR and DARE schemes to investigate the use of multiple pathways for young adults with disabilities; (c) greater alignment is required across HEIs with regard to minimum entry points, quota setting and matriculation requirements; and (d) the intersection between disability and social and economic disadvantage needs to be addressed through modification of the underpinning principles of the scheme (Byrne et al., 2013, p. 193). Individual HEIs were advised to consider changes to admissions policies and access strategies that would, for example: (a) prioritise applications from DARE eligible students with sensory and physical disabilities over all other DARE applicants, (b) specify increased targets for particular disability groups, and (c) pay particular attention to students with the dual disadvantage of disability and poor socio-economic background.

In summary, entry to HE in Ireland is determined by achievement of points in the LC. The points range for courses is significant and increases year on year as the number of applicants taking LC examinations increases, whilst the number of places on courses has remained static. Consequently, the LC is an extremely competitive examination system which focuses on prescribed curricula and rote learning to maximize potential points achievement. These concerns have been expressed by HEIs and at State level and whilst minor revisions to the LC are underway, they are

unlikely to have a significant effect on the competitive nature of matriculation examinations.

DARE students describe transition to HE as a positive experience principally as a result of pre-entry and orientation programmes provided in HE. However, there is a significant gap between existing and expected levels of academic skills, understanding of course content, and learning to navigate an unfamiliar environment, principally attributed to lack of preparation for HE in post-primary schools.

Access courses provided by HEIs to linked post-primary schools or FE colleges, represent an additional pathway for students who aspire to HE but may not meet admissions requirements, with a focus on mature students and those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background. There are opportunities here for students with disabilities, as students who successfully complete an access course are eligible to apply for direct entry to full-time degree courses. However, as places are limited this is also, fundamentally, a competitive scheme.

There is a lack of transparency around the mechanics of the DARE scheme in terms of allocation of places and reduction of points, creating significant levels of doubt, mistrust and confusion amongst students, parents and professionals. DARE eligibility does not guarantee a reduced points offer in HE, such applicants are eligible to compete for a place amongst a pool of other DARE eligible candidates, resulting in an additional competitive layer for disabled students. This is compounded by procedure for granting Irish exemptions, language waivers, and matriculation and subject specific requirements unique to individual HEIs.

Currently, the DARE scheme may be inadvertently favouring those with greater financial resources at their disposal with which to access evidence of disability; the scheme is very “medicalised”, with less emphasis placed on impact of disability on education. Students with a disability from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply to or complete an application to the scheme, than students from advantaged backgrounds, and the scheme is not capturing greater numbers of students with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities over time. Furthermore, statistics indicate that whilst offers and acceptances are increasing, they are not doing so in proportion to the rise in applications, suggesting that there is an imbalance in offers between participating HEIs. Recommendations to participating HEIs highlight the necessity for outreach activities, a wider variety of pathways to

HE, improved transparency in relation to DARE, and a greater focus on the intersection between disability and social and economic disadvantage.

The following section summarizes this interrogation of the Macrosystem, drawing together factors identified in the literature that represent promoters and inhibitors of transition to HE for students with disabilities.

3.2.4 Conclusion

This section of the Literature Review has explored the political terrain associated with transition to HE for students with disabilities. Beginning with an overview of European policy and practice, it determined that: (a) there is great variability in the number and quality of access opportunities for under-represented student cohorts across EU nations, (b) despite improvements in strategy and policy continued monitoring of development is required, (c) non-traditional access routes are instrumental in increasing the number of students with disabilities, and (d) strategies in Ireland generally compare favourably with those of other EU countries.

This was followed by a closer inspection of policy in Ireland over the period 2008 – 2013 which determined that: (a) progress towards national targets for students with disabilities set in 2008 have not been met, despite HE and HEI strategic planning, and (b) entry requirements and admissions criteria continue to be competitive and therefore constitute a potential barrier to transition. Furthermore: (a) the accuracy of data in relation to participation rates is questionable as it is dependent upon information provided by individual HEIs in the absence of a central data repository, and (b) such data is principally statistical, with little evidence that illustrates the student experience of the transition process.

A further section reviewed post-secondary access routes that provide opportunities for progression to HE for non-traditional students, but which are equally competitive given the small number of places available. A review of the DARE college admissions scheme for students with disabilities highlights: (a) disparity in the number of applications and eligible applications from students with sensory and physical disabilities, (b) inequity of access to documentation required for eligibility, (c) an over-representation of applicants from private or fee-paying schools, and (d) misunderstandings and misconceptions around the structure of the scheme, despite the availability of comprehensive resources.

This section concludes a review of the political terrain surrounding transition for disabled students, and its relationship to choice, opportunity and aspirations for progression to HE. It emphasizes the connection between the language, definitions and models of disability discussed in Chapter One (section 1.2), and contextualizes educational transitions in Ireland. The political terrain is inhabited by actors and agencies whose influence has significant effects on the Exosystem, Mesosystem and Microsystem, and policies, strategies and schemes that aim to enable transition to HE, may inadvertently represent a barrier.

Consequently, a logical progression in this review is to examine the underpinning models of transition that operate within post-primary education, to investigate if, and how, these may be contributing to transition outcomes. Such models – and their concomitant planning tools or resources – are discussed in the following section, from a broad to narrow focus, beginning with a comparison of international models from the USA and Europe, followed by an overview of provision in Ireland; this exploration represents the Exosystem within which the transitions of disabled students take place.

3.3 The Landscape of Transition (Exosystem)

The transitional landscape is represented by the transition pathways made available to students with disabilities, by various agencies, institutions or individuals, via policies, strategies and programmes. Principally, this landscape transverses each of the nested systems from a top down perspective, beginning with legal structures that drive policy which inform practices at post-primary and post-secondary levels. This section of the thesis examines international, European and national policy in relation to widening participation in HE for people with disabilities. Within each of these sub-sections the focus is narrowed to observe transition models, planning, and practices operating at local government level, and within community schemes and schools. The scope of these literatures is limited to the USA, UK and Ireland to meet the word limit of this chapter, and will: (a) enable a comparison between working models as evidence for effective practice, (b) provide an opportunity for benchmarking current practice in Ireland, and (c) identify potential frameworks that could be adapted and adopted into an Irish context.

3.3.1 International Transition Models

The United Nations (United Nations, 1989, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007, 2009) makes clear stipulations in relation to the rights of the child, and in relation to transitions this can be interpreted as specifically the requirement for: (a) integrated planning between service providers (United Nations, 2006, para. 7), (b) recognition of diverse needs and circumstances without discrimination (United Nations, 2005, Article 2), (c) person-centred planning that meets the specific needs of the child (United Nations, 2005, Article 3), (d) access to information and support for making informed decisions about their future, which includes representatives who will act in the child's best interests (United Nations, 2005, Articles 12 and 13), and (e) the right to express views freely on all matters that affect them (United Nations, 2005, Article 14).

In 2006, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulations were published by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the USA. Regulation 2 is concerned with IEPs and transition services that must be implemented at or before age 16 years, and which should be reviewed on an annual basis. The IEP should include: (a) appropriate measurable post-secondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and, where appropriate, independent living skills (IDEA, 2004, 20 USC §300.320 (b)); and (b) the transition services (including courses of study) required to assist the student in reaching those goals (IDEA, 2006, p. 2).

Sitlington & Clark (2007) conducted a comprehensive review of IDEA, transition planning processes and services, and their connection to IEPs. As a result, Clark (2007) proposed a life skills assessment as part of a "transition service" which is "a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and *functional* achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities" (IDEA, 2004, 20 USC. §1401). The assessment focuses on three specific areas: (a) life skills – daily, independent, community participation, (b) personal and social skills, and (c) vocational and occupational skills.

To effect the requirements of IDEA, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC, 2010) provides assessment tools and

implementation resources to State bodies. Suggested transition assessments include interest inventories, personality or preference tests, self-determination assessments, and transition planning inventories. Similarly, the HEATH Resource Center provides a “toolkit” for guidance counsellors working with students in the transition process, which aims to encourage discussion and development of transition skills and “relates the role of the counsellor in the transition process to that of the student, the parents and other stakeholders” (OECD, 2011, p. 86). There is scope within this approach, for schools and other agencies, to develop similar transition models using models such as the “Taxonomy for Transition Programming” (Kohler, 1996).

Dedicated State-wide transition planning services such as the Transition Services Liaison Project “assists students with disabilities, their families, schools and adult service agencies to make the transition from high school to post-school be a meaningful experience” (<http://www.tslp.org/index.htm>). These are person-centred, functional services based on needs, strengths, preferences and interests which facilitate the transition from school to HE, and reflect earlier research into the wants and needs of parents and schools (Clark, Mack, & Pennington, 1988; Clark, 1996) and proposed transition planning models based on collaboration between community agencies, schools, and individuals (Aspel, Bettis, Quinn, Test, & Wood, 1999). Importantly, such models are skills-based and age appropriate, and are also founded on the principle of providing an individualised, needs-based solution, involving multi-agency input.

The Transition Coalition (<http://transitioncoalition.org/transition>) provides professional face to face and online development focusing on secondary school reform and transition at national, State, and local levels. They provide many best practice examples, such as transition policy in California which begins in 9th grade (3rd year in the Republic of Ireland) and which requires all students to undertake the Explorations module which focuses on post-secondary options. Students with disabilities extend this module in the final years of high school by completing the Transition Planning Inventory. The Transition Coalition also provides comprehensive online training, which includes modules on the legal requirements, best practices in planning transition from school to adult life, approaches to continuous transition assessment, transition supports for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, and the framework and practice of self-determination.

Project 10 Transition Education Network is a Florida-based initiative, whose focus is to improve secondary transition services and outcomes, for students with disabilities. In addition to supporting interagency collaboration and providing advice on legislative obligations, education and training is provided to transition stakeholders in the areas of assessment, person-centred planning, self-determination, independent living and third level education and training. Their function is also to identify web sites, tools and practices that enhance transition and to disseminate this information to stakeholders. Project 10 provides a framework for the transition assessment process in the form of the Transition Wheel which describes assessment and reporting procedures.

Clearly, transition planning in the US is highly structured and whilst it is delivered State-wide through a range of projects, programmes and services with varying nomenclatures, the specificity of the legislation ensures that provision is content driven. The following section examines research-based evidence that underpins the rationale and principle of transition planning, and which provides the framework for fulfilment of legal requirements identified in IDEA (2004, 2006).

Assessment for transition planning. Findings from a longitudinal study investigating the transition experiences of young people with disabilities in the USA (Wagner, 1989) indicated a strong correlation between achievement in school and successful transition, irrespective of the nature or severity of disability, or parental involvement. Factors linked to low achievement and negative school attitudes were related to age (younger pupils), gender (male), emotional and behavioural difficulties, poor social integration and absenteeism. “Without a comprehensive assessment of a student’s skills, it is difficult to identify the needs that should be addressed in the student’s transition plan,” (Levinson & Palmer, 2005, p. 12).

The US National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) (<http://www.nlts2.org>) collected data between 2001 and 2011 from nationally representative samples across 500 LEAs and 40 special schools, examining the experiences and achievements of almost 12,000 young people aged between 13 and 16 years, across twelve disability categories. Findings in relation to transition planning and post-secondary outcomes (Newman, 2013) provide a detailed picture of the enablers and barriers for students with disabilities. Principally that: (a) students who had received targeted transition planning (approximately two thirds of the

sample), and those whose parents were actively involved in their education, were more likely to engage in transition planning meetings; (b) transition planning meetings included a wide range of school staff, but rarely included external agencies; schools made links with external organisations and service providers for only 60% of the sample; and (c) almost 75% of transition plans identified a course of study that would enable them to meet a transition goal. Irrespective of ability, disability or background, post-primary students whose transition plan included progression to FE/HE, were more likely to achieve this goal, and to receive supports in college.

Michaels (2006) illustrates the potential of an occupational therapy approach to person-centred transition planning, focusing on performance skills, performance patterns, client factors, activity demands, and contexts. Michaels argues for a school-based occupational therapy approach that concentrates on increasing independence and autonomy, encouraging functional and age-appropriate activities, and increasing opportunities for personal development within the community. Conaboy, Nochajski, Schefkins, and Schoonover (2008) draw attention to the importance of transition plans as part of the IEP, and the role of occupational therapy in such assessment and planning. Sitlington, Neubert, Begun, Lombard, and Leconte (2007) identify transition planning as a longitudinal strategy, where early implementation is vital:

This process should begin in middle school and continue until the student graduates or exits high school. Information from this process should be used to drive the IEP and transition planning process and to develop the SOP [Summary of Performance] document detailing the student's academic and functional performance and postsecondary goals. (p. 2)

The authors suggest three strands of assessment (Figure 4) that are particularly focused on the individual rather than the process of transition: screening, exploration and comprehensive assessment.

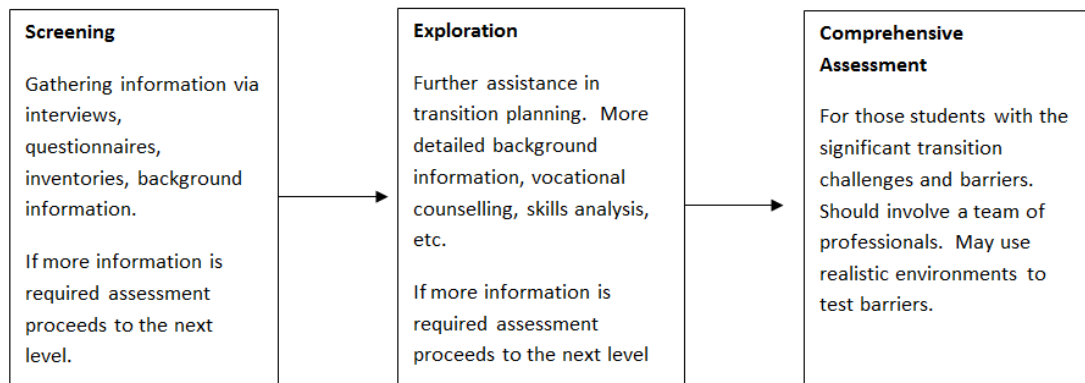


Figure 4. Three stages of transition assessment. Adapted from Sitlington et al., 2007.

A review of transition planning studies conducted between 1995 and 2006 (Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008) concluded that transition planning should focus on the acquisition of self-determination, social skills, academic preparation, reasonable accommodations, and assistive technology (AT), which are critical to meeting the complex demands of HE (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Fier and Brzezinski (2010) advocate for early and long-term planning that utilises both targeted interventions and concrete planning resources, provided by Guidance Counsellors, suggesting that this strategy would ensure the dissemination of appropriate information and the building of essential skills prior to transition. “Good transition planning will allow the student and their college service providers to take a developmental, future-focused approach to college rather than a crisis management, illness-focused approach” (p. 28).

There is a wide range of transition assessment inventories (Walker, Kortering, & Fowler, 2007, p. 1) and universally, advocates of transition assessments consider measurement of life, social and self-determination skills to be of paramount importance (Miller, Lombard, & Corbey, 2007). Whilst such measurement might require formal data collection using an assessment battery, interviewing and observing students in a range of situations is of equal importance. Timmons, Podmostko, Bremer, Lavin, and Wills (2005) stress the importance of including individual records and reviews of all achievements and activities within the transition process, as being instrumental to a sense of self-empowerment and determination. Transition plans should be constructed collaboratively with a transition “partner”, be that a parent, teacher or guidance counsellor, and written in

clear and uncomplicated language capturing past and present achievements with a focus on future goals and aspirations. Miller et al. (2007) suggest that a portfolio should include a consideration of future needs and goals, self-advocacy skills, academic SWOT analysis, independent living skills, and interests and aptitudes (p. 5).

A combination of formal and informal assessment batteries is used by services, schools and teachers in all US states. There is a plethora of resources available, including self-assessment tools for transition stakeholders which assist educational institutions with designing a transition process (Morningstar, 2011). The “Transition Behavior Scales” (McCarney & Anderson, 2000) measure students’ abilities in three aspects: work related, interpersonal relations, and social/community expectations. The “Quick Book of Transition Assessments” (Cline, Halverson, Petersen, & Rohrbach, 2005) is a complete assessment tool for resourcing, planning, implementing and recording the transition process. It includes formatted student / family interview sheets, a transition “road map”, personal, social, situational and functional assessment tools, questionnaire templates for leisure interests, learning styles, self-advocacy and study habits, and planning checklists. Toolkits for specific SEN and disabilities include the “TEACCH Transition Assessment Profile (TTAP)” a revised version of the “Adolescent and Adult Psychoeducational Profile (AAPEP)” developed for children and adolescents with Autistic Spectrum Conditions, particularly those with transitional needs. The TTAP is structured to comply with IDEA (2004, 2006) requirements and covers six functional skill areas for use by teachers, guidance counsellors and parents / carers.

In conclusion, the transition planning tools described in this section were developed in the USA, and whilst these are standardized and normed on US populations, they are easily adaptable to a European context and therefore have significant value as templates for good practice. Transition planning in the US is at an advanced stage of progress, and its specification in national legislation and state-wide provision, is encouraging. The process and practice of transition planning outlined in these models emphasises an individualized approach that spans a transition period beginning in the senior cycle of education, and culminating in entrance to HE or other post-secondary options. Assessment and planning is driven by a personal, environmental, occupational and performance perspective, which

enables students with disabilities to achieve their goals, and acknowledges and addresses promoters and inhibitors to transition. With this in mind, the following section investigates transition planning models and assessment tools within a European context, specifically localized practices within England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

3.3.2 European Transition Models

The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE, <http://www.european-agency.org>) is an independent organization established by EU member countries, which functions as a collaborative resource for special needs education. The report “Individual Transition Plans: Supporting the Move from School to Employment” (Soriano, 2006) identified characteristics associated with transition from primary to post-primary settings, that can equally be applied to the transition to HE, namely: (a) it is a process that must be supported by legislation and policy, (b) it should ensure participation and choice of the student working in partnership with parents and professionals, and (c) it should include development of an IEP as part of the transition (p. 12). This report also identified an Individual Transition Plan as a distinct entity from the IEP, and which should be prepared two to three years before the end of compulsory education, within a team that includes the student, parents and school staff, and particularly that it “needs to include tools and methods to ensure an individual process of transition and to facilitate the young person’s empowerment” (p. 22).

The OECD (2011) report into inclusion of disabled students in HE is a follow-up study to a previous review of disability in HE (OECD, 2003), which identified a lack of data on opportunities and inclusionary practices which in themselves constitute a barrier for students with disabilities (2011, p. 3). The 2011 review examined examples of transition policy and practices in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Ireland, Norway and the United States. Specifically, it identified the role of the school in assisting young people to identify wants and needs associated with transition out of formal education, and the role of HEIs in supporting young people with the admissions process. In particular, they drew attention to the development of “synergies” between “actors” within the different levels of education. This analogy enables a greater understanding of the existence of different

roles, and how these might impact upon stakeholders engaged in the transition process.

The OECD review (2011) discussed three strategies (and associated case studies) as examples of good practice: (a) formal transition planning, (b) the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and (c) an emphasis on guiding students along the transition route, as opposed to simply providing basic information. Transition planning may take the form of educational programmes, publications or handbooks provided via state services, the school, the HEI or any combination of these. In Denmark and France this is provided across the senior cycle of education, whilst the Czech Republic, Norway and Ireland have instigated more formal links with HEIs with varying degrees of success, but which are institutional rather than national initiatives. The review highlighted the fact that despite such initiatives, students continue to be un- or under-prepared for third level education, and in particular Irish students reported lack of a formal IEP as being a barrier to transition support.

“Education Today 2013” (OECD, 2012) compared arrangements and policies connected to transition beyond compulsory schooling within the Americas, Asia, Australia, Canada and Europe, pointing out that previous policy reports “have stressed the need to improve the existence, diversity, relevance and transparency of different pathways, while protecting those left most vulnerable” (p. 44). Key findings emphasised the fact that:

In rapidly-changing economies, career guidance has become more critical but it suffers serious weaknesses in many OECD countries: young people face a sequence of complex choices over a lifetime of learning and work; helping them to make these decisions is the task of career guidance ... guidance services can be fragmented, under resourced and reactive, so that those who most need guidance risk failing to obtain it; the evidence base on “what works” in career guidance is generally weak (p. 49).

Furthermore, attention was drawn to the significant gap in funding of SEN supports in upper secondary education (1.6%) compared to supports in the early years of second level (3%), which occurs in most OECD countries, with the exception of

England (p. 51). This under-resourcing comes at a critical point for young people in their educational career and in particular for students with disabilities.

Under the Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) (Consolidation) Regulations 2001 (Government of the United Kingdom, 2001) young people who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs must be provided with the opportunity to develop a transition plan, after completing ten years in compulsory education. It is the responsibility of the Head Teacher to call a Transition Plan Meeting between relevant professionals, parents and the student, to identify appropriate pathways, including subject choice in school and the aspirations of the student, and to determine the supports required to enable successful transition.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (Government of the United Kingdom, 2004) and the Supporting Children's Learning: Code of Practice (The Scottish Government, 2009) represent respectively the legal framework and interpretation of that framework for transition planning in Scotland. Local education authorities are responsible for planning the transition from school, which should be initiated at least 12 months before the student is expected to complete post-primary education. Both student and parents should attend the planning meeting which might also include an NHS representative, a careers advisor from Skills Development Scotland and a member of staff from an HEI. The content of the Transition Plan must be disseminated to relevant post-secondary personnel at least six months prior to transfer to the post-secondary setting.

In Wales, planning for post-secondary transition is provided through the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services and the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice for Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, 2006). The Head Teacher is responsible for co-ordination and delivery of the transition plan, which similarly involves a range of stakeholders including Careers Wales, where the transition plan specifically focuses on transition to FE/HE or employment. A number of regional transition projects led by local councils or agencies have sought to provide individual planning tailored to strengths and challenges (Conlon, 2014), however the programme life for such projects is generally limited to three years (e.g. Regional SEN Transition to Employment

Initiative 2010 – 2013; Your Life, Your Choices, 2009-2012; Transition Key Working, 2007-2010).

The ethos for transition planning in Northern Ireland is tied to UK legislation and is framed by the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDI) and the “Code of Practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs” (Department of Education, 1998, 2005). Transition planning practices are described in terms of guidelines and best practices, recommending that transition planning “should” take place at the age of 14 years in a format that ensures input from a range of support stakeholders, and should include the viewpoints of students and parents. An annual review or transition plan should be monitored by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) or Transitions Officer or Education Transition Co-ordinator. However, existing statutory provision for transition is dependent upon the existence of a statement of SEN together with a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP), of which there will be fewer under future legislation (Department of Education, January 2012, May 2012). Students with disabilities who do not have a CSP will instead be provided with a Personal Learning Plan (PLP), although “there is little concrete detail on these at present, and proposals have yet to be finalized” (Lundy, Byrne, & McKeown, 2012, p. 27).

Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities created in 2007, identified five action priorities for UK government, the first being a commitment to transition support (Skill, April 2010) and in particular the need for sustained training of school and tertiary staff pointing out that:

Between the ages of 14 to 25 young people usually have to make important decisions about their education. Disabled young people require access to impartial Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in order to make informed choices about their future opportunities in post-16 education and training (p. 7).

In March 2011 the UK government published a Green Paper (Department for Education, 2011), setting out key areas in need of reform and a timeline for piloting

new policies and practices within selected local authorities – referred to as “pathfinders” – for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). In April 2011 Skill was closed due to insufficient funding. Whilst some resources were still used, such as the “SEN Toolkit” (Department for Education and Skills, 2001) together with common practices for provision of SEN support across the country, these varied between local authorities. All schools were required to provide an SEN Coordinator post or equivalent, and the SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills, 2001) provided guidance on the structure of SEN provision. Section 10 of the toolkit refers specifically to transition planning, the purpose of which is to:

Ensure a smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood and working life so that every young person has the best possible start in life. Its aim is to provide all teenagers with the help and support they need to participate effectively in learning and achieve their potential (p. 5).

The Children and Families Act 2014 will introduce key reforms for children and young people with special needs and disabilities (c.6, p. ii), referred to in policy documents as SEND. These include provision of an Education and Health Care Plan (EHC) which aims to: (a) co-ordinate care and support across agencies and stakeholders, called joint commissioning arrangements, (b) extend such support up to the age of 25 years, and (c) include a “personal budget” to secure particular provision specified in the EHC plan, with a view to the child’s parent or the young person being involved in securing the provision.

However, educational psychologists have drawn attention to the potential challenges of this new model, specifically: (a) continuously requiring students and families to reiterate their personal narratives, (b) inadequate training for school staff engaged in preparing young people for adulthood, (c) insufficient recognition of the increased need for psychological supports, and (d) the danger of increasing parental expectations and aspirations in relation to the personal budget, in a climate of decreasing funding (James, 2014).

In summary, similar transition policies and legal frameworks underpin practice in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Whilst they

acknowledge the presence of barriers to post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities, provision of transition planning is limited to structures and procedures, with suggested “principles” and “guidelines”. Despite these efforts, independent reviews of policy and practice development over the past ten years (OECD, 2003, 2011, 2012) indicate continuing issues with access to IEPs, effective and meaningful transition planning, and high quality career guidance. The following section examines research-based evidence that informs assessment as part of the transition plan, and identifies current resources for implementing assessment procedures for students with disabilities in the UK.

Assessment for transition planning. The senior cycle of education is rife with stress moments – examinations, decisions around future pathways to education or employment, economic circumstances which may determine future choices (Browning, Osborne, & Reed, 2009; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; OECD, 2012) in tandem with the physiological, psychological and emotional changes that take place as part of adolescence (Lerner, Brennan, Noh, & Wilson, 1998; Michaud, Blum, & Ferron, 1998). At this moment, young people require careful, considered and concrete direction to make such choices.

Reviewing relevant literature on the transition experiences of disabled students, parents and practitioners, Beresford (2004) concluded that investigation of the long-term outcomes of transition models was required. Aston, Dewson, Loukas, and Dyson (2005) investigated the transition experiences of 1,000 young people with special educational needs aged 19 – 20 years, as part of a longitudinal study. Four sets of factors affected transition to HE: (a) the attributes of the young person, (b) the involvement and motivation of their family, (c) effectiveness and type of local support on offer, and (d) range of local opportunities (2005, p. xiii). Other findings indicated that the level of support obtained was linked to the knowledge base, assertiveness and intervention of parents; and that students who were perceived to be more independent, were frequently failed by the system in terms of the level and quality of support they received, and that:

There is no clear or systematic evidence of any individual, organisation or agency having overall responsibility for assisting young people to identify and source appropriate options, nor to coordinate service delivery. There are

many opportunities for young people to fall down the cracks between services and there is a very real risk that some young people will wander beyond the reach of support (p. xiv).

In part, this is a function of two competing models of support (Aston et al., 2005, p. 102): the developmental model which is essentially student-focused and provides individual support through the transition process, and the reactionary model which anticipates that the student can navigate their transition independently with sporadic periods of support /guidance as and when required. There are attractors and detractors for both models: the first, whilst scaffolding the transition of the individual and theoretically building for success, may encourage over-dependence on support systems and a reluctance to take independent steps. In addition, implementing a number of interventions and strategies simultaneously may cause confusion and place an added burden on students who have fundamental difficulties with organization and time management. Conversely, the reactionary model might instil more confidence and encourage the development of independent skills more quickly, but is entirely dependent upon students knowing when to ask for help and what kind of support they might require.

Whilst pupils may be in possession of a statement of SEN, once they have transitioned out of secondary education the usefulness of such a statement becomes defunct, and there is effectively no bridge to continuing supports at a post-secondary level (Mittler, 2007), and the disappearance of services and supports for school leavers at the point of transition means that, effectively, the IEP is no longer a viable document (Mittler, 2008). A “passport” system would address this gap and “should be based on person-centred planning – a process which should begin in school and continue seamlessly into post-school transitions” (Mittler, 2007, p. 17). Central to this planning framework is the inclusion of student participation providing an opportunity for young people to voice their needs and aspirations, reflecting approaches to transition assessment adopted in the USA.

A study on post-transition experiences in HE on behalf of AimHigher (Elliott & Wilson, 2008) identified differing degrees of availability in support services across HEIs, and a number of barriers to smooth and successful transition that included: (a) the necessity for students to organise supports on their own behalf

within the institution; (b) a reluctance to disclose and be identified as “disabled” in order to avail of supports; (c) lack of preparation for and experience of a different teaching and learning experience; and (d) insufficient access to library and study resources. Transition barriers specific to students with Asperger’s Syndrome included a lack of skills for independent living and social inclusion, but overall, the “determination to persevere and complete their courses despite any difficulties encountered by the students was particularly apparent” (Elliot & Wilson, 2008, p. 8).

Research commissioned by the Equality Challenge Unit UK (May & Felsing, June 2010) identified a number of strategies to promote meaningful engagement with disabled students. With respect to pre-entry preparation and planning, they argue that decision making at this crucial stage will impact on the college experience, with the result that students: (a) have a smoother transition to HE, subsequently influencing their retention and progression, (b) are better prepared to study and can take ownership of their own learning, and (c) there is less likely to be a mismatch of expectations between the student and the institution (p. 17).

Theoretically, the creation of the Connexions Service in the UK in 2000 aimed to address such strategies, providing general, in depth, integrated and specialist support nationwide for young people aged thirteen to nineteen years (up to 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities). Connexions Centres within each county provided support and advice on a wide variety of topics including education, housing and health. However, findings from the longitudinal study into post-16 transitions indicated that there is no evidence of “any individual, organisation or agency having overall responsibility for assisting young people to identify and source appropriate options, nor to coordinate service delivery”, (Aston, Dewson, Loukas, & Dyson, 2005, p. xiv).

From 2008, responsibility for providing Connexions Services was transferred to local authorities, however, the quality of information, advice and guidance was inconsistent (Hibbert, 2010), with some Connexions units described as difficult to access and variable in quality. The dismantling of Connexions began in 2011 and whilst in some areas of the UK the “brand” remains, its format is disparate – in some cases functioning as a limited company – and in many regions it has disappeared completely. Connexions was replaced by the National Careers Service for adults and young people aged 13 years or over, in 2012. However, this is principally a web-

based support, information for students with disabilities is limited, and is not connected to IEPs or transition planning that takes place in school.

The Transition Support Programme (TSP), part of the Aiming High for Disabled Children Programme, ran from 2007 to 2011 and was delivered via a National Transition Support Team which coordinated activities of local authorities and experts. After its closure, this strategy was continued through the Transition Information Network (<http://www.transitioninfonet.org.uk/home.aspx>) a website for adults involved in supporting the transition of students with disabilities. Resources include the Autism Transition Toolkit (Stobard, 2010) and comprehensive guidelines on developing a transition plan from the National Autistic Society, together with a link to the Ability Profiler, a commercial computerized suite of assessments designed specifically for the workplace setting. The Transition Support Programme itself evolved into Preparing for Adulthood (<http://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk>), a partnership between the National Development Team for inclusion (NDTi), the Council for Disabled Children (CDC) and Helen Sanderson Associates (©). The remit of this programme is wide, and includes a Pathfinder Support Programme associated with 15 local authorities, with the purpose of working with individuals to develop a transition to adulthood and employment plan. Independent schemes include Dimensions (<http://www.dimensions-uk.org/support-services/transitions>) a specialist support provider funded through the use of individual disability budgets. Dimensions Discover is a service for 14 -19 year olds who are in or approaching transition, and works in tandem with Discover Buddies. Whilst all of these and similar initiatives are to be welcomed, the constant change in programme names, providers and availability, is confusing for schools, parents and young people.

The “Good practice guide for health professionals and their partners on transition planning for young people with complex health needs or a disability” (Department of Health, 2008) includes an assessment tool for use by health professionals, young people and their carers, to determine actions and goals (p. 53 – 66), however this is limited to health, self-care and independent living skills. Useful templates are also available from local authorities for structuring transition planning meetings, for example, the “Co-ordinated Support Plan Assessment Tool – CSP1” (Angus Council Education Department, 2011), which can be used to monitor the

transition plan and ensure that information is efficiently disseminated to post-secondary providers. Both of these planning models would be easily replicable by other agencies and institutions.

In summary, the legislative framework relating to transition planning in the UK is supported by numerous policies and guidelines issued by government in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales over the past 10 years (Department of Education, January 2012, May 2012; Department of Education Northern Ireland, 1998, 2005; Government of the United Kingdom, 2001, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2009) in addition to individual guides issued by local government authorities, support agencies and community groups (Angus Council Education Department, 2011; Department of Health, 2008; Stobard, 2010). These documents emphasise the necessity for individualised, person-centred and multi-disciplinary planning, which encompass post-secondary routes that include FE, HE and employment.

However, it is clear that: (a) transition planning programmes are localised, quasi-standardised and vary from country to country (Hibbert, 2010; OECD, 2003, 2011, 2012; Rix et al., 2013) and (b) Government and local authority initiatives regularly open, close or migrate to another “branding” and projects tend to be fixed term – most commonly three years – leading to confusion and frustration for students and parents. Research has consistently noted the need for specific planning tools (Aston et al., 2005; Beresford, 2004; EADSNE, 2006; Levinson & Palmer, 2005; Mittler, 2007; Newman, 2013; OECD, 2011) however, whilst “transition assessment” is referred to throughout formal policy, few practical resources were discovered during the course of this literature review with which to conduct such assessments. This contrasts sharply with the specific legal requirements for transition planning and support in the US (IDEA, 2004, 2006) and the plethora of assessment resources developed to meet such requirements (Cline, Halverson, Petersen, & Rohrbach, 2005; McCarney & Anderson, 2000; Mesibov, Thomas, Chapman, & Schopler, 2000; Morningstar, 2011; NSTTAC, 2010).

This comparative review of models from the USA and UK demonstrates that: (a) inequity of access to consistently delivered, high quality transition planning – irrespective of the nature of disability or geographical location – constitutes a barrier to transition to HE, (b) such inequities can only be ameliorated with statutory

regulation that is clear on the obligations of State agencies, and (c) there are a range of transition models and assessment tools which can provide a benchmark for intervention, and which are widely available for adaptation and modification. Consequently, it is useful to develop these comparisons by examining transition models operating in Ireland, and how these are implemented across the senior cycle of education.

3.3.3 Transition models in the Republic of Ireland

Critical factors associated with successful transitions from primary to post primary education (Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004) include: (a) supporting parents to support students, (b) developing parental trust and student self-confidence, (c) engaging with bridging activities or materials that introduce new environments and ways of learning, and (d) ensuring that students with SEN and their parents have access to a transition partner (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Shevlin, & Vahey, 2013). Similar success factors are noted in transition from junior to senior cycle (NCCA, 2007), with transition outcomes affected by teaching and learning experiences in the junior cycle, and school attitudes and ethos, in particular where there is a focus on those who can and will be successful, “may inadvertently lead to the reproduction of inequitable policies and practices” (p. 44).

In a large scale study examining transition to HE in the Republic of Ireland (Smyth & Hannan, 2007), the rate of progression to HE was dependent upon the “general academic effectiveness in the school” (p. 192), and that historical application and progression to college within specific schools was based on: (a) encouraging students to select subjects that play to their academic strengths and personal interests, and (b) effective and timely guidance in subject selection. There is a variation in quality of guidance across schools which is largely derived from the ethos and culture of the school (Byrne & Smyth, 2011; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; Smyth & Hannan, 2007). Post-entry to HE, barriers encountered include lack of adequate interaction between post-primary guidance services and institutions, socio economic background, self-determination and self-awareness, mismatched expectations, inadequate planning and investigation of options, and poor adjustment to the challenges of third level learning environments (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; HEA,

2009; Hyland, 2011; Morgan, Kellaghan, & Flanagan, 2001; O’Sullivan, 2011; Redmond, Quinn, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011). For students with disabilities, increased independence is accompanied by concerns about physical access, reasonable accommodations and support in HE (Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007; McGuckin et al., 2013).

It is clear from the breadth of research that little has changed in the transition experiences of students over the last decade, both for disabled students and their non-disabled peers. Therefore, the following sub-section inspects the model of transition preparation for young people currently operating in Irish schools, to determine approaches and practices that promote or inhibit access to post-secondary opportunities.

Transition programmes. Cohen and Spenciner (1996) point out that often the transition programme is considered to be a once off, one-time event rather than an on-going process. This is reflective of the current framework within the context of Irish schools, where Transition Year (TY) is observed as a defined, stand-alone period after completion of the Junior Certificate, rather than an on-going process of development spanning the junior and senior cycle years up to the point of transition into HE, and is “a uniquely Irish experiment” (Clerkin, 2012, p. 5).

In 1994, the Department of Education and Science (now the Department of Education and Skills) undertook a restructuring of senior cycle education with the purpose of providing “maximum flexibility in catering for the different needs, aptitudes and abilities of pupils” (Bhreathnach, 1993). A feature of this strategy was the reorganisation of the TY Programme (TYP) for all post-primary schools in Ireland. TYP had existed notionally since 1974, but after its inception uptake was so poor that “only three out of nearly 800 possible schools offered TY” (Jeffers, 2011, p. 64). By 2001, 67% of second-level schools included a TYP as a part of senior cycle education (Jeffers, 2002), increasing to 80% of schools in 2012 (Clerkin, 2012). However, actual student participation rates in 2006/2007 were estimated to be 46.7% (Jeffers, 2007) with a modest increase to 55% in 2010/2011 (Clerkin, 2012). Factors determining the choice to offer a TYP include school size, geographical location and socio-economic status of the school and its students (Clerkin, 2012, 2013; Jeffers, 2002, 2007, 2011). The Department of Education provides a grant of €95 per student to schools who maintain a TYP, but this is an

expensive option for parents with the cost ranging from €150 to €900 per student, and teachers also cited inadequate funding for TY as a weakness of the programme (O’Connor & Kinsella, 2014).

Whilst the TYP is compulsory in some 25% of schools (Clerkin, 2012, 2013), and is set out in formal school policy, it is not automatically available to all pupils (Clerkin, 2012). The Board of Management in each school decides on the maximum number of students that can be accommodated on a TYP, otherwise places are allocated on the basis of an application and selection process (<https://www.kildarestreet.com/sendebates/?id=2013-02-26a.175>). Unsuccessful applicants must proceed directly into 5th year, effectively selecting Leaving Certificate subject choices on the basis of performance in the junior cycle and Junior Certificate examination results. This is a critical transition event in the Chronosystem, as these choices impact on examination grades, points, and participation in HE (Crawford, 2014).

The Transition Year Support Team was initiated in 1995, reformed as the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service in 1998, and in 2010 superseded by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST: <http://www.pdst.ie/TY>) an integrated support service for schools which encompasses TY planning. Schools devise a custom-made TYP across four layers consisting of core curriculum subjects, “taster” subjects, topic specific TY units, and practical activities (Figure 5).

Core subject	Subject sampling	TY units	Calendar
PE	Environmental Studies	Debating	Work experience
ICT	Physics	Mini Company	Outdoor pursuits
Mathematics	Spanish	Photography	Drama/Musical production
Irish	Drama	Psychology	Field trips
English	History	Global Development	Visiting speakers
RE	Construction	Food Matters	Voluntary

Figure 5. Examples of TY options across four strands.

The PDST provides assessment and evaluation materials for each TY unit, and the DES inspectorate assesses and reports on the TYP in selected schools each year, however, no national review and critique of the TYP has been conducted since 1994/1995 (DES, 1995).

The TY unit “It’s your future! Exploring options in further and higher education” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment /HEA, 2010) provides post-primary students with an opportunity to learn about strengths, interests and abilities, and post-secondary educational opportunities. Students are directed to complete a self-assessment of strengths, interests and abilities using a selection of online tests, a worksheet that identifies possible study routes, and to reflect on goals and potential barriers. As a foundation for planning the transition to HE and career options, this serves as a useful framework, but is not compulsory. No statistical data is available from either the HEA or NCCA with regard to uptake and evaluation of this module, although it is estimated that 45 hours are required to complete the unit which may be difficult to achieve within the school timetable (Jeffers, 2002). The TY unit “Disability Equality Training for Transition Year Students” (NDA, 2012) has been re-modelled as “Enabling Access across Generations” – a joint project with the Local Authorities Access Officer Network and the DES – in which students learn about the socio-economic impact of disability, equality and diversity. This unit is not featured as one of the sample units on the NCCA website, and scant information is available from the PDST.

The Irish Second-Level Students’ Union investigation of the TY experience (O’Connor & Kinsella, 2014) surveyed TY and 5th year students who had completed a TYP, students who had progressed directly from 3rd to 5th year, and TY Co-ordinators. The majority of students (89%) described TY as a positive experience, and both students and Co-ordinators believed that TY should be maintained. Students felt that less emphasis could be placed on studying core subjects (Maths, English, Irish), subject tasters are useful, but more time should be devoted to life skills such as work experience and entrepreneurship projects. Commenting on the report the then Minister of Education, Ruairi Quinn, stated that “Young people benefit from the space to mature, and the opportunity to learn and test real life skills,” (DES, 27 May 2014). On this basis, it would make sense to include post-secondary progression routes, access schemes, application procedures, identifying

future career interests, and researching third level options as one such opportunity to learn and test real life skills.

In summary, transition outcomes in Ireland are determined by teaching and learning experiences, inclusivity, school ethos, and quality of guidance (Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007; NCCA, 2007; Smyth & Hannan, 2007; Smyth & McCoy, 2011). Successful transitions to HE are a function of academic preparedness, links between HEIs and post-primary guidance providers, socio economic background, self-determination and self-awareness, and realistic expectations (HEA, 2009; Morgan, Kellaghan, & Flanagan, 2001; Redmond, Quinn, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011). The TYP is a gap year taken before the senior cycle with the purpose of developing such skills (Clerkin, 2012), however not all students have the opportunity to participate in TY in their school (Jeffers, 2007; Clerkin, 2012, 2013); those that do tend to come from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds and have higher educational aspirations (Clerkin, 2012; Smyth et al., 2004). Unless school policy specifies that TYP is compulsory, access to this extended period of development of skills, is inequitable.

The structure and quality of the TYP is unique to each school, and is dependent upon staffing and financial resources of schools; critically, TY is not available equally to all post-primary students in Ireland (Clerkin, 2012, 2013; Jeffers, 2002, 2007, 2010; O'Connor & Kinsella, 2014). Apart from core academic subjects (e.g. English, Maths, Irish) each school determines the content of the TYP, meaning that exploration of FE, HE and career options may not be selected as an element of TY. Currently, one TY unit provides such an opportunity (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment /HEA, 2010) as a foundation for transition planning, and one TY unit focuses on disability awareness (NDA, 2012) but is not showcased on the NCCA or PSTD websites. Students view TY positively, but also believe more emphasis should be given to developing life skills (O'Connor & Kinsella, 2014), a viewpoint reiterated by government (DES, 27 May 2014). Thus, the concept of transition planning is not embedded in TY, there are significant issues with equity of access to the opportunity to experience TY, and the importance of transition planning for students with SEN and/or a disability participating within the TY curriculum in mainstream schools, is not acknowledged at all.

It has to be assumed, therefore, that this is addressed formally within the Individual Education Plan (IEP), provided by Guidance Counsellors in schools, or through SEN resourcing. As a potential enabler to successful transition, such opportunities are explored in the following section.

Access to statutory transition planning. The NDA review of international education plans for children with disabilities (NDA, 2005) stated that “Transition planning is especially important for post-school outcomes, and as such transition planning should be established at least by the end of compulsory school age, and preferably sooner” (p. 17), although no guidance is provided on appropriate models, resources or progression of such plans. Section 3, 9, 11 and 12 of the EPSEN Act (2004) describes the preparation, content, review and appeals in relation to IEPs, once the Act is fully implemented. However, economic recession in Ireland in the intervening period has had a significant impact on development of educational systems (Drudy, 2009, 2011), thus delaying the obligation to provide IEPs, meaning that formalized assessment of individual need and preparation of transition plans, are not available to all students with SEN or disabilities (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014).

The NCSE (2006a) established under EPSEN (2004) provides comprehensive guidelines for transition planning in primary and post-primary environments. However post-secondary transition within this document is limited to the observation that:

The final steps of transition planning should take place one year in advance of the young person leaving school. It is important that the young person be involved in making these plans. The views of parents and/or an advocate should also be taken into consideration. Transitions can involve working in a multidisciplinary partnership. There is [sic] a variety of pathways that young people might follow upon leaving school and there are professionals with responsibility to assist them along these pathways. (2006, p. 51)

Whilst the guidelines advocate for a person-centred strategy “tailored to individual need” (p. 52), there is no further extrapolation on format, content or procedure, with

the exception of brief examples provided in the Appendices. The Special Education Support Service (<http://www.sess.ie/resources>) provides resources and professional development training for school staff, including a section on transition from primary to post-primary education. There is no equivalent guidance relating to transition from post-primary to post-secondary settings.

The Visiting Teacher Service (VTS) for students with sensory disabilities is accessed via referrals from parents or schools, Eye Clinics, the National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI) or the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), processed through regional offices of the DES. The VTS supports 2,300 students in primary and post-primary settings who are visually or hearing impaired, through the services of 46 teachers. Transition Reports for students with sensory disabilities were introduced by the Department of Education and Skills in 2010, and identify the impact of a student's disability in an educational environment, together with an overview of supports provided to the student. Transition Reports are critical documents, particularly where a VT may have supported a student throughout their educational career. A study completed by University College Cork (UCC, 2012), identified only ten transition reports from VTs to support applications to the DARE scheme.

The National Institute for Intellectual Disability (NIID) examined existing practices for preparing students with intellectual disabilities for the transition from post-primary schooling to post school options (NIID, 2011). A key recommendation suggests: (a) person-centred planning service which is “organic, building to transition as the student moves through the stages of his/her school life”, assisted by (b) a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) with national responsibility for transition planning, and (c) recognition that transition is a process which should begin prior to the commencement of the senior cycle of education (p. 13 – 14). Recent NCSE proposals in relation to resource allocation in schools (NCSE, 2014) specify that “The baseline component should particularly assist schools in supporting students in the transition from primary to post-primary school” (p. 48), and that “schools will be required to record baseline information, goals set and progress made for students with special educational needs” (p. 54), including outcomes for transition to FE/HE.

The Institute of Guidance Counsellors policy paper “A Whole School Guidance and Counselling Service and Curriculum: Roles and Relationships” (IGC, 2008), advocates for a “service plus curriculum model” (p. 10), drawing attention to the need for educational and career guidance counselling at all critical transition periods. Despite references to “personal counselling”, it makes no suggestion about how this might be developed to provide individualised transition plans. Similarly, “Taking the Next Step: A Parent and Student Guide to Further and Higher Education” (Wall, 2013), collates information on the National Qualification Framework, applying to the CAO, Post Leaving Certificate courses, and grants and scholarships. It does not provide advice on individual, goal-orientated assistance with planning progression to FE or HE, and is reflective of other available guides and booklets targeting students with disabilities, parents and carers (AHEAD, 2014; NCSE, 2014).

To summarize, with the exception of within-school practices for some students with intellectual disabilities attending special schools and some students with access to an IEP, there is currently no formal, systematic, individualised transition planning provided for students with disabilities. Nationally, it is acknowledged that transition planning is necessary for positive post-school outcomes, and should be in process by the end of compulsory education (NDA, 2005; NCSE, 2006a, 2013, 2014; NIID, 2011). Whilst EPSEN (2004) provides for assessment and intervention of the individual needs of students with disabilities, economic factors have significantly impacted on education (Drudy, 2009, 2011), with the result that access to IEPs is restricted (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014).

As noted in the review of UK transition models in previous sections of this literature review, policy proposals, guidelines, and recommendations for good practice do not constitute formalized, statutory transition planning, the absence of which represents a significant barrier to transition to HE. Consequently, students with disabilities and associated stakeholders are reliant upon schemes that focus on widening participation. The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is an access initiative that is unique to Ireland, and is reviewed in the following section.

Transition schemes for students with disabilities. Transition to HE for people with disabilities in Ireland, is less assured than within the general population.

People with a disability cease their full-time education at an earlier age, 8,313 (7.4%) aged 15 to 49 years having left full-time education before reaching the age of 15 years, 16.3% had completed no higher than primary level education, compared with 5.1% for the general population in this age group (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

Entrance to HE in Ireland is contaminated by the “backwash” effects of the competitive points system (Hyland, 2011, p. 4). An international review of transition to HE commissioned by the HEA / NCCA (Boland & Mulrennan, 2011), drew upon case studies from UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland), Europe (Netherlands), Australia (New South Wales), Canada (Quebec) and the United States of America (Texas). However, this report specifically excludes “non-standard tracks such as mature students, students with a disability, access programmes” (2011, p. 3), a puzzling omission given government commitment to widening participation for under-represented groups.

The IUA Working Group response to governmental concerns relating to HE admissions processes (IUA, 2011) comments on supplementary admissions schemes such as DARE, stating that:

Without such routes, large numbers of applicants from these target groups with the proven potential to succeed in their preferred courses of study would simply not reach the competitive points requirements ... and thus lose out on the opportunity to benefit from the professional, social and cultural advantages which HE can bring to themselves as individuals, their families and their communities (p. 8).

However, they express reservations about increasing the number of places available through such schemes, in that they may further increase competitiveness for limited places.

The mid-term review of the National Plan to Achieve Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013 (HEA, 2010) reported progress on objectives, action points and participation targets for 2010. Of the five objectives two in particular – investment in widening participation in HE, and widening participation in HE for people with disabilities – are relevant to the transition process. Whilst recognising the significant progress that has been made in many areas, the mid-term review set

out a work agenda for 2011 – 2013 that included new action points, namely: (a) a review of disability targets for 2013, and (b) improving links between sectors within the education system for students with disabilities (HE, 2010, p. 25).

The number of applications to the DARE scheme between 2008 and 2012 has not increased significantly (Table 9), in particular for students with sensory and physical disabilities, who continue to be significantly under-represented in HE, despite HEA targets to double the numbers of students in these groups by 2013 (HEA, 2008, p. 65).

Table 9

DARE Completed Applications 2008 – 2012

<u>Disability</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>
ASD	36	76	68	94	129
ADD/ADHD	40	107	70	114	148
B / VI	24	54	36	36	42
Df / HI	67	110	70	77	68
DCD	32	74	88	143	151
MHC	49	115	89	129	206
NC	0	43	39	36	79
PD	17	94	62	94	92
SOI	178	72	189	226	247
SLC	0	0	17	14	4
SpLD	1152	1560	1108	1197	1221
Total	1595	2305	1836	2160	2387

Note. The Neurological Conditions category was added to DARE in 2009, Speech, Language and Communications Disorders added in 2010.

A comparison of participation rates for students with sensory and physical disabilities indicates that original targets have been exceeded for the period 2006 to 2013 (Table 10), with a significant increase in the number of students with a visual impairment or multiple disabilities.

Table 10

HEA Targets Students with Sensory and Physical Disabilities 2006 – 2013

<u>Cohort</u>	<u>2006</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u> <u>Target</u>	<u>2013</u> <u>Outcome</u>
Students with sensory and PD	466	668	979	932	1,302
Students with a PD	190	235	317	380	398
Students who are DF/HI	126	173	190	252	212
Students who are B/VI	65	116	138	130	140
Students with multiple disabilities	85	144	334	170	552

However, these figures illustrate a proportional under-representation of students with sensory and physical disabilities, compared to the general population of this cohort. In 2006 there were 14,348 people with disabilities aged 15 – 19 years living in Ireland, this figure rising to 22,712 in 2011, an increase of 58.3% (Central Statistics Office, 2008). On this basis, the number of students with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities (combined) attending HE represents only 4.3% of the 15 – 19 year old population for these cohorts (Table 11).

Table 11

Census Data for Young People with Sensory and Physical Disabilities 2006

<u>Age group</u>	<u>Blindness or serious visual impairment</u>	<u>Enrolled in HE</u>	<u>Deafness or serious hearing impairment</u>	<u>Enrolled in HE</u>	<u>A difficulty with basic physical activity</u>	<u>Enrolled in HE</u>
15 – 19 years	1,415		1,170		2,287	
20 – 24 years	1,650		1,347		2,975	
Total	3,065	138 (4.5%)	2,517	190 (7.5%)	5,262	317 (6%)

Source: Central Statistics Office Ireland, 2006

Cumulative data from one HEI over the past five years, indicates a decrease in the number of students with sensory disabilities transitioning to HE (Table 12), which is representative of participation rates in other DARE HEIs (IUA, 2008; UL, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Table 12

First Year Undergraduates with a Disability 2007 – 2012

<u>Disability</u>	<u>2007</u>	<u>2008</u>	<u>2009</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>
AS/ASD	1	3	8	7	15	13
ADD / ADHD	5	4	10	15	8	10
B/VI	1	4	5	8	7	1
Df/HI	1	7	17	6	9	4
DCD	2	8	10	17	8	16
MHC	9	23	26	55	21	29
NC	0	0	0	3	7	7
PD	5	14	14	15	15	16
SLC	0	0	0	0	0	1
SOI	10	23	26	46	25	28
SpLD	85	101	103	114	82	49
Total	119	187	219	286	189	174

Source: Annual report, Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin (2012).

<http://www.tcd.ie/disability/policies/annual-report-stats.php>

This continuing under-representation implies that transition planning is not working for young people with disabilities within these cohorts, either as a function of the variability of transition support and guidance, or lack of access to IEPs.

To summarize this section, young disabled people in Ireland are less likely to complete full time education or transition to HE than their non-disabled peers (Central Statistics Office, 2008, 2011). Whilst access schemes for disabled students are a welcome addition to progression opportunities, the fixed quota of places under the DARE scheme within each participating HEI is an additional competitive layer within the LC process (IUA, 2011; NIID, 2011; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014), and the lack of transparency on points reductions and places, targets and statistics (Byrne et al., 2013) perpetuates a lack of understanding with respect to how the scheme works. National participation targets for students with sensory and physical disabilities have been exceeded (HEA, 2012), although in terms of overall growth the number of students within these cohorts is decreasing (IUA, 2008; UL, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012), and is not proportionately representative of the potential number of HE entrants (Central Statistics Office, 2008, 2011).

3.3.4 Conclusion

The landscape of transition is populated with many routes and pathways, some more equitable than others. Transition planning in the USA is legislated (IDEA, 2004, 2006) and is specific in the requirement for dedicated transition services therefore models of assessment, planning, support and partnerships, are sophisticated, comprehensive and well-developed (Cline, Halverson, Petersen, & Rohrbach, 2005; McCarney & Anderson, 2000; Mesibov, Thomas, Chapman, & Schopler, 2000; Morningstar, 2011; NSTTAC, 2010). The practice of transition planning embraces the principles of person-centred transitions which acknowledge the strengths and challenges of the individual in terms of aspirations and goals, and the potential personal and environmental barriers to achieving these ambitions (Aspel et al., 1999; Clark, 1996; Clark, et al., 1988;). It is clear that legal requirements that drive the need for structured and deliverable programmes are enablers of successful transitions.

There is no equivalent legal obligation in Europe, and although reviews and reports from EU agencies have reiterated the need for formalized transition planning (EADSNE, 2006; OECD, 2003, 2010, 2011, 2012), UK government policy and associated legislation does not extend to dedicated transition services for every young person with a disability, rather, guidelines and recommendations are tied to statements of Special Educational Need (Department of Education, 1998, 2005, 2012; Department of Health, 2008; Government of the United Kingdom, 2001, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2009; Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, 2006). Initiatives and projects with finite timelines and a localized geography are worthy, but insufficient, and additionally suffer from problems with continuity and identity (e.g. Connexions, Skill, the Transition Support Programme, Aiming High for Disabled Children).

In Ireland, whilst EPSEN (2004) sets out the legal requirement for an IEP this element has not yet been enacted, therefore transition planning is loosely tied to guidelines and suggestions for good practice (AHEAD, 2014; NCSE, 2006a, 2014). This absence of obligation to support all disabled students in their post-secondary journeys (NDA, 2005) together with inequity of access to IEPs (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014), is a barrier to successful transitions to HE. Opportunities to develop personal and social

skills and to investigate options and pathways to FE/HE, is provided for through the TYP in Irish schools which is not available to every post-primary student, inevitably affecting those students who are most disadvantaged (Clerkin, 2012, 2013; Jeffers, 2002, 2007, 2011). The core competencies associated with successful transitions to HE (HEA, 2009; Morgan, Kellaghan, & Flanagan, 2001; Redmond, Quinn, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011), are determined by the culture and ethos of the school, which sets the agenda for academic expectations, inclusive practices, and quality of guidance and support (Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007; NCCA, 2007; Smyth & Hannan, 2007; Smyth & McCoy, 2011). Thus inequity of access to such opportunities and experiences represents a barrier to transition. Finally, the DARE scheme, which was devised to compensate for the educational disadvantage experienced by some students with disabilities, currently functions as a secondary CAO system, whereby students with disabilities not only compete within the wider LC population, but also within a smaller pool of DARE applicants. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that DARE eligible applicants are more likely to hail from an advantaged background, attend a fee-paying school, and have the financial resources to access specialist documentation which evidences their disability (Byrne et al., 2013). Stakeholders in the scheme, including HEI staff, acknowledge that DARE effectively functions under a medical model (p. 192).

Clearly, the actions of actors and agencies within the outer layers of the bioecological system have a significant effect on post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities. The Microsystem represents the space where these effects observably impinge upon the educational trajectory of the disabled student. Whilst individual experiences are unique, important lessons can be learned by listening to students, their parents or carers, and professional practitioners. In particular, identification of common themes and experiences provides a starting point for reflecting upon how transition planning can be developed at a national level, and practiced at a local level. To gain a better insight into why this might be the case, it is necessary to examine the factors at play within the near social environment, which includes the family, peer groups, schools, and communities; these are discussed in the following section.

3.4 Transition Journeys (Meso and Microsystem)

The cornerstone of inclusive education philosophy is that all learners should have access to the same educational opportunities and outcomes (OECD, 2003, 2011; Winter & O’Raw, 2010); a critical aspect of such opportunities is the inclusion of narratives and viewpoints of students with disabilities and their families, as active participants in the identification of future goals and aspirations (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Byers, Davies, Fergusson, & Martin, 2008; Florian, 1998; Redpath et al., 2013; Rieser, 2001; Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Planning for transition journeys is a critical element of social inclusion (Dee, 2006), therefore a failure to provide access to appropriate transition support and guidance, is exclusionary (Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004; Unwin, LeMesurier, Bathia, & Deb, 2008).

The broader transition experience is described as “a process which, at its best, research suggests causes slight apprehension, while at its worst provokes deeply felt anxiety” (Galton & Hargreaves, 2002, p. 1), and is experienced equally within transition from primary to post-primary (e.g. Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013; Crafter & Maunder, 2012; Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; Lohaus, Elben, Ball, & Klein-hessling, 2004) and from post-primary to post-secondary settings (e.g. Gillan & Coughlan 2010; Lefever & Carrant, 2010; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; Smyth, Banks, & Calvert, 2011; Stewart, Freeman, Law, Healy, Burke-Gaffney, Forhan, Young, & Guenther, 2010). However, such apprehensions and anxieties may be magnified by a range of factors including, but not limited to, individual differences, family resources, peer relationships, school ethos and culture, teacher attitudes, curriculum access and socio-economic / socio-geographic variables (e.g. Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007; McCoy, Byrne, O’Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Unwin, LeMesurier, Bathia, & Deb, 2008; Wray, 2013).

Therefore, exploration of transition journeys should encompass not only quantification of positive or negative experiences, but should establish causes and effects that act as enablers or barriers to transition. The following sub-section focuses on the near and wider social environment of post-primary students with disabilities, and competing factors within the microsystem and mesosystems that can promote or inhibit access to transition pathways.

3.4.1 Managing the Micro and Mesosystems

The desire to progress to HE is strongly rooted in cultural and emotional issues associated with social class, identity and belonging (Bradley, 2012) and is therefore a “social and political construction rather than an unchallengeable truth” (p. 107). The influence and socio-economic status of the near social community (family, peers, schools) determines access to information and resources which allow parents and students to make informed decisions (Dustmann, 2004; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). Post-primary students with SEN in Ireland have lower educational expectations, with 38% expecting to progress to HE compared to 54% of their peer group” (ESRI / TCD, 2012). It is imperative, therefore, that transition partners focus on fostering and promoting the desires and ambitions of each young person, guiding them through the process of transition tasks and transition choices (Gallagher, 1992; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014).

Students can experience “a profound sense of anxiety” in relation to post-secondary options (Geldens & Bourke, 2008, p. 288), partly due to the loss of the school environment which may have functioned as a significant source of personal and social stability, but also in anticipation that “even with their best efforts and diligence these goals may not be realised” (p. 288). Transition planning is not just concerned with concrete goals and ambitions, but involves creating or adapting new identities to fit new environments (Stewart, Freeman, Law, Healy, Burke-Gaffney, Forhan, Young, & Guenther, 2010). Young people’s ideas of what prevents them from achieving their aspirations, may differ from the perceptions of others (Shah, 2008), and thus the policies, plans and support systems that are created and implemented on their behalf, may constitute barriers in themselves (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Atkinson, 1998; Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Barron & Hassiotis, 2008; Unwin, LeMesurier, Bathia, & Deb, 2008; Whitehead & Clough, 2004). Often, there is a failure to acknowledge that the hopes and ambitions of young disabled people do not differ from those of their non-disabled peers (Shah, 2008), and that they must negotiate the same complex social relationships and roles (2008, p. 4). Supports and resources that should enable students with disabilities to transition in exactly the same way as their peers are more often context-specific and compensatory rather than inclusive by design. A failure to take into account the opinions and voices of

young people in connection with their needs and approaches to addressing environmental barriers, can have “negative psycho-emotional repercussions” (Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2011, p. 207); by the time young people with disabilities have reached their early twenties, their goals and aspirations have diminished, by the age of 24 years, they are significantly reduced (Burchardt, 2005).

The role of the family is a significant one in the lives of young people with disabilities, in particular because they rely on support and guidance from parents or carers for longer than their peers (Dovey-Pearce, Price, Wood, Scott, Cookson, & Corbett, 2012). Parents face significant hurdles in the pursuit of inclusion for their children (Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007) and frequently “the family provide students with additional support not offered by the institution, and students who do not have access to such support, may well be at particular risk” (Weedon & Ridell, 2007, p. 6). However, whilst this evolution of dependence is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, it may inadvertently constitute a barrier where: (a) the desires and aspirations of parents and students diverge, and (b) it impedes the requirement to function independently in HE (Dee, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014). Therefore, it is imperative that skills development in self-determination, self-awareness and self-advocacy are developed or scaffolded in tandem with family support, in preparation for managing new environments and independences (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Duggan & Byrne, 2014; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; O’Sullivan, 2010; Wojcieszek-Arjomand & Gosselin, 2011),

A number of studies have examined the impact of social inequality on access to HE (McCoy et al., 2010; McCoy & Smyth, 2011; O’Connell et al., 2006; Smyth, 1999), associated with limited financial resources (McCoy & Byrne, 2011). Young people from high-income and highly educated households are more likely to have positive views about school and relationships with their teachers, and less likely to present with behavioural problems (ESRI / TCD, 2012). Geographic inequalities are also drivers in transition outcomes, for example, greater travel distances between home and prospective HEIs leads to higher direct and indirect costs, which are more likely to be a financial barrier to students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in lower levels of participation in higher education (Cullinan,

Flannery, Walsh, & McCoy, 2013). In addition, eligibility for student maintenance grants is based on parental income and geographical distance to the HEI, which may be further disadvantaging those living further from an HEI. For young people, socio-geographic location can have a significant effect on the development of identity (Geldens & Bourke, 2008). The restrictive environment of rural life, with little opportunity for experimentation under the gaze of the local community, and with no, or few, role models means that “There is intense pressure to maintain socially prescribed identities that conform to local cultural expectations” (p. 282). Whilst young people from socially restricted environments can be active participants in securing their own future, to some degree they are also constrained by identities and expectations which are often exclusionary (Dovey-Pearce, Price, Wood, Scott, Cookson, & Corbett, 2012; Geldens & Bourke, 2008; Hughes, Russell, & Patterson, 2005).

At a school level, serious discrepancies exist between the aspirations of students, and the expectations of practitioners, affecting the level of encouragement and guidance provided (Mc Guckin et al, 2013; Smyth, 2013a, 2013b; Smyth & McCoy, 2013; Watson, 2009; Wray, 2013). Unequal educational outcomes are connected to academic engagement and achievement, resources, and the overarching ethos of the school including the attitudes and expectations of teachers (Shevlin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013; Smyth, 2013). Educational aspirations are formed at the juncture of junior and senior cycles of education, and the cumulative effect of subject choices and available resources, differentiated knowledge of pathways and access routes, means that for some students, particular choices cut off particular pathways, early on in the senior cycle of education (Smyth, 2013), most significantly where TY is not available equally to all post-primary students in Ireland (Jeffers, 2002, 2007; Clerkin, 2012, 2013). With the reduction in dedicated Guidance Counselling posts, increased training in disability awareness and inclusive practices is urgently needed (Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014; Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007; Duggan & Byrne, 2014), in order to promote the most effective use of TY for transition planning.

Post-primary students in Ireland place a higher than average value on participation in post-primary education compared to their international peers, however, they also believe that they have little or no influence on what happens in

school, and parental interaction with schools is lower than international levels (Cosgrove & Gilleece, 2012). Whilst a quarter of parents are dissatisfied with the general level of guidance in post-primary school, they are less likely to pursue formal engagement with schools and staff (Byrne & Smyth, 2011). This disconnectedness has significant repercussions for involvement in transition planning, which is critical given that the transition plan recognizes the difficulties associated with transferring from a highly structured environment, to a more flexible and independent academic and personal life (Redpath et al., 2013).

In summary, the influence of family, identity, socio-economic background, schools, role models and educational expectations is considerable, and emphasizes the importance of multiple partnerships in transition planning. HEIs are equally responsible for: (a) preparing young people at the pre-entry stage, by assisting with the development of skills, informed choices and realistic expectations, and (b) identifying reasonable accommodations and supports, ensuring that young people and their parents are aware of their availability, and expediting these in a manner that reduces anxiety and ensures a smooth transition (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008). The following section looks more closely at the role of HEIs in choice and decision-making in the transition process, and their potential as transition enablers.

3.4.2 The Role of HEIs as Transition Enablers

In 2012 Campus.ie (www.campus.ie), an independent student website, conducted an online student survey which revealed that of the 3,894 college students who participated, 44% would choose a different course, 38% believed that post-primary school did not prepare them for college, and 30% stated that the college prospectus did not provide an accurate description of their course. The first Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE, 2013) incorporated the views of more than 12,700 students in 26 HEIs. Only 22.4% of first years felt that they had received support for coping with non-academic responsibilities, and 33.8% indicated that they had received support with socialization. These results are not encouraging given that the purpose of the TY programme in schools is to provide opportunities to “learn and test” such non-academic or life skills (DES, 27 May 2014). Additionally, 52% of students reported that as they approached the end of their first year, they had very little (21.4%) or only some (30.6%) self-knowledge, suggesting that development of

self-awareness and self-reflection are skills that should be addressed prior to entry to HE.

Studies that explore barriers to HE for disabled students as they transition from post-primary education draw attention to institutional barriers such as access to information and disability awareness (Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Gorard et al., 2006; Thomas, Quinn, Slack, & Casey, 2002; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). The Uni4U initiative (Redpath et al., 2013) a three-year research project funded by Department of Education and Learning in Northern Ireland, linked these to communication at the pre-entry stage, particularly between schools and HEIs:

Students would have liked disability services to have been advertised to them via various media, such as posters and leaflets given to the teachers, emails and websites, that they could look at in their own time, and presentations delivered in school by both support staff or current students (2013, p. 1346).

Communication between HEIs and parents is also emphasized given that parents are the most likely source of support to students, as is dissemination of information to Guidance Counsellors and SEN teachers. However, the quality and quantity of information and guidance is specific to particular individuals, schools and HEIs. The reduction in guidance provision at post-primary level (DES, 2012) will have a significant effect on disseminating transition information to students and parents, and for students with disabilities there is “little evidence . . . that schools were proactive in developing transition planning at an early stage in the school career of students with SEN” (Mc Guckin et al., p. 34), and equally poor evidence for “a coherent, sector-wide approach” by FE and HE institutions (p. 99, citing Trant, 2011).

The transition experiences of disabled students across the student journey, suggests a continuing inequity that requires development in five key areas: (a) pre-course induction support, (b) commitment by HEIs to providing barrier-free access to the curriculum, (c) consultation with disabled students, (d) institutional commitment to developing appropriate support services, and © personal development planning (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Viewpoints from twenty student ambassadors with disabilities from eighteen HEIs in Ireland (Gough &

Fleming, 2014) highlight the importance of: (a) understanding and awareness of disability by academic and administrative staff, (b) knowledge and understanding of alternative access routes, (c) peer support, and (d) alternative assessment methods. Participants believed that it was the student's responsibility to be proactive in engaging in a self-assessment of needs; however, they also identified uncertainty around internal supports as being one of the greatest barriers to achieving their full potential. DARE students who reported positive experiences of transition to HE attributed these to the provision of orientation or induction programmes by Disability or Access Offices (Byrne et al., 2013). Others described difficulties in managing the gap between the level of academic skills and expectations, and learning to navigate an unfamiliar environment, expressing significant dissatisfaction with the way in which they were prepared for third level in their post-primary schools (p. 175).

Research commissioned by the NCSE (Mc Guckin et al, 2013) identified: (a) systemic issues related to the complexity of progression routes to college, (b) a lack of cohesion between sectors to facilitate a smoother transition, (c) an inequity of access to support and guidance on the transition process, and (d) the necessity to disclose a disability to activate provision of supports at third level. They recommend a more focused approach to holistic transition planning which includes closer collaboration between guidance counsellors and HEIs, and an approach to outreach activities that includes increased "face-to-face" strategies with students, parents and practitioners. In addition, course specific information needs to be more clearly provided by academic staff, in order for students to make realistic choices.

Additionally, Mc Guckin et al. (2013) discuss the difficulties experienced by parents and carers who, at the moment of entry to FE/ HE, must relinquish control over their student's life. This power exchange has the potential to be traumatic if not handled carefully, and may also have a significant effect on the first crucial weeks of the first year experience. The transfer of responsibility for support must be handled with sensitivity and understanding. Engaging in activities and communication that reinforce the commitment of the HEI, whilst simultaneously recognizing the needs and wishes of students, and acknowledging the expertise and input of parents, can have a significant impact on the ease of transition to HE, and in particular, the experience of the first year of college.

This section has reviewed the available literature relating to links between education sectors that can have positive or negative outcomes for students with disabilities. A summary of factors within the micro and mesosystem that affect transition outcomes is provided in the conclusion that follows.

3.4.3 Conclusion

Aspirations and intentions to progress to HE are dependent upon the influence and interplay of agents and agencies in the near social community as providers of information and resources. Transition partnerships require the active involvement of young people with disabilities, their families, schools, and providers of post-secondary education. They should incorporate opportunities to develop action plans that acknowledge the identities and needs of young people, and that recognize the particular worries and concerns associated with beginning journeys in unfamiliar and challenging environments. Importantly, they should pay attention to the desire of students with disabilities to experience transition on an equal footing with their peers.

The family plays a significant role in supporting students particularly where support is not available in school, but the intensity of seeking appropriate levels of concrete supports and guidance can result in fractured relationships with schools, and decreased opportunities for young people to develop independent skills. Socio-cultural values within the local community shape the expectations and identities of young people, providing role models that may promote or inhibit transition aspirations. The ethos and culture of the school influences the level of importance placed on inclusive practices, affecting teacher attitudes towards achievable goals for students with disabilities. Social inequalities impact on opportunities to access the level of academic attainment required to meet the entry requirements for entry to HE; associated financial barriers determine participation in school programmes that open up choices and pathways.

Findings from national surveys indicate that significant numbers of students in HE are unhappy with their choice of course as a consequence of inaccurate information from HEIs and unsatisfactory levels of preparation and guidance in post-primary school, together with a lack of self-knowledge and social and independent living skills, opinions that are echoed by DARE students attending HE. These are fundamental elements of personal development that should be addressed in

structured transition planning, within TY programmes and individual plans. Self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy are crucial for successful transitions to HE, in an environment where students are considered to be adults, and responsible for managing their own learning. For students with disabilities, it is critical that they are fully confident in communicating the need for reasonable accommodations, and to be proactive in bringing this to the attention of institutional stakeholders.

HEIs also have a responsibility to prepare students prior to entry to HE and ensure that they make choices matched to interests, abilities and expectations. More transparent information is required about access routes and supports for students with disabilities, delivered directly to students, families and schools. In an environment where dedicated guidance in post-primary schools is rapidly diminishing, formalized transition planning that includes collaboration between students, parents, school and HE staff, is more important than ever. Such activities have the potential to reassure parents and young people with disabilities, providing them with confidence that HEIs are aware of individual needs and potentially disabling environments, and can provide supports that will ensure a smooth transition.

As a potential vehicle for promoting collaboration between individuals and institutions, the following section introduces the concepts of third places, Communities of Practice (COPs) and the role of cyberspace, as facilitators of transition planning spaces, communication channels and providers of advice and guidance.

3.5 Creating a “Third Space” to Support the Transition Journey (Chronosystem)

This section introduces the concept of “third spaces” (Bhabha, 2004), specifically the use of the Internet as a third place COP (Wilson, 2003), and the extent to which social networking sites (SNS) can function as COPs. This perspective is extended with an exploration of currently available Internet sites that represent or have the potential to represent, virtual transition planning spaces. It concludes with a detailed description of a virtual transition planning space constructed specifically for this research programme, the use of which is inherent to the research methodology as set out in Chapter Four.

3.5.1 Defining Third Spaces and Communities of Practice

Oldenburg (1989) identifies eight characteristics of third places, later refined by Bhabha (2004) as “third spaces”. They are geographically and socially unbound, and are physically and socially accessible and accommodating. Conversation and engagement is a principal occupation, and is highly valued. Third spaces are constructed from a core of “regular” users or inhabitants, whose role is to invite and encourage “newcomers” to participate in the space. They represent a place of security, familiarity, acceptance and knowledge, with an environmental structure that is simple and unpretentious.

Wilson (2003) discusses the construction of a third place as a product of conflict between the individual and the environment, where the environment functions as a site of alienation or rejection. Intermediate or third spaces operate outside of, or in between, the norms of first and second spaces, which may traditionally be viewed as problematic. Svalberg (2004) argues that “through the struggles of those who create them [third spaces] present the possibility for stimulation and renewal” (para. 3), and as such they should be valued.

Communities of Practice (COP) are places of “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in which people participate at different levels. Three dimensions associated with this mutual engagement are: (a) collaboration to achieve the same goal or goals whilst acknowledging that this may include conflicts, (b) engagement in joint enterprise involving a continuous negotiation between community members, and (c) invention, adaptation or adoption of resources through shared actions, tools or approaches. Non-traditional COPs (Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006) are not geographically dependent, can be distributed, multiple and complex, and the resources available to such communities include collective identity, reciprocal obligations and a shared discourse (Mercer, 2000). Virtual COPs are increasingly used in HE and in this medium also depend upon accessible technology, multicultural dimensions, understandings of netiquette, accessible language, and longevity (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007).

COP transitions (Crafter and Maunder, 2012) focus on the relationship between the COP and transition of a new member into the community, which creates “refinement of practices and a continuum of expertise” (p. 14). From an HE perspective, this can be translated as development of more student-centred pre-entry

initiatives which focus on personal challenges and skills, and less on institutional convenience. Experienced community members – admissions offices, disability services and academic staff – have a significant role to play in expediting membership to incoming non-traditional students, in a timely and problem free manner. However,

COPs are common in HE in the format of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and are increasingly used in post-primary schools. Engaging students in their use prior to the transition from school is a means of providing transition information and support, and teaching valuable skills. Whilst the lack of geographic specificity is an advantage, it may be difficult to stimulate communication amongst members and maintain a vital flow of information, producing a lack of a sense of community. A considerable amount of time and energy must be committed in order for the VLE to retain an aura of vitality, and if community members “lurk” but do not overtly participate, it is difficult to maintain a sense of energy and engagement, consequently leading to doubt and uncertainty for new or prospective members. Additionally, social, action and community groups work on the basis of growing relationships through trust, which is traditionally dependent upon physical interaction: getting the measure of each other.

Students, parents and practitioners are existing members of a post-primary COP, however the entity of such a community is constructed from satellites of smaller communities, which are geographically fixed but simultaneously connected. The purpose of a third space COP, is to provide a meeting point and information exchange where members may simultaneously belong to one or more sub-sets (Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006), for example, a parent who is also a resource teacher, a Visiting Teacher who is also a member of a disability support group. It is crucial to gain an understanding of how disabled individuals can engage in third space COPs to support their transition goals.

The challenge is to make space available so that different lifeworlds – spaces for community life where local and specific meanings can be made – can flourish. The new multimedia and hypermedia channels can and sometimes do provide members of subcultures with the opportunity to find their own voices. (New London Group, 1996, p. 70)

Membership of the disabled community is “unbounded”, in that it includes members and “visitors” from each of the bioecological systems, whether their participation is transient or permanent.

The “borderland territory” of the Internet (Gee, 1990, cited by Wilson, 2003, p. 296), functions as a physical and metaphysical space between the social environment (home, school, workplace), and the individual, and can thus be considered as a virtual third space, which is ideally suited to COPs who are geographically dispersed. In particular, discussion forums, blogs and wikis function as third space COPs, where individuals are free to express opinions and offer advice, within specific and identifiable domains of interest or expertise. Kirwan (2010) suggests that online behaviour is “merely an extension of offline conduct, simply conducted through a different medium” (p. 71). However, online interactions are multiple, varied and dependent upon the type of forum within which the participant engages. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in the use of Social Networking Sites (SNS), which are prolific, distributed, and have questionable levels of protection for vulnerable young adults (Downing, 2013). For this reason, careful attention is required to establish their suitability as a medium to assist with transition opportunities for students with disabilities. This is examined in the following section.

3.5.2 Social Networking Sites

The OECD (2011) notes the advantages of web-based resources as transition enablers:

Networking via the Internet is another source of valuable information which allows upper secondary students to exchange experience and solutions with their peers throughout the transition process, to find answers to their questions from university personnel and even to find common solutions to problems also encountered by others. (p. 81)

Many HEIs use SNS such as Facebook as part of pre-entry activities, resulting in positive effects on confidence, commitment, engagement and perseverance, at a time when students are overwhelmed with a plethora of information (Keenan, 2009).

Such transition mechanisms are a key step towards providing a successful student transitional experience (Keenan, 2006). Analysing interactions within an online CoP for non-traditional students, Guldberg and Pilkington (2006) claim that it can “help create a safe interaction space for the students” (p. 159). However, Facebook is a tool for making social connections, and students see its use within an academic framework as being inappropriate or irrelevant (Foon Hew, 2011; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009), as there are other synchronous and asynchronous communication mechanisms available for such contact. Therefore, HEIs should exercise “caution about moving into a social networking space that students clearly feel is ‘theirs’ for social rather than academic purposes” (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009, p. 152).

In Ireland, 81% of 6 – 17 year olds use the Internet (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009), which is 6% higher than the EU average, and 82% of 13 – 16 year olds use a Social Networking Site (SNS) (Livingston, Ólafsson, & Staksrud, 2011). However, whilst 75% of post-primary students use the Internet as an informal learning resource for LC study, their preference is for sites that directly provide information or instruction, as opposed to collaborative or SNSs (Melrose, 2012). This would suggest that although using a SNS to engage young people with disabilities is a useful mechanism for disseminating information on transition related matters, there is little evidence that it would encourage interaction on a personal level.

Post-primary students with disabilities are less confident about disclosing a disability publicly, and if Facebook is the primary means of social communication for post-primary and HE students, the ramifications of disclosing via SNSs must be carefully considered. Many disability services within HE in the UK and Ireland maintain a Facebook page, but the number of friends, followers or “likers” posting to the site, is not representative of the number of post-primary students with a disability intending to transition to HE. For example, the Trinity College Dublin Disability Service Facebook and Twitter accounts were created in 2010, and although daily postings are submitted, by January 2015 its Facebook account had amassed only 409 “likes” over the five-year period, and only 137 Twitter followers. Similarly, the University College Cork Facebook account was created in 2009 and has a total of 611 “likes”, and 77 Twitter followers. Given that more than 2,000 young people with disabilities apply to the DARE scheme each year, this would suggest a

reluctance or disinterest in engaging with SNS publicly, to assist with transition planning.

The Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) Public Information project (2011) surveyed post-primary students and Career Guidance Counsellors throughout Ireland, to ascertain the type of information that should be provided on university and other websites, in a format that is clear and accessible. Students indicated a need for information on course content and entry routes, clearer and simpler use of language, explanation of HE jargon or key words, and provision of a site specific search engine. Guidance Counsellors indicated a need for course specific information, a glossary of key terms, realistic accounts of programmes, entry routes, and student supports. The IUQB recommended inclusion of feedback on the experiences of students in college, with regard to specific courses and campus life.

New entrants to HE are surveyed at the point of registration in their institution; data from one such survey indicates that 80% of students use the HE website as a means of extracting or sourcing information, more than double the number (33%) who consult a Guidance Counsellor (Trinity College Dublin, 2012). The combined use of college-based resources (e.g. website, prospectus, open day) significantly outweighed other human resources (e.g. school staff, parents, or friends). Transition specific information (admissions, courses, accommodation) is widely available across HEI websites as text-based pages, although there is no facility for visitor interaction other than by email.

In conclusion, whilst the use of SNS has valuable potential for pre-entry engagement with HEIs, they are principally used as social tools. Use of the Internet and SNSs by Irish teenagers is prolific and measured at higher levels than anywhere else in the EU, but there is no evidence that they are instrumental to enhancing transition. SNS sites maintained by disability services in HEIs are useful in acknowledging that services and support are available to post-primary students with disabilities, and to distribute important information to students, parents and practitioners. However, as interactive forums they are not used by students or parents as part of a transition plan and therefore they are not a suitable method of engagement for students who have concerns about disclosure.

It is acknowledged that web-based resources are vital sources of information exchange (Eysenbach & Till, 2009), and that consulting web resources for transition

information within the student population generally outweighs interaction with human consultation. Guidance Counsellors and post-primary students in Ireland are critical of the need to provide more comprehensive and transparent information about courses, access routes and student supports. However, there is little evidence to support the argument that they function as a “real time” information exchange between HEIs and the wider community. The following section narrows the focus of this exploration of web-based resources, by considering websites with a specific emphasis on prospective HE students with a disability.

3.5.3 Virtual Transition Planning

Pre-entry activities are a reasonable adjustment for students with disabilities that enhance the transition to HE consequently impacting on student retention and progression (Felsing & Byford, 2010). Strategic actions for HEIs should include public dissemination of information on reasonable accommodations, entitlements and supports (Felsing & Byford, 2010), and student services have a crucial role in determining the quality of the student experience and to providing initiatives to support widening access to HE (Eurostat/Eurydice, 2012, p. 22). Disability services in HEIs maintain a web presence, but there is a wide range of level and quality of information, principally focused on access routes, supports available on entry to HE, orientation programmes, policies and procedures for delivery of reasonable accommodations, and key statistics on participation rates for students with disabilities. In Ireland, pre-entry guidance is limited to information about applying to the DARE scheme; no transition planning tools or resources available to post-primary students with disabilities, parents or schools for use during the senior cycle of education.

In the USA, websites external to HEIs that assist with transition planning, are sophisticated, highly structured, and client-centred, based on the legal requirements set out in IDEA (2004, 2006), and taxonomies of transition planning (Kohler, 1996). “Going to College” (<http://www.going-to-college.org>) is text-based but advice and guidelines are provided in the form of podcasts, interactive online assessment tools and checklists, with a student-to-student focus that includes positive role models. “Think College” (<http://www.thinkcollege.net>) is less engaging, more text heavy, and has less of an emphasis on students, but does provide experiential podcasts. In Australia, “Get Ready for Uni” (<http://pubsites.uws.edu.au/ndco/getready>) has

sections on preparing for university, what and where to study, getting into a university course, your disability at university, and FAQs. All of this material is presented as text pages or downloadable pdf. Education Services Australia – My Future (<http://www.myfuture.edu.au>) is focused on career planning, education and training for all school leavers; the website is colourful, attractive, interactive and easy to navigate, and includes online tools and profilers, but makes no reference to students with disabilities.

Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities in the UK closed in 2011; the website is still hosted at <http://www.skill.org.uk/youth> and has a colourful interface on the homepage set out as a map to transition planning. The next level of pages provides limited material on post-secondary options and supports, but does not provide information from students, toolkits or profilers. “Transitions” (<http://www.spldtransitions.co.uk/transitions.php?lang=e>) from the Dyscovery Centre at the University of Wales, is a three phase approach to transition from primary to post-primary, to college or employment This site provides advice and guidance to individuals with specific learning difficulties, although some of the content is broadly relevant to other disabilities. The material is text-based with downloadable advice sheets; no multimedia material or student stories are provided. In Northern Ireland, Skill (<http://www.skillni.org.uk>) provides fact sheets and booklets associated with benefits and rights, and Uni4U (<http://www.ulster.ac.uk/uni4u/>) is a web-based initiative from the University of Ulster, but is principally a research vehicle and does not provide transition assistance per se to post-primary students with disabilities.

In the ROI, AHEAD promotes access to HE and employment, a section of their website is devoted to Accessing College <http://www.ahead.ie/accessingcollege>, with sections on subject choice, CAO application, DARE, and FAQs. Information is limited and text-based; the section on LC subject choice provides two web links to choosing a college course, a format that is replicated across other sections of the site. AHEAD also provide a useful interactive “roadmap” which clarifies pathways to post-secondary opportunities. The Learning Ireland Network has a website for all school leavers, <http://www.gotocollege.ie/Going-to-College/Disabled-Students.html> links to general information about college supports, funding and scholarships. Quest for Learning is an EU Minerva project which promotes VLE and ICT solutions for

people with disabilities (http://questforlearning.org/html/about_project.html). The site is well-organized and comprehensive and hosts a text-based study skills module; however, no materials are provided in relation to transition planning.

The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2008) purchased the domain www.yourfuture.ie with the specific purpose of “merging existing information resources into a unified comprehensive web resource for prospective students of further and higher education” (2008, p. 52). This has not been delivered and the domain is still unpopulated. Until 2014, the HEA website hosted a section for all post-primary students providing generic information with links to individual college websites for further information on services. It lacked guidance on transition planning, and for students with disabilities provided a single page linking to AHEAD and DARE. This section of the HEA website no longer exists, the section “Studying in Ireland” (<http://www.heai.ie/content/studying-in-ireland-0>) contains only a “coming soon” message.

In summary, none of the ROI websites offer resources to assist with post-secondary choices and college application, based on first-hand advice from disabled students and academic staff. They do not provide a transition planning programme, assessment tools or checklists, resources are not provided in a range of formats, and forwarding web links take visitors away from the home website. There are no web resources readily available in the ROI that function as a COP for students with disabilities, parents and practitioners, or which provide a virtual transition planning space for structured and comprehensive assistance with person-centred and individualised transition planning. Consequently, recommendations from national and international literatures (AHEAD, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; HEA, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2014; IUQB, 2011; OECD, 2003, 2011) were incorporated into the design of a virtual transition planning COP, to: (a) address the gap in transition planning resources for students with disabilities in Ireland, (b) provide positive role models, advice and guidance, and (c) measure the level of need and interest in transition-specific resources as identified in the research questions established for this programme of study.

To facilitate this investigation a suite of transition tools was created and hosted at “Pathways to Trinity” (www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity) with the purpose of enabling transition to HE, and to “work productively with diverse students . . . to

support them in learning how to use the varied ‘funds of knowledge’” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, cited in Norton-Meier & Drake, 2008, p. 3). Other members of this COP are existing HE students with disabilities, academic and admissions staff in HEIs, and disability support staff. The website provides personal narratives from learners and teachers, a knowledge base for understanding the practices associated with applying to and attending HE, and materials that include podcasts and videos. There are three elements of the transition resource: (a) a structured web repository which includes a discussion forum and blog page for real time exchange of information, (b) a transition skills assessment and planning tool, and (c) transition planning workshops provided within the HEI, for LC students with disabilities. A description of each element is provided in the following sub-section.

3.5.4 Pathways to Trinity website

Students and their transition partners require access to relevant information in an accessible format in an uncomplicated, jargon free context. Pathways functions as a “one stop shop” where students can identify information on admissions, courses, student stories, supports, finance and real time assistance with study and examinations, without having to traverse multiple websites from multiple providers. Students, parents and practitioners have the opportunity to participate “virtually” via the Pathways blog which allows users to post comments and ask questions on an on-going basis, and in this respect the website is organic. A site map for the hierarchy of web pages is provided in Appendix C3. Additionally, the website hosted three surveys to students, parents and practitioners functioning as the data collection method for this research programme, the design and delivery of which is presented in the following chapter. A fundamental section of the website is the Pathways Transition Planning Tool designed specifically for this programme, based on best practice models identified in section 3.3 of this chapter.

Pathways Transition Planning Tool. Students with disabilities should be assisted with planning and recording the steps in the transition process, adapting their goals and needs as they progress through their school career, and reviewing such goals collaboratively with a transition “partner”, be that a parent, teacher, Guidance Counsellor or other practitioner. Using web spaces and multimedia technologies to develop personal skills and knowledge is a powerful methodology. Online distance learning has become a sophisticated medium adopted by world

ranking universities via platforms such as FutureLearn (<https://www.futurelearn.com>). The Pathways Transition Tool is based around a similar philosophy and is provided as a web-based assessment and planning resource structured into five modules: Preparing Myself for the Future, Independent Living, Academic Skills, College Application and Course Choices, and Identifying and Using Reasonable Accommodations. Each module is downloadable from the Pathways website in an editable pdf format, and can be easily adapted to individual needs. In addition, a short video is provided as an introduction to each unit. The final element of the transition planning suite, the Pathways Leaving Certificate Workshops, enabled engagement between students with disabilities, parents and practitioners with HE providers, current students in HE and disability service personnel.

Pathways Leaving Certificate workshops. This strand of the programme sought to engage students with disabilities during their final two years of school by providing college-based workshops across the academic year. The programme provided students with the opportunity to explore topics such as assistive technology, academic skills, organisation and time management, planning a college career, and the college application process. Parents and practitioners were encouraged to engage in parallel workshops which provided advice on the college application process, supporting students through State examinations, managing student stress and setting up a study environment. Sessions were designed and delivered by Disability Service staff and Occupational Therapists, together with course specific input from current students with disabilities in the HEI. All participants in the workshop were introduced to the Pathways Transition Tool.

In summary, this section has introduced the suite of transition planning resources created specifically for this research programme, that function as a COP where information, advice and resources can be collated and shared, together with opportunities for community members to participate in virtual and real time transition planning. The following chapter provides an audit of how these resources were used as methodological tools with which to address the aim, objectives and research questions established for this research programme. In anticipation, the final section of this chapter summarizes the findings from a review of the literature, as they relate to enablers and barriers to transition to HE, for students with disabilities.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

This research programme examined a specific instance in the Chronosystem of post-primary students with disabilities – the transition from school to HE – and the proximal processes related to this transition that constitute enablers or barriers to successful transition. The literatures reviewed in this chapter inspected the topography of disability and educational transitions, and the potential of virtual or third places to assist with transition journeys. The presentation of material was structured around the theoretical framework determined in Chapter Two: Bioecological Systems Theory and Children’s Geographies, and facilitated a triangulated interrogation of the evidence for enablers and barriers to transition.

There is great variability in the number and quality of access opportunities for disabled students within the EU nations, and although policy in Ireland compares favourably to its European neighbours, there are significant gaps between policy and practice. Setting national institutional targets has not resulted in significant increases in participation of students with disabilities, and this is particularly the case for students with sensory and physical disabilities. Existing methods for monitoring targets and participation rates are inefficient, unreliable, and therefore have a limited value as tools for measuring the success of national and HEI strategic plans. Despite repeated commitment to a central data collection point for HE statistics in Ireland, this has failed to materialize.

The purpose and intent of the Transition Year Programme is to: (a) provide an opportunity for young people to explore subjects that fall outside of the formal academic curricula prior to making important decisions about subject choices in the senior cycle of education, and (b) engage in projects and work experience that enhance personal skills. The investigation of post-secondary options is not embedded in TY, the availability and structure of TY is unique to each school depending upon staffing and the financial resources of schools and families, and transition planning for students with SEN and/or disabilities is not integrated into TY.

There is a mismatch between promoting the social and economic value of participation in HE and the financial wherewithal of prospective students to do so. Additionally, the academic achievement required for entry to HE is highly competitive and intrinsically tied to the personal and financial resources of families,

and the quality of guidance provided in post-primary schools. Initiatives that promote equity of access to HE by compensating for the competitiveness of entry to HE and the additional socio-economic and cultural complexities experienced by students, are intrinsically competitive. Access programmes targeting students who are under-represented in HE have limited places and still require minimum academic qualifications, and eligible applicants for the DARE scheme compete within themselves for a finite number of places – still based on points achievement – the parameters of which are not made clear to stakeholders. Currently, DARE is unintentionally biased in favour of students with disabilities from advantaged social and educational backgrounds.

The statutory requirements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland identify the need for transition planning but are restricted to pupils with a statement of need; future proposals point to a reduction in opportunities to access such statements. In Ireland, young disabled people are less likely to transition to HE than their non-disabled peers; economic restrictions have resulted in a failure to enact all aspects of EPSEN (2004) with the result that IEPs are not available to all students with disabilities. Formal transition planning as it currently exists is represented by guidelines and suggestions for good practice, with no obligation to support all disabled students in their post-secondary journeys.

Transition planning assessment and models of development for students with disabilities in the USA are widespread and highly structured, principally as a function of legislation. Such plans include measurable goals and identifiable pathways that culminate in post-secondary opportunities to education or employment, based on the needs and aspirations of young people with disabilities. Thus there is a wide range of planning resources that would be easily adaptable to European contexts. Whilst there is some evidence of structured transition planning assessment for students with autism and mental health conditions in the UK, currently, there is no equivalent provision in Ireland.

Individual geographies encompass identity, self-concept, the support of the family, social context and socio-economic background, role models and educational expectations, and the variability of each of these factors significantly affects transition opportunities. Engagement between students, parents, practitioners, schools and HEIs can ameliorate such variables, and facilitate a more integrated

approach to addressing promoters and inhibitors to HE. National surveys indicate that across the wider student body, entrants to HE lack the skills and preparation for the first year of study in terms of academic expectations, social contexts, and the realities of independent living. However, on the ground, responsibility for targeted provision and development of such skills rests with schools, and is wholly dependent upon the quality of advice and guidance at their disposal. Post-primary staff in particular are varied in their knowledge of disability, inclusion and access routes.

The Internet represents a third space which facilitates the engagement between multiple transition partners as a Community of Practice, where community members are geographically dispersed. Whilst Social Networking Sites have the potential to function as a Community of Practice, they are principally used as tools for creating and maintain social relationships, and evidence suggests that they are not an effective method of engaging students with disabilities, parents or practitioners, other than as a distributor of information. Theoretically, web-based resources are vital sources of information exchange, and presently, consulting web resources for transition information within the student population generally, far outweigh interaction with human consultation; however, stakeholders are critical of the quality of information currently available.

There are opportunities for HEIs to smooth the transitional arc by reaching out to the post-primary sector by providing more transparent information about: (a) routes, pathways, and supports for students with disabilities, (b) the structure, content and accessibility of HE programmes, and (c) viewpoints of disabled students that address the reality of the HE experience. In particular, Disability Services within HEIs have a responsibility to do so with greater care, attention and detail than is currently evidenced. An exploration of available web resources in the ROI that function as a COP for students with disabilities, parents and practitioners, or which provide a virtual space for individualised transition planning, established that none exist at the present time.

In conclusion, there are systemic, contextual and environmental barriers to transition for students with disabilities in Ireland, which operate within every level of the bioecological system. It is established that these are exacerbated by:

- an absence of statutory obligation to provide transition planning to all students with disabilities;
- an absence of transition planning procedures, person-centred assessment and individual programmes;
- an absence of centralized transition planning resources that provide positive role models, advice and guidance;
- competitive entry requirements for access programmes which represent an additional layer of competition for entry to HE;
- unequal access to the TY programme in post-primary education, and thus opportunities to identify goals, pathways and supportive strategies;
- a variable quality of guidance and support for students with disabilities and their parents, compromised by a lack of disability awareness;
- inadequate communication channels between HEIs, post-primary schools, schools and parents.

Consequently, a suite of transition planning tools for students with disabilities was designed and created for this research programme, with the purpose of: (a) bridging the current gap in transition resources; (b) providing a central repository of materials that explain the mechanics of application to HE and access schemes for students with disabilities, including advice and viewpoints of academic staff and current students participating in HE; (c) forming a geographically independent Community of Practice within which post-primary students, parents, practitioners and HEI staff could participate; and (d) constructing an instrument to investigate and measure promoters and barriers to HE in Ireland.

The following chapter provides an audit of the Methodology applied in this research programme. The research aim, objectives and questions are reiterated as a precursor to explaining the selection of methodological approach, from which a research design was evolved. It identifies the sample population from which data was drawn, the quantitative and qualitative components of data collection used, followed by the research procedure for each of the studies. An outline of the ethical guidelines consulted in pursuit of research with potentially vulnerable populations, is

also included. A final section provides a technical description of the design and construction of the Pathways transition planning tools.

CHAPTER FOUR – METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology adopted for this research programme, which investigated enablers and barriers associated with transition to HE in Ireland, from the viewpoint of students with disabilities, parents and carers, and practitioners working with students and their families. Three studies were conducted in pursuit of this investigation: Study One examined the experiences of students with disabilities, parents or carers, and practitioners in the field of education, prior to transition from post-primary settings; Study Two investigated the post-entry transition experiences of students with disabilities approaching the end of their first year in HE; Study Three measured engagement with transition resources specifically designed and developed for this research programme. The section that follows sets out the aims of this chapter, together with a map of its structure as a guide for the reader.

Chapter Aims

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the approach taken to investigate enablers and barriers to post-primary transitions, the methodological theory underpinning the research design, and the choice of method that was selected to most effectively address the research questions. Additionally, it seeks to link findings from Chapter Three, which established the contexts and factors most relevant to an investigation of promoters and inhibitors to transition opportunities, to the choice of research design. For this reason, the hypotheses, research aim, objectives and questions are re-stated, followed by a methodological discussion including identification of the research paradigm and epistemology. In continuation, it provides an audit of methods and procedures, together with recognition of the methodological limitations that were identified during the research process. A detailed map of the structure now follows.

Section 4.1 revisits the research hypotheses, aim, objectives and research questions together with an explanation of how these are genetically linked to the Literature Review. In continuation, section 4.2 establishes the rationale for the selection of a mixed methodology, followed by an extrapolation of the research design in section 4.3, which was determined to be the most suitable structure within which to investigate factors and variables identified in Chapter Three. Sampling procedures for Study One, Study Two and Study Three are presented in Section 4.4, including identification of participants and the demographic samples from which they were

drawn. Subsequently, section 4.5 provides a detailed description of the quantitative (4.5.1) and qualitative (4.5.2) components of data collection and analysis employed in this research programme. This is followed by a guide to the procedures and timelines employed for Study One (4.6.1), Study Two (4.6.2) and Study Three (4.6.3).

Section 4.7 examines the pertinent ethical considerations when conducting research with vulnerable young people and adults, together with the ethical guidelines that were consulted in pursuit of this. A technical description of the design and construction of the research environment is provided in section 4.8, identified as: (a) a website repository for transition planning resources: Pathways to Trinity, (b) a modularized transition assessment and planning programme: Pathways Transition Planning Tool, (c) transition activities for post-primary students with disabilities enrolled in the senior cycle of education: Pathways Transition Workshops; and (d) a transition themed discussion forum / blog: Pathways Blogspot. These entities were created specifically for the delivery of the research methods devised for Study One and Study Three.

The limitations of the research methodology are discussed in section 4.9, and include issues identified during the course of the research programme relating to sampling, data collection measures, reliability of self-reported data, and limited availability of prior research in this area at the commencement of this research programme. Researcher limitations identify issues with accessing sample populations, and defined timelines for gathering data and reporting and analysis of findings. A concluding section (4.10) draws together the salient points of this chapter, as a framework for understanding the findings of the research programme presented in Chapter Five.

As a precursor to an in depth discussion of the methodology and design of this research programme, the following section elucidates the relationship between conclusions drawn from a review of the literature in Chapter Three, and the identification of the research aim, objectives and questions introduced in Chapter One.

4.1 Research Aim, Objectives and Questions

The preceding chapter examined the topography of disability and educational transitions for students with disabilities. An inspection of the political terrain (the Macrosystem) exposed a variability of transitional opportunities for disabled

students, principally due to the absence of statutory obligation to transition planning for post-primary students with disabilities. National and institutional targets have not significantly increased participation rates; furthermore, data used to measure participation is unreliable. This was followed by an interrogation of the landscape of transition (Exosystem) which drew attention to the dual barriers of competitive entry to HE and unequal access to the DARE scheme. A concomitant lack of national transition planning strategy, access to IEPs or transition plans, results in practices which are exclusionary.

Subsequently, an inspection of transition journeys focused on personal assets and liabilities and the influence of socio-cultural contexts (Mesosystem and Microsystem). Unequal access to TY programmes in schools affects choices and pathways in the senior cycle of education. The ethos and culture of the school determines the attitudes and awareness of its staff, which significantly impacts on expectations and self-concept. Often, parents of disabled students are the sole supporters of goals and aspirations, and are dependent upon a variable quality of guidance and support from schools, compromised by a lack of disability awareness and inclusion. Finally, communication links between HE providers, schools and parents are not working effectively, despite the availability of print and media resources.

Thus, the emerging hypotheses are that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors which may effectively act as an enabler or barrier (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Pyer, Horton, Tucker, Ryan, & Kraftl, 2010; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014; Shah, 2008; Smart, 2004; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012), and (b) a dedicated, targeted transition planning strategy for post-primary students with a disability can encourage and assist disabled students in their transition journey (Clark, 1996, 2007; Dente & Coles, 2012; Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; Sitlington, & Clark, 2007). In order to test these hypotheses, the research aim and objectives must facilitate investigation of the nature, magnitude, distribution and location of transitional factors for students with disabilities.

The aim of this research programme is to explore the relationship between disability and transition to HE in Ireland, with a focus on investigating: (a) the effectiveness of current transition policies and opportunities, (b) the nature of current

links between education sectors, (c) the quality of transition support and guidance, (d) competing factors in the transition journey for post-primary students with disabilities that constitute enablers or barriers to HE, and (e) to establish interest and engagement levels with targeted transition planning materials.

The principal research objectives are: (a) to document access to initiatives, advice, support and guidance using online surveys to students, parents / carers, and practitioners, embedded within a dedicated transition website; (b) to investigate personal perceptions of transition and disability via in-depth interviews with students, parents / carers, and practitioners; (c) to examine transition experiences of students with disabilities at the conclusion of their first year of undergraduate education; and (d) to use an emancipatory methodology that permits students with a disability and associated stakeholders to voice their experiences of transition.

Planning research by conceptualizing research questions “makes explicit the idea of levels of abstraction in research” (Punch, 2006, p. 20). Constructing a research hierarchy assists with visualising the methodology (Wheeldon & Ahlberg, 2012), and provides a starting point for planning the research design (Brannen, 2005; Creswell, 2003, 2009; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Consequently, the research questions distilled from the hypotheses, aim and objectives of this research programme are identified as:

- Are students with disabilities, their parents, and other stakeholders in the transition process, provided with access to disability-specific transition advice and guidance?
- Do all stakeholders have equal access to the same quality and quantity of transition support?
- How useful / effective is this advice and guidance, what form does it take, and who provides it?
- What are the enablers / barriers to transition identified by students with disabilities, their parents and practitioners?
- Is there a need for dedicated, transition-specific resources, for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland?

This constitutes the framework for the research programme and therefore a methodology is required that uses instruments to test and answer these questions. The following section presents the research paradigm and methodology, demonstrates the appropriateness of the epistemology, and justifies the methods of data collection.

4.2 Research Methodology

Using a transformative paradigm permits investigation and analysis of social issues that can be transformed by social action (Mertens, 2003, 2009; Sweetman, Badiee, & Creswell, 2010). A transformative paradigm was adopted for this research programme with the purpose of: (a) establishing catalysts that result in barriers to transition for students with disabilities, and (b) extracting recommendations from the findings that can instigate change. This paradigm views disabled students as a minority group within the dimension of human difference (Mertens, 2003). Transformative-emancipatory research investigates the worlds of individuals who experience oppression or discrimination (Tashakkeni & Teddlie, 2003), where the research is dependent upon building trust relationships with the researcher(s), resulting in increased knowledge and understanding of “diversity within communities and implications for social justice and equity for diverse groups” (Mertens, 2003, p. 69).

Greene (2007) extends this paradigm describing mixed methodologies as permitting “multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished,” (p. 20). Brannen (2005) emphasises the importance of paradigms, pragmatics, and politics during the process of selecting an appropriate methodology, although “some of the advantages of mixed method research may not emerge until the end of the research process” (p. 9). Mixed methodologies permit multiple worldviews and a greater freedom in the use of methodology and data (Creswell & Plano, 2009). The rationale for mixed methods is founded on the argument that quantitative data alone is not enriched by the voice or views of participants, nor does it reflect the complexity of the research context within which data is collected. Qualitative methods consider the need for the insider viewpoint to lend depth to the research, and to avoid situations where statistical data may be skewed or re-interpreted.

Researchers have historically used elements of quantitative and qualitative approaches simultaneously, however, as a distinct approach mixed methodology design (Creswell, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, 2011; Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003; Hossler & Vesper, 1993) is a relatively recent concept. Creswell and Plano (2007) describe mixed methodologies as “a research design with philosophical assumptions as well as quantitative and qualitative methods” (p. 5), based on a belief that combining both perspectives provides a clearer understanding of the research problem or question.

Within this research programme, quantitative data, whilst illustrating the scale and frequency of experiences and providing additional evidence to support theory, may not inform how experiences of disability within the transition process are internalized. Equally, they may not lend weight to the argument that there are significant issues at an individual / institutional level. Mixed methodology approaches enhance the data by using qualitative methods as a tool for exploration, and quantitative methods as a tool for explanation. Such a combination can be achieved in three ways: by merging, connecting or embedding both types of data, and have been used in many longitudinal studies (Byrne, & Smyth, 2011; Day, Sammons, & Gu, 2008; McCoy & Byrne, 2010; McCoy, Byrne, O’Connell, Kelly, & Doherty, 2010; Sammons, Day, Kington, Gu, Stobart, & Smees, 2007; Thogersen-Ntoumani & Fox, 2005). This is an organic methodology as collation and analysis of both types of data simultaneously, means that emerging qualitative themes of importance can be quantified to determine scale and incidence, and emerging quantitative findings measured at significant levels, can be inspected to determine underlying themes and experiences. Integrating analytic strategies in this way ensures that every aspect of the transition from post-primary to HE is captured; mixed methods are increasingly used in the study of such transitional processes (Day et al., 2008; Kenny, Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2010; McCoy et al., 2010; McCoy, 2011).

In summary, this research programme used an inductive and deductive methodology to determine the enablers and barriers to transition to HE for post-primary students with disabilities. A mixed methodology (Creswell, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, 2011) was selected as the most suitable approach for this research programme, as it permits exploration of multiple viewpoints within the research environment (Greene, 2007). Mixed methodologies use research

instruments that explore and explain the research topic by merging, connecting or embedding quantitative and qualitative data (Brannen, 2005; Clark, Creswell, Green, & Shope, 2008; Creswell, 2003, 2009, 2011, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, 2011). Within this research programme, quantitative data is used to measure the scale, frequency, type and location of promoters or inhibitors to transition, whilst qualitative data illustrates how these are experienced at a personal level, ensuring that the voices of students and parents are valued. Having established the overarching methodological perspective, the following section sets out a research design that facilitates the mixing of quantitative and qualitative data.

4.3 Research Design

Investigating rare, hidden, elusive, marginalized, excluded and blurred populations, Rossi (2008) states that “without solid qualitative research it is not possible to define appropriate quantitative methodology” (p. 3). Atkinson (1998) suggests that this should include: (a) relativity to non-excluded individuals or groups, (b) the excluding agency, and (c) the dynamics of exclusion which considers future prospects in addition to the current situation, where the design focuses on “people rather than experimentally manipulated variables” (Burden, 2008, slide 3). Therefore, there is no assumption of homogeneity within the research sample, and the design of this research programme recognises within-group diversity, for example, functional limitations, socio-cultural attitudes, and equality of access to supports and opportunities.

This research programme principally used inductive and deductive logics of enquiry with the purpose of examining the experiences of disabled students, parents / carers and practitioners during the senior cycle of education in post-primary school, to determine enablers and barriers to transition. Merging and interpreting data within a mixed-method study is a delicate and time-consuming process, but an integrated design validates the central role of participants in the research (McKiernan, Guerin, Steggles, & Carr, 2007), and ensures that the “voice” of students with disabilities and their parents or carers, is valued (Hamill & Boyd, 2003; Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, & Daly, 2000; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2002; Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Using a mixed-method design is the optimum approach with which to analyse all aspects of the data collected from each of the three studies in this research programme, providing both scale and depth to the findings.

A concurrent-triangulation-convergent design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003) was identified as the most efficient and productive method with which to test the hypotheses that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, and (b) a dedicated transition planning strategy for post-primary students with a disability, can promote, encourage and assist with their transition journey. This is a relationship-based design (e.g. non-experimental) which investigates the relationship between factors and variable; these are specified in a discussion of quantitative (QUAN) and qualitative (QUAL) components in section 4.5. Study One and Study Two were conducted concurrently using: (a) web-based surveys embedded in the Pathways transition website for each of the sample populations (students with disabilities, parents/carers, practitioners), and in-depth interviews with each of the sample populations (Study One); and (b) surveys to undergraduate students in one HEI, who were also applicants to the DARE scheme, together with in-depth interviews (Study Two). A detailed description of the construction, components and procedures for these methods is provided in section 4.5 and sections 4.6.1 and 4.6.2. Study Three was conducted concurrently using web analytics embedded into each page of the Pathways transition website, web registration forms, and online surveys to transition workshop participants; a detailed description of the construction, components and procedures for these methods is provided in section 4.5 and section 4.6.3.

QUAL and QUAN approaches were used simultaneously in every aspect of the design for Study One, Study Two and Study Three, to “confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings” (Creswell, 2003, p. 217). No priority was given to either method of data collection or analysis; results were converged in the presentation of findings for each study, during the interpretation of findings for each study, and merged again in the discussion of findings for the research programme, with the aim of providing a complementary inference (Östlund, Kidd, Wengström, & Rowa-Dewar, 2011).

The following section presents the rationale for the selection of sampling techniques used for each of the studies in this research programme, as dictated by the mixing of data collection and analysis methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2003; Teddlie & Yu, 2007).

4.4 Research Sample

Probability sampling is based on the notion of random selection of participants, in that the process or procedure for acquiring participants results in the probability of having a range of participants from a particular population (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This sampling technique was selected for Study One and Study Two to capture quantitative data with the purpose of: (a) making statistical inferences; (b) achieving a representative sample using a method whereby participants are randomly selected; and (c) consequently minimising sampling bias.

Purposive random sampling techniques are used where it is not possible to research the entire target population due to size and time constraints (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Within this methodological approach, a maximum variation sampling method was selected to capture qualitative data in Study One and Study Two via in-depth interviews, with the intention of: (a) collating a wide range of perspectives relating to transition experiences, (b) using triangulation to gain an insight into the reality of transition experiences, and (c) identify shared themes across the sample. This mixed method sampling technique has been used successfully in a number of MM studies within educational settings (Day, Sammons. & Gu, 2008; Lasserre-Cortez, 2006; McCoy et al., 2010

The following three sub-sections provide detail specific to identification of participants and method of recruitment, for each of the three studies within this research programme.

4.4.1 Study One Research Sample

Study One investigated the transition experiences of students with disabilities, parents / carers, and practitioners, prior to transition from post-primary school. This sample population was selected on the basis that a triangulation of perspectives from each of these stakeholder groups would add depth to the findings, an approach used in other narrative studies of disability (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2012).

Probability sampling was used in the QUAN component of Study One, in which data was collected using online surveys to students with disabilities in the senior cycle of education, and parents, schools and practitioners supporting students with disabilities in the senior cycle of education. This assumed a probability of acquiring responses across a range of disability categories, school types and

practitioner expertise within the field of education / special education. Purposive sampling was used for the QUAL component of Study One, in which data was collected from participants who responded to an invitation to interview in a final survey question. Two phases of recruitment were employed concurrently for Study One.

Phase 1 recruitment began on the 4th April 2011 with an initial probability sample of participants composed of: (a) post-primary students with disabilities, (b) parents, carers or guardians, and (c) practitioners associated with transition processes and programmes (n = 2,093) (Table 13).

Table 13

Study One Probability Sample

<u>Sample</u>	<u>N =</u>	<u>Method</u>
CAO applicants to TCD disclosing a disability	936	Email
Disability support groups	63	Email
Practitioners in education	108	Email
Principals	185	Letter
Guidance Counsellors	463	Letter
Resource Teachers	268	Letter
Higher Options, Better Options, DARE clinic	70	Flyers
Total	2093	

The student sample was recruited from students with disabilities applying to one HEI, who indicated a disability on their CAO application. Parents were recruited from disability and community support groups by requesting insertion of a link to the Pathways website on support group web pages, or by including a brief introduction to the research programme in community support group newsletters. Participants in these samples were sent an email introduction to the Pathways website (Appendix A6).

The practitioner sample was recruited from State departments and national bodies (e.g. Department of Education and Science, the National Disability Authority, the National Council for Special Education, the Disability Federation of Ireland, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the Special Education Support Service, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals), Special Educational Needs Officers (SENOs). A database of individual contact emails was collated for each of these entities as these are generally available through web searches or on request. For

example, contact details for school Principals were retrieved from post-primary school lists which can be downloaded from the DES website. Participants in this sample were sent an email introduction to the Pathways website (Appendix A6).

Contact with resource and learning support teachers, and Guidance Counsellors (GC) was via a printed invitation to access the Pathways website and participate in the research programme (Appendix A6). At the time of data collection (2011) it was not possible to retrieve individual contact details for this sample, and therefore invitations to visit the Pathways transition website and complete the transition survey were posted to each post-primary school, and addressed to 'The Resource Teacher', 'The Learning Support Teacher', or 'The Guidance Counsellor.' Invitations were also distributed in person to this sample at public events such as Higher Options.

Phase 2 of participant recruitment began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch of the website. Formal invitations were not issued but links to each of the surveys were prominent on the main page menu. It was anticipated that as the profile of the Pathways transition website increased, additional participants would self-select for engagement with the surveys and interviews.

4.4.2 Study Two Research Sample

Study Two investigated the transition experiences of students with disabilities post-entry to HE. An initial probability sample was identified as students with disabilities registered with the Disability Service in one HEI, who were approaching the conclusion of their first year in HE. Probability sampling was used in the QUAN component of Study Two, in which data was collected using online surveys to students (n = 166) with an assumed probability of acquiring responses across a range of disability categories (Table 14). Purposive sampling was used for the QUAL component of Study Two, in which data was collected from participants who responded to an invitation to interview in a final survey question.

Two phases of recruitment were employed sequentially for Study Two. Recruitment for Phase 1 took place in March 2012 with the purpose of capturing data spanning the pre-entry and post-entry period in the academic year 2011 to 2012; email invitations were sent to first year undergraduate students with disabilities in one HEI (n = 66). Recruitment for Phase 2 took place in March 2013 with the purpose of capturing data spanning the pre-entry and post-entry period in the academic year 2012

to 2013; email invitations were sent to first year undergraduate students with disabilities in one HEI (n = 100).

Table 14

Study Two Probability Sample

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage %</u>
AS/ASD	12	7.2
ADD/ADHD	14	8.4
B/VI	3	1.8
Df/HI	10	6.0
DCD	9	5.4
MHC	26	39.4
NC	3	1.8
PD	13	7.8
SLC	1	0.6
SOI	35	21.0
SpLD	40	23.9

4.4.3 Study Three Research Sample

Study Three investigated engagement with transition planning resources created specifically for this research programme, focusing on a sample population of students with disabilities, parents / carers, and educational practitioners, in the period prior to transition from post-primary school. This sample population was selected on the basis that a triangulation of perspectives from each of these stakeholder groups would add depth to the findings, an approach used in other narrative studies of disability (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2012).

Probability sampling was used in the QUAN component of Study Three, in which data was collected using: (a) a commercial web analytics tool to measure engagement with the transition website, (b) a registration form requesting permission to download and use the transition planning tool, and (c) surveys to students with disabilities parents, and practitioners who participated in Leaving Certificate transition planning workshops within one HEI. This assumed a probability of acquiring responses across a range of disability categories, school year, school types and practitioner expertise within the field of education / special education. Sample sizes for use of the website repository and transition tool were therefore infinite, up to close of data collection.

Purposive sampling was used for the QUAL component of Study Three, in which data was collected from participants who: (a) submitted email enquiries to the website, (b) submitted postings to the forum/blog hosted on the website, (c) submitted comments about the transition planning tool, and (d) completed a qualitative survey at the conclusion of participation in the transition workshops. The following section outlines initial participant recruitment to introduce the Pathways website, transition planning tool and forum/blog, in two concurrent phases.

Recruitment for online resources. Phase 1 recruitment began on the 4th April 2011 with an initial probability sample of participants (Table 15) composed of: (a) post-primary students with disabilities, (b) parents, carers or guardians, and (c) practitioners associated with transition processes and programmes (n = 2,093).

Table 15

Study Three Initial Probability Sample

<u>Sample</u>	<u>N =</u>	<u>Method</u>
Disability support groups	63	Email
Practitioners in education	108	Email
Principals	185	Letter
Guidance Counsellors	463	Letter
Resource Teachers	268	Letter
Higher Options, Better Options, DARE clinic	70	Flyers
Total	2093	

The student sample was recruited from students with disabilities applying to one HEI, who indicated a disability on their CAO application; parents were recruited from disability and community support groups; practitioners were recruited from State departments and national bodies (e.g. Department of Education and Science, the National Disability Authority, the National Council for Special Education, the Disability Federation of Ireland, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, the Special Education Support Service, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals), Special Educational Needs Officers (SENOs), resource and learning support teachers, and Guidance Counsellors. Contact by email, posted letters, and flyers distributed at public events invited participants to visit the Pathways transition website and complete the transition survey.

Phase 2 of participant recruitment began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch of the website. It was anticipated that links to the site would increase over time as a consequence of the sample population discovering content through web searches, external links from guidance counsellors, disability and community groups, schools and practitioners, and personal recommendation.

The following section outlines participant recruitment for the Pathways transition workshops for Leaving Certificate students, in two sequential phases.

Recruitment for transition planning workshops. The Pathways transition workshops took place in two sequential phases: Phase 1 timeline spanned one Wednesday afternoon in each month between September 2011 and April 2012, Phase 2 timeline spanned one Wednesday afternoon each month between September 2012 and April 2013. Given the time constraints of travel from school to the workshop location in a Dublin HEI, sampling was restricted to the Dublin area.

Probability sampling was used for this element of Study Three in which data was collected using qualitative surveys and feedback forms to students with disabilities in the senior cycle of education, parents, school staff and practitioners, all of whom participated in the transition planning workshops. Recruitment assumed a probability of acquiring responses across a range of disability categories, school year and school types, and commenced on the 3rd August 2011, to a probability sample of staff within one HEI in Dublin (Table 16). Invitations were distributed by the Human Resources Department through staff email lists, flyers displayed in staff communal areas, and advertisement on the HEI online noticeboard.

Table 16

Study Three Probability Sample: Phase 1 Transition Workshops

<u>Sample</u>	<u>No. of staff</u>
Administrative staff (library, technical, administrative, and services)	1491
Academic staff	777
Research staff	606
Total	2874

Recruitment for Phase 2 began on the 20th June 2012 to a probability sample of SENOs, Guidance Counsellors and Principals attached to post-primary schools in the

Dublin area, (Table 17) identified in lists accessed from the Department of Education and National Council for Special Education. Invitations were sent by email to the sample population, all of whom were invited to an introductory meeting.

Table 17

Study Three Probability Sample: Phase 2 Transition Workshops

<u>Sample</u>	<u>Invitations</u>
School Principals	184
Guidance Counsellors	171
SENOs	24
Total	379

This section has discussed theories of sampling choice, and identified the sample populations for Study One, Study Two and Study Three. The following section presents a detailed description of the quantitative and qualitative components of the research programme, as a precursor to an audit of the procedure for administration of the research design for each study, provided in section 4.7.

4.5 Research Method

The research programme used an MM concurrent-triangulation-convergent design within a transformative paradigm, consisting of concurrent QUAN and QUAL data collection with equal weighting (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Handson, 2003). The procedure in this type of design is for the researcher to collect QUAN and QUAL data simultaneously within the same time period, and converge results during the analysis and interpretation stage. The rationale for this approach is that QUAN data provides an overview of the research problem, while content analysis of QUAL data can explain statistical data by exploring participant viewpoints in more depth, with the intent was to “validate or expand quantitative results with qualitative data” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 62). The following section sets out the QUAN data components for each of the studies in this research programme.

4.5.1 Quantitative Component

This research programme investigated enablers and barriers to transition from the perspective of post-primary students with disabilities, parents / carers and practitioners, in Ireland. Surveys were chosen as the quantitative method of data collection as they are “concerned with the relationship between variables” and not just

the distribution or frequency of variables (Punch, 2003, p. 3). Adapting an existing survey is efficient in that it eliminates the need for lengthy design and construction (De Leeuw, Hox, & Dillman, 2008). Quantitative data was collated through administration of surveys partially based on previous measures used in studies within educational settings with high reliability and validity (Elliot & Wilson, 2008; Kirby, 2011; Mc Guckin et al., 2013).

The following sections set out the method of determining survey questions for Study One, Study Two and Study Three, by identifying factors, variables and data sets from which appropriate items were selected.

Study One quantitative methods. Mc Guckin et al (2013) administered surveys to students, parents and practitioners in a study of pre-transition experiences of students with SEN. This study addressed the thematic areas of: (a) demographics, (b) SEN description (c) school guidance, (d) access and progression experiences, (e) services and supports at second and third level, and (f) transfer of information at third level. Completion rates in surveys are dependent upon length and construction of the survey, with shorter more succinct surveys more likely to have a higher response rate and thus more validity (Punch, 2003). Based on this design approach, survey length, question structure and language were examined and cross-referenced with the research questions identified in this research programme. Consequently, an optimum survey length of a minimum of 10 questions and a maximum of 20 questions was identified. Subsequently, draft surveys to students with disabilities, parents and practitioners were constructed and piloted to: (a) practitioners in post-primary schools attending courses in one HEI (n = 12), (b) parent volunteers from one disability support group (n = 7), and (c) post-primary students with disabilities in State, Private and DEIS schools in the local area (n = 9), to ensure clarity of language and question structure, and ease of survey completion. The surveys were revised based on feedback which principally directed attention to adjusting the language and format of questions that used a matrix of responses.

The relationship between disability types, school attended current school year, quality and extent of support, identity of support providers and personal opinions of promoters and inhibitors within the transition process were identified as independent variables (IV), and successful transition to higher education as a continuous dependent variable (DV). Separate surveys were constructed for students, parents / carers and

practitioners to: (a) measure the quantity and quality of information and assistance around the transition process for students with disabilities, (b) collect demographic data to investigate associations between school type, school year attended and disability category, and (c) collect experiential data from stakeholders about their experiences or opinions on transition via open-ended questions, that can be coded and quantified.

Factors and variables for each of the surveys to students, parents/carers and practitioners were extracted from the research questions (Appendix A9) to investigate relationships that would permit IVs to predict DV. The selection of IVs was based on the need to avoid overlap, duplication or bias, which might lead to incorrect conclusions about the DV. A data set was extracted from the factors and variables for each (Tables 18, 19 and 20), and from these an initial pool of survey items was constructed and piloted with stakeholder groups to determine ambiguity, clarity and length of completion; some questions were subsequently revised.

Table 18

Study One: Student Survey Quantitative Data Set

Data set 1: Student survey

Categorical

<u>IV (conceptual definitions)</u>	<u>IV (operational definitions)</u>
1. disability type	1. disability categories
2. school type	2. school type: fees, no fees, DEIS
3. year of study	3. TY, 5 th , 6 th
4. quality of support	4. rating scales
5. extent of support	5. rating scales
6. identity of support provider	6. parent, friend, SENO, teacher etc
7. factors in successful transition	7. undefined open-ended response
8. barriers to successful transition	8. undefined open-ended response

Table 19

Study One Parent / Carer Survey Quantitative Data Set

<u>Data set 2: Parent / carer survey</u>	
Categorical	
<u>IV (conceptual definitions)</u>	<u>IV (operational definitions)</u>
1. disability type	1. disability categories
2. school type	2. school type: fees, no fees, DEIS
3. year of study	3. TY, 5 th , 6 th
4. quality of support	4. rating scales
5. extent of support	5. rating scales
6. identity of support provider	6. parent, friend, SENO, teacher etc
7. factors in successful transition	7. undefined open-ended response
8. barriers to successful transition	8. undefined open-ended response

Table 20

Study One Practitioner Survey Quantitative Data Set

<u>Data set 3: Practitioner survey</u>	
Categorical	
<u>IV (conceptual definitions)</u>	<u>IV (operational definitions)</u>
1. gender	1. male / female
2. professional experience	2. years in education / special education
3. qualification / expertise	3. education, psychology, SEN
4. experience with disability type	4. disability categories
5. quality of support	5. rating scales
6. factors in successful transition	6. undefined open-ended response
7. barriers to successful transition	7. undefined open-ended response

To maximise response rates, surveys were made available in the public domain by embedding them within the Pathways to Trinity website, with links provided in the main menu bar. Theoretically, in addition to invited participants, any visitor to the website could participate in the research thereby broadening the research sample.

Surveys were delivered via a professional SurveyMonkey® account which included the facility to export and analyse numeric data to SPSS™.

Study Two quantitative methods. Elliot and Wilson (2008) administered questionnaires to students with disabilities in HE in a study which examined post-entry experiences of transition for students with ‘hidden’ disabilities. Four question themes from this study were identified as important for inclusion in Study Two: (a) levels of support in HE, (b) identification of key supporters in HE, (c) differences between school and HE, and (d) reflections on the first year of college. Items relating to individual descriptions of impact of disability, finance, and communicating disability within the academic environment were not included, as they were considered to be unrelated to comparing quality and levels of transition guidance at post-primary and third level. An additional three question themes relating to: (a) access and progression experiences, (b) comparison of services and supports at second and third level, and (c) transfer of information at third level, were also included (Mc Guckin et al., 2013). Question length, structure and language were examined and cross-referenced with the research questions identified in this research programme. Draft surveys were piloted to students with disabilities attending the HEI within which the research programme was conducted. An email invitation explaining the purpose of the pilot was sent to all third year students registered with the Disability Service (n = 182). Feedback from n = 30 responses did not indicate any issues with survey length, question structure or language.

Consequently, factors and variables were extracted from the research questions (Table 21) to investigate relationships that would permit IVs to predict DV, culminating in a data set for each survey (Table 22). The selection of IVs was based on the need to avoid overlap, duplication or bias, which might lead to incorrect conclusions about the DV. An initial pool of surveys items was constructed from the data sets, and the resulting draft surveys were piloted to randomly selected first year undergraduate students within one HEI, from each of the disability categories (n = 10), to determine ambiguity, clarity of language and question structure, and ease of survey completion. Feedback from the pilot did not indicated minor adjustments to phrasing of some question items. Surveys were delivered via a professional SurveyMonkey® account which includes the facility to export and analyse numeric data to SPSS™.

Table 21

Study Two Survey Factors and Variables

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Variables</u>
Transition process	Very easy, Fairly easy, Manageable, Difficult, Very difficult
Person input	Unilink Service, Parents, Family support, College friends, School friends, Knowing someone in college, College Tutor, Disability Service, Academic staff, Nobody
Transition assistance	Provided information, Explained options, Helped with decisions, Discussed supports and advised, Understood my disability, Gave encouragement, Don't know/can't remember, No help
Support in college	I have been well supported, I know where to go for help, advice or support, I have had opportunities to discuss any problems, I have a key person who I can rely on for help, advice and support
Support in comparison to school	Needs are understood better, More support is available, Easier to locate support, More professional, People are more helpful, Better advice, Advice is more practical, Information is easier to find
Future Transition Year initiatives	Workshops on applying to college, Advice clinics for students with disabilities, A transition website, Visits to college Disability Services, Disability specific information, Make transition planning part of the curriculum / timetable
Experience of the DARE process	Very easy, Simple enough, Confusing, Very complicated

Table 22

Study Two Survey Quantitative Data Set

<u>Data set student survey</u>	
<u>Categorical</u>	
<u>IV (conceptual definitions)</u>	<u>IV (operational definitions)</u>
1. Disability type	1. Disability categories
2. Faculty of study	2. FAHSS, FEMS, FHS, Multi
3. Ease of transition	3. Rating scales
4. Identity of support provider	4. Parent, friend, academic etc
5. Comparison of supports	5. Rating scales
6. DARE experience	6. Rating scales
7. Advice to other students	7. Undefined open-ended response

The survey was distributed by email to first year students with a disability who applied to the DARE scheme in one HEI in Ireland.

Study Three quantitative methods. Web statistics were collected using Google Analytics (GA), an enterprise-class web analytics solution that provides added insight into the analysis of website traffic. GA is an effective resource for measuring the impact of academic research output and understanding the geodemographics of users of specific web 2.0 content, and has been used effectively in other studies measuring engagement with Internet-based interventions and to measure visitor behavior, geodemographics and content access (Crutzen, Roosjen, & Poelman, 2012; Kirk, Morgan, Tonkin, McDonald, & Skirton, 2012; Mc Guckin & Crowley, 2010). GA provides a unique HTML code that the web author inserts before the </body> line in the HTML code of each page to be analysed. GA will begin tracking as soon as coded webpages are uploaded and “live”. This code was inserted into all Pathways to Trinity website pages, and the original Weebly discussion forum pages. Currently it is not possible to replicate this for the Pathways blog, as the TCD Wordpress account does not permit this level of site management. Analytical tools include number of site visits, visitor profile, page views, time on site, referring sites, search engines and demographics by town / city, country and language. Results can be provided in one of two ways: as a visual representation (Figure 6) or as a Microsoft Excel report. There is also a capacity to “annotate” key dates and extract custom reports for specific date ranges, for example, traffic data for the launch date of 4 April 2011, or distribution of letters to Guidance Counsellors on the 11th April 2011 (Figure 7).

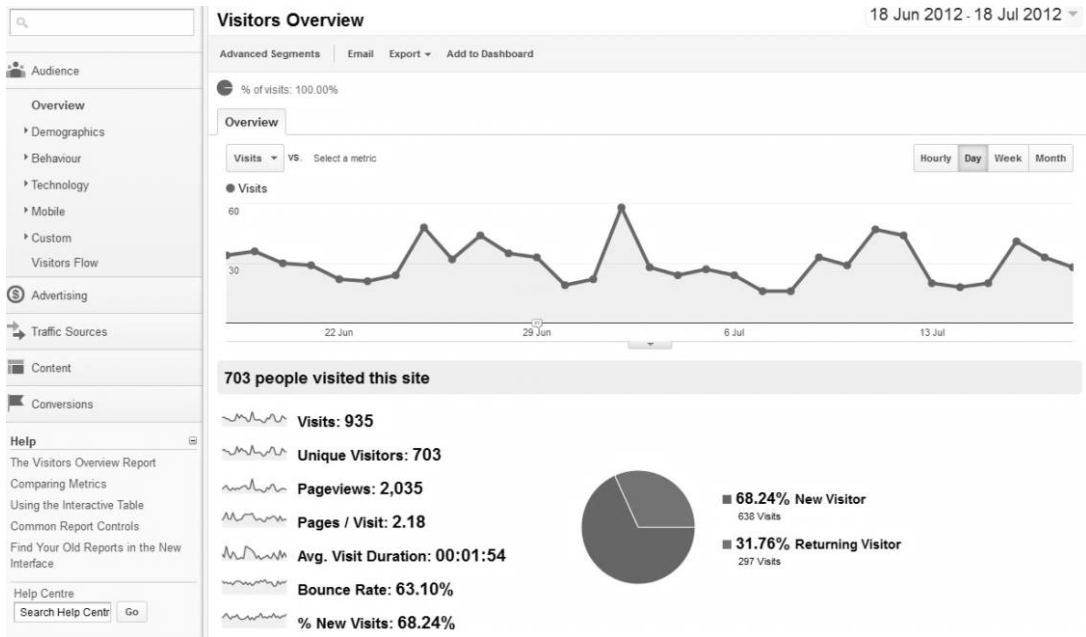


Figure 6. Study Three Google Analytics web traffic report.

Thus, it is possible to observe the effects of environmental factors on website visits and survey participation, and to determine whether there is any relationship between variables such as social media communication (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), blog posts, modifications or additions to website content, or significant temporal events in the transition process, such as DARE application or Leaving Certificate examination results.

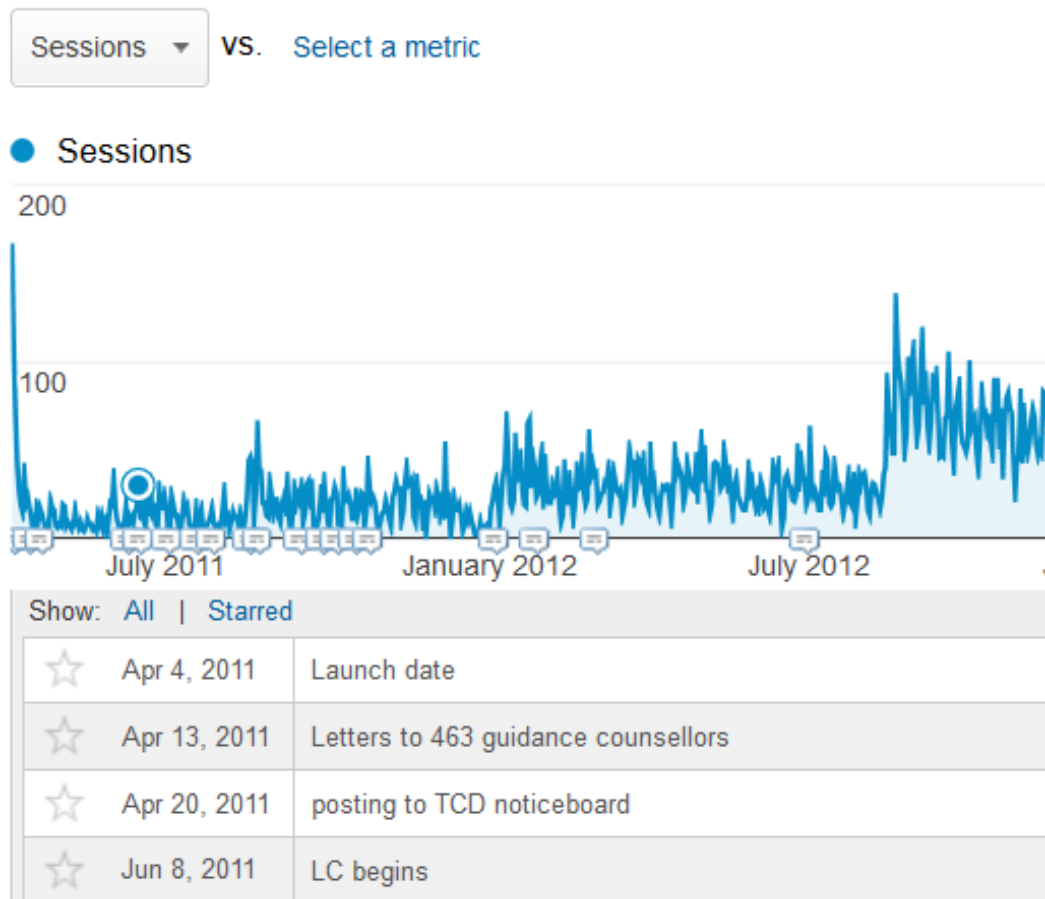


Figure 7. Study Three Google Analytics annotated timeline.

Quantification of thematic analyses. On completion of the qualitative analyses for Study One, Study Two and Study Three which are presented in the Qualitative Component section that follows, themes identified for each study were also quantified to establish the frequency of their occurrence (Guest & MacQueen, 2012). A complete example of identified themes is not provided due to the significant size of the corpus, however Figure 8 illustrates how this data was collated and quantified by theme.

Theme	Example	Frequency (N =)
Links between school and HE	S: 13 Felt these [access to info] could be promoted more with 2nd level by the school. S2: I do think that it is important that students understand every aspect of their course before they come and the best way to do this is to hear from people who are there. S23: I tried to go back to my school to discuss my course with the students who are making the choices now but my school does not have a history of going to HEI they never got back to me. I know that they have people in from HEI all the time and that they even have students from there come in so that is why I offered but never heard back. S31: Speak to someone in the College. S14: We had had a talk on DARE at the beginning of the year in school but it did not really explain what it was or how it worked. More information on DARE so people consider it as an option would be useful.	5
Access to concrete information	S6: Found all the material online very helpful if needed and could not add to the resources already available. S12 I read the information and didn't feel I had questions that went unanswered. S15: The information sent out was comprehensive and straightforward. S4: The internet has good information to prepare you. I found the necessary information was there but you needed to research it yourself – you didn't get it in school. S: More information on DARE so people consider it as an option would be useful.	12

Figure 8. Study Two sample thematic quantification.

This section set out the principles of quantitative data collection which were incorporated into the research design for Study One, Study Two and Study Three, and described identification of quantitative factors, variables and data sets for investigation. The following section introduces the principles of qualitative data collection applied to this research programme, and describes the method of data analysis employed for each of the studies.

4.5.2 Qualitative Component

Exploring the narratives of participants in this research programme allowed the researcher to: (a) survey the landscape of transition to HE, (b) observe the cause and effects of interactions between and across the Micro, Meso, Exo and Macrosystems, and (c) reflect on the implications and wider meaning of quantitative findings (Josselson & Leiblich, 1993). Inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) was used for the qualitative component of the research methodology to dissect the data from: (a) free response text from survey comments and the text corpus from interview

transcripts in Study One and Study Two, (b) contributions to the discussion forum / blog in Study Three, and (c) feedback from students, parents and practitioners who engaged in the transition workshops in Study Three. A thematic analysis of this corpus was identified as an important method of investigating the presence of power structures that affect transition from post-primary to HE (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2012; Crozier, 1999; Daly, Keogh, & Whyte, 2007) as it involves “grounding the examination of topics and themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them, in the data” (Zhang, 2009, p. 1).

Using a purposively selected text corpus facilitates investigation of the research questions by gathering viewpoints from participants that reflect their experience within specific social contexts (Neuendorf, 2002; Schamber, 2000; Zhang, 2009). Thematic content analysis was selected as an ideal method of examining the perspectives of students with disabilities, parents / carers and practitioners as it is “not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented” Neuendorf, 2002, p. 10).

This method adopts a “mix” of approaches to examining transition experiences: an idiographic perspective (analysing themes from interview transcripts and survey comments to gain an insider viewpoint) and a nomothetic perspective (quantitative data analysis of text themes), in order to answer the research question. The process of thematically coding qualitative data develops and refines interpretation of QUAL data from interviews or focus groups by categorising it into meaningful themes. Criteria that ensure high quality analysis of text (Elliot & Timulak, 1999) include owning the perspective, grounding the materials in examples, credibility checks, and coherence of analysis (Guerin, 2013, p. 16). Thematic analysis of content requires immersion in the data by repeated re-reading and re-examination of transcripts, thus it can be labour intensive and time consuming (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Surveys were delivered via a professional SurveyMonkey® account which includes a text analysis feature using an integrated concordance tool. After exploration and testing this instrument was not considered to be sufficiently sophisticated for the purposes of this research programme. Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) such as Nvivo and Ethnograph are efficient instruments for transcription analysis of a large corpus of text, but arguably make text

analysis a mechanical process by removing some of the spontaneity and imaginative aspects associated with narrative (Boje, 2008). Ultimately, “the choice will be dependent on the size of the project, the funds and time available, and the inclination and expertise of the researcher” (Basit, 2003, p. 143). A significant level of preparatory work must be completed in order to use a CAQDAS programme, including acquiring the skills to manipulate the complex functions inherent within the software; effectively, there is a danger that time and focus will be expended on learning to manage the tool that might be more productively spent on exploring the data (Saldana, 2009). As no prior knowledge or experience of CAQDAS was available, hard copy or human coding was selected as the most efficient method for analysing the data.

Human coding is usually conducted by a minimum of two coders using a code book and coding form to establish inter-coder reliability, however most small scale QUAL studies are coded by a single researcher (Saldana, 2009). As this research programme was conducted by a single researcher, a reliability figure was not calculated, however texts were re-read and coding decisions reviewed across three analysis cycles. To establish coding credibility, a triangulation of text forms was used by converging information from interview transcripts, open-ended survey comments, and text artefacts from blog postings and email messages. To provide interpretative validity to the findings, interview participants were provided with a copy of the transcripts with themes identified in text. External validity, in terms of whether findings can be generalized to other contexts or time periods across the same or similar research samples, was determined by the representativeness of the research sample.

A description of the thematic analysis method for each of the studies incorporating identification of data sets and coding categories is provided in the following sections, beginning with Study One.

Study One qualitative components. QUAL data sets were extracted from open-ended survey questions in Study One, which investigated the pre-transition experiences of students with disabilities, parents / carers and practitioners (Table 23). Data sets for each sample population were identified to assist with establishing an initial framework for thematically coding the corpus of text.

Coding categories were not pre-identified on the basis of existing theories or prior knowledge, and the purpose of the analysis was not to confirm or refute

previous findings. Data was first coded in an exploratory analysis to gain a sense of perspectives within the data set. Subsequently, an open rather than relational coding system was selected, and a set of a priori or initial codes were identified.

Table 23

Study One Survey Qualitative Data Sets

Data set 1 students

Q7: advice and support providers

Q8: usefulness of transition planning resources

Q9: worries and concerns about going to college

Data set 2 parents

Q7: type and quality of transition information and advice

Q8: usefulness of transition planning resources

Q7: factors associated with successful transition to college

Q8: barriers to successful transition to college

Data set 3 (practitioners)

Q8: difficulties faced by schools in supporting transition for students with disabilities

Q9: factors associated with successful transition to college

Q10: barriers to successful transition to college

A coding key was constructed for survey comments and interview transcripts in Study One (Tables 24, 25 and 26) which specified the name and definition of each code (e.g. Administrative), a description of when the code should be applied (e.g. tasks involved in the application process), together with an identification of the coding filter (e.g. Descriptive: a descriptive commentary of events and their outcomes). A coding key is necessary to establish consistency and reliability of data analysis (Saldana, 2009), and was referred to during each of the three cycles of analysis. These codes were also used as a basis for quantification of the incidence of themes.

Table 24
Study One A Priori Codes Student Surveys and Interviews

<u>Experience of the DARE process</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Administrative= tasks involved in the application process	Descriptive
Human= people involved / associated with the DARE process	Descriptive
Emotional= feelings associated with the application process	Values
Disability= words or phrases tagged with the item 'disability'	Attributes

Table 25
Study One Qualitative A Priori Codes Parent Surveys and Interviews

<u>Access to information, support and guidance</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Planning= all aspects of planning the move from school to college.	Descriptive
Friends/ship= support and attitude of school or college friends that contributed to the transition experience.	Values
School= support and guidance from school staff during the transition process.	Values
Application= elements of the application process including paperwork.	Descriptive
Course= course choice or structure as it affects perception of transition success.	Descriptive
Emotional= feelings associated with self-worth, self-determination, success and a sense of belonging and achievement.	Values
<u>Access to information, support and guidance</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Disability= words and phrases tagged to the item 'disability'.	Attributes

Success= factors parents believe are associated with successful transition	Values
Barriers= factors parents believe are associated with successful transition	Values
Help= quantity and quality of assistance	Values

Table 26
Study One A Priori Codes Practitioner Surveys and Interviews

<u>Supporting students with disabilities</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Resources=access to information, support and guidance	Descriptive
School= difficulties faced by schools supporting students with disabilities	Values
Application= elements of the application process including paperwork.	Descriptive
Disability= words and phrases tagged to the item 'disability'.	Attributes
Success= factors parents believe are associated with successful transition	Values
Barriers= factors parents believe are associated with successful transition	Values

The second and third coding cycles identified emerging themes, but also involved the merging or absorption of similar themes, or separation of significant themes. Coding and analysis was therefore derived inductively, reflecting the exploratory design of the methodology (Foster, 2004; Meyler, Guerin, Kiernan, & Breathnach, 2006; Schamber, 2000). During analysis, themes were annotated in the right-hand margin of electronic transcripts. Notations, in-margin memos, and comments were re-read and comparisons between transcripts were noted (Figure 9), as this helps to “distil redundancy and resolve incoherence among earlier open codings and theoretical memos” (Barnes-Holmes et al, 2013).

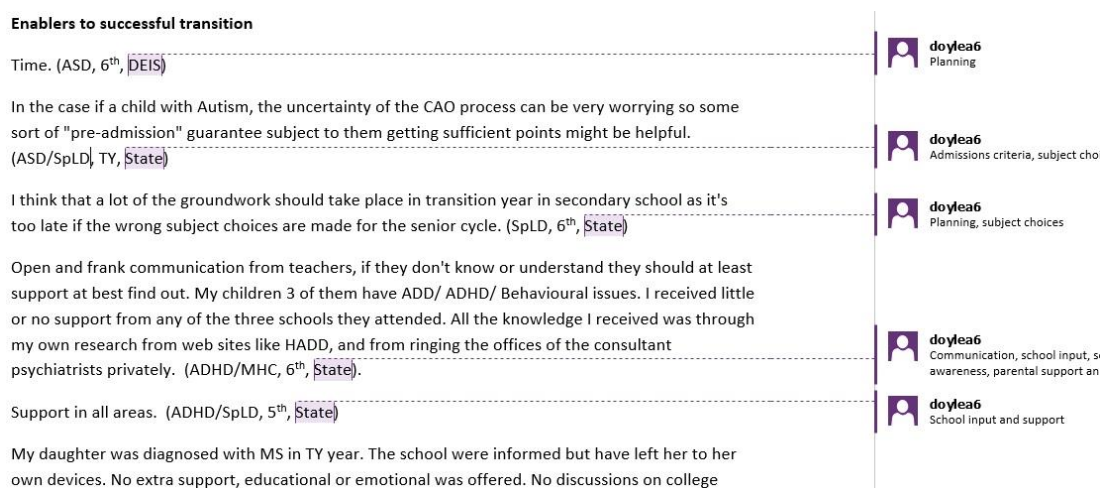


Figure 9. Study One in-text coding of survey responses.

This concludes the description of QUAL components for Study One, a similar structure is applied to a following section which describes the QUAL components of Study Two.

Study Two qualitative components. QUAL data sets were extracted from open-ended survey questions and interviews in Study Two, which investigated the post-transition experiences of students with disabilities nearing completion of their first year in HE. Data sets were identified to assist with establishing an initial framework for thematically coding the corpus of text and a coding key was constructed for survey comments and interview transcripts (Tables 27, 28, 29 and 30). The key specified the name and definition of each code (e.g. School), a description of when the code should be applied (e.g. support and guidance from school staff during the transition process), together with an identification of the coding filter (e.g. Values: opinions on the efficacy of input). These codes were also used as a basis for quantification of the incidence of themes.

Table 27

Study Two Qualitative Data Set Student Survey

Survey data set

- Q3: ease of transition from post-primary to third level education
- Q6: advice and support providers
- Q7: perspectives on support in college
- Q11: experience of the DARE process
- Q12: advice to Leaving Certificate students

Table 28

Study Two A Priori Codes: DARE Experience

<u>Experience of the DARE process</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Administrative= tasks involved in the application process	Descriptive
Human= people involved / associated with the DARE process	Descriptive
Emotional= feelings associated with the application process	Values
Disability= words or phrases tagged with the item 'disability'	Attributes
Transition= process/opportunities to change and grow	Values
Significance= degree of importance to the individual and their transition outcome	Values

Table 29

Study Two A Prior Codes: Transition Experience

<u>Factors affecting ease of transition</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Family= support and attitude of family members that contributed to the transition experience.	Values
Friends/ship= support and attitude of school or college friends that contributed to the transition experience.	Values
School= support and guidance from school staff during the transition process.	Values
Application= elements of the application process including paperwork.	Descriptive
Course= course choice or structure as it affects perception of transition success.	Descriptive
Structure/system= aspects of the way in which the HE institution is structured, or the organisational systems or processes it uses.	Descriptive
Academic= attitudes of academic staff.	Values
Teaching/learning= similarities and differences in teaching style and learning outcomes that affect transition experience.	Values
Independence= aspects of independent living e.g. accommodation, health, travel, and becoming self-managing	Descriptive
Emotional= feelings associated with self-worth, self-determination, success and a sense of belonging and achievement.	Values
Transition= as a process of change or growth	Attributes
Disability= words and phrases either specifically tagged to the concept 'disability', or which refer to the effects of a disability directly or indirectly.	Attributes
Significance= degree of importance to the individual and their transition outcome	Values

Table 30
Study Two A Priori Codes First Year Experience

<u>Advice to post-primary students with a disability</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Family= support and attitude of family members that contributed to the transition experience	Values
Friends/ship= support and attitude of school or college friends that contributed to the transition experience	Values
School= support and guidance from school staff during the transition process	Values
Course= course choice or structure as it affects perception of transition success	Descriptive
Structure/system= aspects of the way in which the HE institution is structured, or the organisational systems or processes it uses	Descriptive
Academic= attitudes, input from academic staff	Values
Teaching/learning= similarities and differences in teaching style and learning outcomes that affect transition experience	Values
Independence= aspects of independent living e.g. accommodation, health, travel, and becoming self-managing	Descriptive
Emotional= feelings associated with self-worth, self-determination, success and a sense of belonging and achievement	Values
Transition= as a process of change or growth	Values
Disability= words and phrases either specifically tagged to the concept 'disability', or which refer to the effects of a disability directly or indirectly	Attributes
Significance= degree of importance to the individual and their transition outcome	Values
Administrative= aspects of the application process itself	Descriptive

The second and third coding cycles identified emerging themes, but also involved the merging or absorption of similar themes, or separation of significant

themes. During analysis, themes were annotated in the right-hand margin of hard copy and electronic transcripts.

This concludes the presentation of QUAL components for Study Two, and is now followed by a final section which sets out the methodological components of Study Three.

Study Three qualitative components. QUAL data sets were extracted from: (a) open-ended survey questions which captured student and parent opinions on the content, format and usefulness of the transition workshops, and (b) submission of comments or queries to the website discussion forum / blog (Table 31). Data sets were identified to assist with establishing an initial framework for thematically coding the corpus of text. A coding key was constructed for survey comments (Table 32) which specified the name and definition of each code (e.g. Quality), a description of when the code should be applied (e.g. positive or negative observations relating to content or personnel or venues), together with an identification of the coding filter (e.g. Values: opinions on the efficacy of input). These codes were also used as a basis for quantification of the incidence of themes.

Table 31

Study Three Qualitative Data Sets Transition Workshop Surveys

Data set 1 students

Q2: reason for attending workshops
Q4: overall experience of workshops
Q5: positive aspects of workshops
Q6: negative aspects of workshops
Q7: suggestions for improvements

Data set 2 parents and practitioners

Q2: reason for enrolling students in workshops
Q4: overall experience of workshops
Q5: positive aspects of workshops
Q6: negative aspects of workshops
Q7: suggestions for improvements

Table 32

Study Three A Priori Codes Transition Workshops

<u>Workshop engagement</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Purpose= rationale for attending workshops, previous experiences, gaps in knowledge or support identified	Descriptive
Quality= positive or negative observations relating to content or personnel or venues	Values
Outcomes=perceived usefulness, gains. or no gains as a result of attending workshops	Values
Resources= identification of additional materials, activities or processes to enhance workshops	Attributes

Internet communities are a rich source of naturalistic data (Osvaldsson, 2011) where text represents an “unprompted and contextualized account” (p. 321) of experiences. The Pathways discussion board / blog was created in WordPress and linked to the main website, it was structured into five sections which represent the data sets for this component (Table 33). Its purpose was to investigate text content for themes within each section, and not to study the personal attributes of individuals who submitted text to the forum. A priori codes were identified based on each of the forum themes.

Table 33

Study Three Qualitative Data Set Transition Discussion Forum / Blog

<u>Data set discussion forum</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. mechanics of course choices, preferences, matriculation, applying to college 2. disability specific queries relating to supports in HE 3. opinions on quality and availability of transition support and resources 4. DARE queries relating to criteria, documentation, procedure, eligibility

A coding key was constructed for forum submissions (Table 34) which specified the name and definition of each code (e.g. Supports), a description of when the code should be applied (e.g. queries or submissions requesting or describing supports and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities in HE), together with an identification of the coding filter (e.g. Descriptive: factual advice or information). These codes were also used as a basis for quantification of the incidence of themes.

Table 34

Study Three A Priori Thematic Analysis Codes Discussion Forum / Blog

<u>Information, support and guidance</u>	<u>Coding filter</u>
Planning= all aspects of planning the move from school to college; elements of the application process including paperwork	Descriptive
Disability= disability related / specific themes	Attributes
Supports= queries or submissions requesting or describing supports and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities in HE	Descriptive
Transition=access to information, support and guidance concerned with the process of transition practices	Values
DARE= aspects of the DARE scheme including mechanics and criteria	Descriptive

This section has presented the QUAN and QUAL data collection components used in this research programme. The following section sets out a map of the research procedures for Study One, Study Two and Study Three using a visual diagram of the procedures and products for each study, together with a description of the procedure for initiating data collection, including administration of surveys and in-depth interviews.

4.6 Data Collection Procedure

This section sets out the procedures for each study as a guide to the administration of data collection instruments. They present information on the

recruitment of population samples, timeframes of data collection, and procedure for collecting and measuring QUAN and QUAL data.

4.6.1 Study One Procedure

Study One examined the transition experiences of post-primary students with disabilities, their parents / carers, and the viewpoints of practitioners connected to the transition process for students with disabilities. The principal objectives of the study were to: (a) investigate enablers and barriers to transition from the perspective of each stakeholder group; (b) compare experiences of quality and sources of transition advice to support progression from post-primary to FE / HE; (c) acquire a triangulation of perspectives on the transition journey from each of the stakeholder groups; and (d) identify areas for improvement and factors that will inform transition resources.

A visual diagram of procedures and products was constructed for Study One (Figure 10). Both QUAN and QUAL data sets were used to determine insider viewpoints around the transition process.

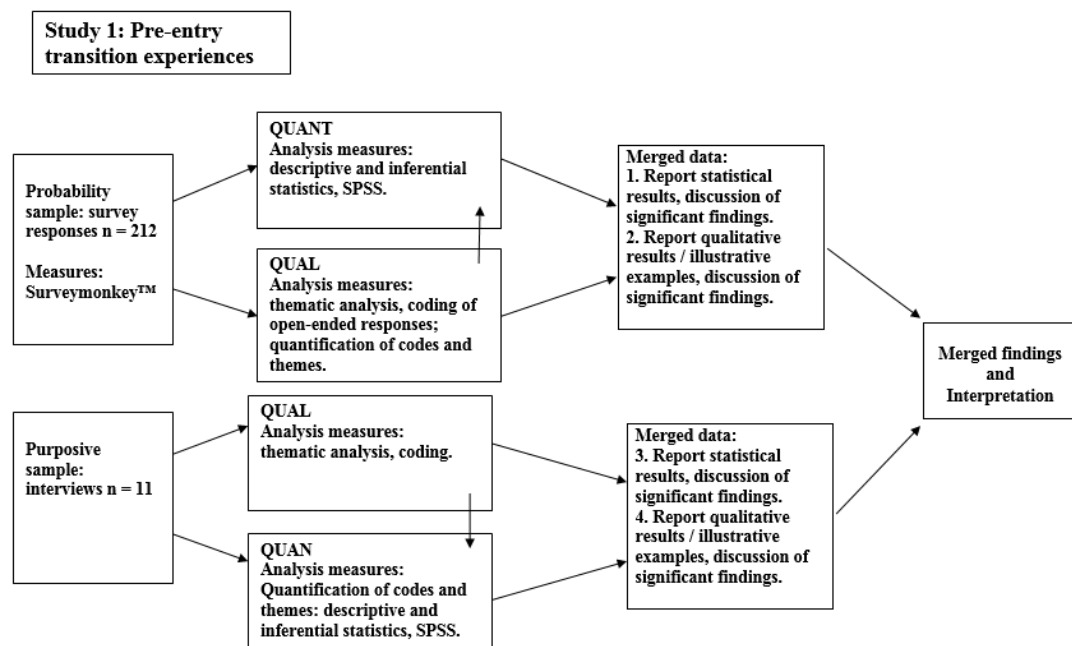


Figure 10. Study One visual diagram of procedures and products.

Research instrument. A self-administered survey was delivered to post-primary students with disabilities (Appendix A1), parents / carers (Appendix A2), and practitioners within the field of education (Appendix A3) via a SurveyMonkey® link embedded in the menu of the Pathways to Trinity website. An introduction to

the researcher, the purpose of the research, a statement of ethics, statement of anonymity and data collection (Appendix A4), were provided in the first three pages of the survey). This information was also provided in the “Information for Students” and “Information for Parents and Schools” sections of the website. Respondents were not asked to identify themselves in any way, other than by submission of an email address should they wish to participate in interviews or focus groups.

Recruitment. The Pathways to Trinity website was formally launched on the 4th April 2011; the probability sample identified in Section 4.4.1 were sent either an email or hard copy letter, inviting them to access and use the website resources, and to participate in the stakeholder surveys (Appendix A6). The surveys were delivered through the website with no closing date applied to the link, but a timeframe for data collection was established to facilitate analysis and reporting of findings for this thesis. Data collection began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch date of the website and dissemination of publicity material in print and by email, and a close date of 30th November 2013 was selected, representing 18 months of data collection, encompassing two complete Leaving Certificate cycles: 2011 – 2012 and 2012 – 2013. Although this timeline defines the research period for this research programme, all surveys currently remain open to facilitate longitudinal data collection for further study.

Data collection. Three sets of data were collated from the online surveys: data set 1 consisted of responses from secondary school students (n = 122), data set 2 consisted of responses from parents / carers (n = 69) and data set 3 consisted of responses from educational practitioners (n = 21). Data for IVs in each data set was cleaned for missing, ambiguous or duplicated responses; SPSS was used to extract frequencies and descriptive statistics, open-ended data was coded and thematically analysed.

A final survey question invited stakeholders to indicate an interest in participating in an interview, by submitting their email address. Participants were subsequently contacted by email to ascertain whether they would prefer to be interviewed in person or by telephone, at a time and date of their own choosing (Appendix A7). Prior to the interview date, participants were provided with a set of trigger questions (Appendix A8). Interviews were conducted in person or by

telephone for a duration of approximately 30 – 60 minutes; they were digitally recorded to permit post-interview thematic analysis and coding.

Interviews began with an opportunity for participants to describe / critique their use of the Pathways to Trinity website. This free-response method is a useful opening activity to ensure that participants feel their viewpoints are valid and valued (Luzzo, 1995). Subsequently, participants were asked to describe their experiences of transition from three perspectives: disability-specific issues, “internal” support (for example, parental / school input), and “external” support (for example, colleges, print information, media, events). The purpose of this line of questioning was to provide data that could be analysed to determine differences in experiences and to identify perceived barriers and enablers within the transition process. A number of previous studies were consulted to examine the structure and content of interviews, the style of questioning used, and interview procedure (Barnes-Holmes, 2013; Elliott & Wilson, 2008; HEA, 2006; Mc Guckin et al, 2013).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, participants were identified by a letter and number, for example S1 (Student 1), P1 (Parent 1), PR1 (Practitioner 1) and all personal name and place name identifiers were removed from each transcript. A copy of the transcription was emailed to each of the interviewees post-interview for comment, and in the interests of respondent validation, all participants were offered the opportunity to discuss the findings from thematic analysis of their transcript. Following verbatim transcription of the audio recordings, the text corpus was thematically analysed and coded by the researcher, as described in Section 4.5.2. On completion of transcription audio data was erased; interview transcripts were not printed as a hard copy, all content analysis was completed on electronic versions and annotated electronically.

This section has set out the procedures for data collection for Study One of this research programme, which investigated pre-transition experiences of students with disabilities completing the senior cycle of post-primary education, together with perspectives from parents or carers, and practitioners in the field of education. The section that follows replicates this structure for clarification of procedures for Study Two.

4.6.2 Study Two Procedure

Study Two examined the transition experiences of students with disabilities approaching the conclusion of their first year in HE. The principal objectives of the study were to: (a) examine practical and personal variables involved in the process of transitioning from school to college; (b) compare experiences of support and guidance in school, to experiences of support and guidance in HE; (c) identify enablers and barriers to transition, and (d) identify factors that can improve transition resources.

A visual diagram of procedures and products was constructed for Study Two (Figure 11). Both QUAN and QUAL data sets were used to determine insider viewpoints around the transition process.

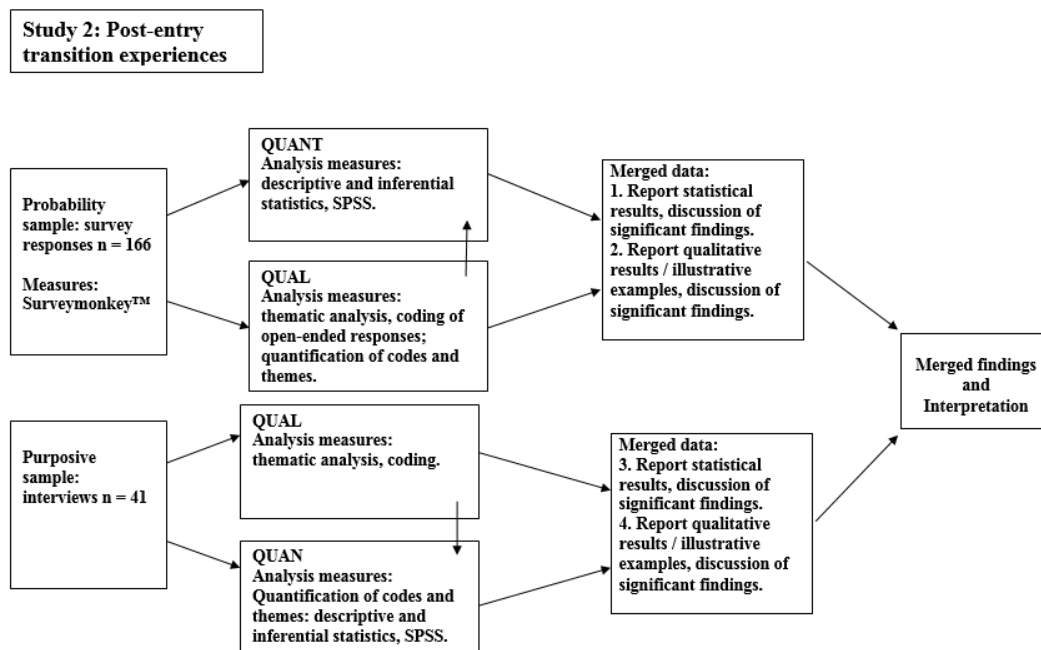


Figure 11. Study Two visual diagram of procedures and products.

Research instrument. A probability sample of students registered with the Disability Service in one HEI (section 4.4.2) was invited to participate in the study by completing a self-administered survey through a professional SurveyMonkey® account. The invitation was distributed to two separate cohorts of first year students in two phases: March 2012 and March 2013, with the purpose of capturing reflective experiences of transition to HE in the academic years beginning 2011 and 2012 respectively.

Recruitment. In both phases of data collection students were sent an invitation to participate explaining the purpose of the study (Appendix B1), also provided on the first page of the survey (Appendix B2), and together with a copy of the Code of Ethics used in the study (Appendix B3). Participants were subsequently contacted by email to ascertain whether they would prefer to be interviewed in person or by telephone, at a time and date of their own choosing (Appendix B4). After a lapse of one week, non-respondents were contacted by telephone and invited to make an appointment for interview. Prior to the interview date, participants were provided with a set of trigger questions (Appendix B5).

Data collection. This population were recruited from within one HEI. Staff working within the Disability Service conducted interviews; participants were randomly allocated to a member of staff with whom they had had no previous contact or service relationship. Interviewers were provided with an interview process guide and a copy of the semi-structured trigger questions. Some interviews were digitally recorded using a Dictaphone, and whilst this is the preferred method for accurately capturing first person viewpoints, interviewers used a note-taking method where participants declined consent to audio recording. Interview notes were anonymised and labelled by interviewer initials and interview number, for example AD2. Interviews lasted between 20 – 40 minutes and were conducted in a location that avoided identification of any of the participants. Interview recordings and notes were stored in a password protected folder within the HEI intranet. A copy of the interview transcript was emailed to each participant post-interview, and in the interests of respondent validation, all participants were offered the opportunity to discuss the findings from thematic analysis of their transcript. The text corpus from each of the interviews and responses to open-ended questions was thematically analysed and coded as described in Section 4.5.2.

This section has set out the procedures for data collection for Study Two of this research programme, which investigated post-transition experiences of students with disabilities approaching the conclusion of their first year in HE. The section that follows specifies the data collection procedure for Study Three, an investigation into engagement with transition resources created for this research programme.

4.6.3 Study Three Procedure

The objective of Study Three was to determine the level of interest in a range of transition resources, for post-primary students with disabilities, their parents, carers or guardians, and practitioners. The principal aims of the study were to: (a) determine levels of engagement with a dedicated transition website, Pathways to Trinity; (b) determine levels of engagement with the Transition Planning Tool, hosted on the transition website; and (c) ascertain the effectiveness of a structured transition workshop programme for Leaving Certificate students with disabilities.

A visual diagram is provided (Figure 12) to explain the quantitative and qualitative products and processes involved in this study.

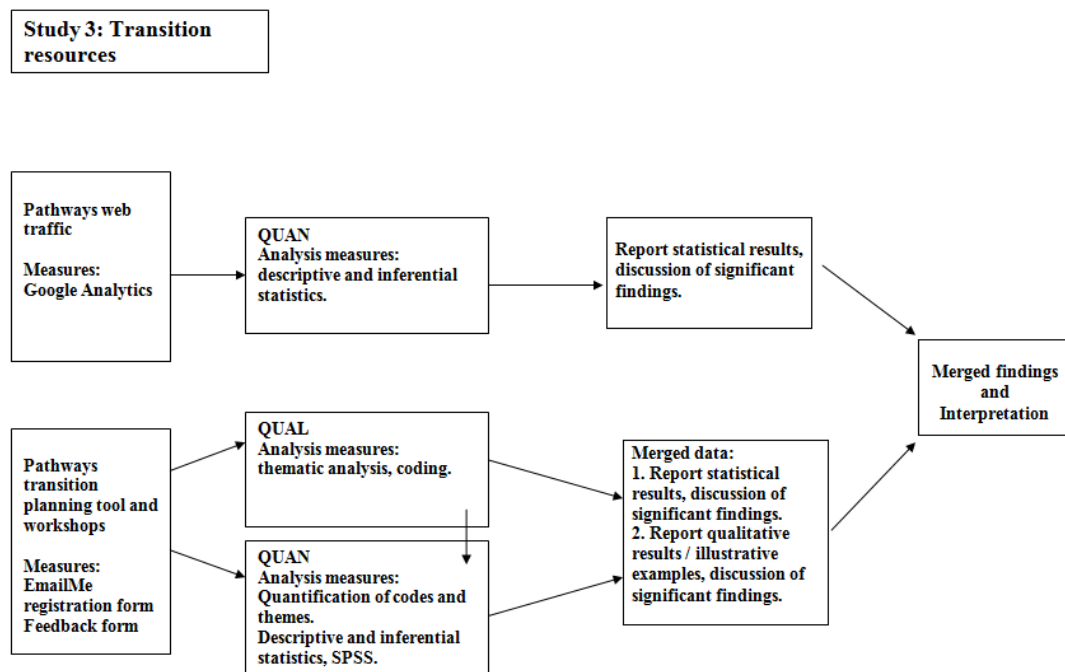


Figure 12. Study Three visual diagram of procedures and products.

Pathways to Trinity website. A Google Analytics account was created during construction of the Pathways to Trinity website in January 2011, and a unique tracking code corresponding to the Analytics account was added immediately before the closing </head> tag in the web page file that contains the <head> section. This ensured that each page of the website was tracked for visitor traffic; this data is returned to Google Analytics where it is processed into customized reports. The Analytics Dashboard (Appendix C1) provides an overview of website traffic by

displaying summaries of different reports for a range of variables including bounce and exit rates, visitor demographics (country, town, language, operating system, social media), behavior flow, site searches and site content.

Two additional data collection tools were embedded into the website. The website feedback form was provided to encourage visitors to submit comments and suggestions for additional content (Appendix C2). A discussion forum / blog provided visitors with the facility to submit queries in relation to: (a) general questions about applying to college, courses etc., (b) disability related discussions permitting members to share experiences, activities and advice, (c) disability service supports, in which members may post questions about college supports, (d) transition from school to college, a section for contributing ideas about improving transition practices, and (e) queries specific to the DARE process (Appendix C4).

The Pathways to Trinity website was formally launched on the 4th April 2011, and the probability sample identified in Section 4.4.3 were invited to access and use the website resources via an email or hard copy flyer (Appendix A6). Data collection began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch date of the website and dissemination of publicity material in print and by email, and a close date of 30th November 2013 was selected, representing 18 months of data collection, encompassing two complete Leaving Certificate cycles: 2011- 2012 and 2012 - 2013. Although this timeline defines the research period for this research programme, the website presence has been maintained to facilitate longitudinal data collection for further study.

Pathways to Trinity transition planning tool. This resource is accessed from the main menu bar of the Pathways website (Appendix C5). The transition planning tool was formally launched on the 4th April 2011, and the probability sample identified in Section 4.4.3 were invited to access and use the website resources via an email or hard copy flyer (Appendix A6).

Data collection began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch date of the website and dissemination of publicity material in print and by email, and a close date of 30th November 2013 was selected, representing 18 months of data collection, encompassing two complete Leaving Certificate cycles: 2011 - 2012 and 2012 - 2013. Prospective users submitted an online request form to register their intent to download and use the resource, with the purpose of collating demographic data about the user (student, parent, practitioner), school year (TY, 5th, 6th), and disability category

(Appendix C6). In addition, each unit of the transition planning tool was assigned a unique web page, and a Google Analytics tracking code was added to each of these.

Data collection began on the 4th April 2011 with the launch date of the website and dissemination of publicity material in print and by email, and a close date of 30th November 2013 was selected, representing 18 months of data collection, encompassing two complete Leaving Certificate cycles: 2011- 2012 and 2012 - 2013. Although this timeline defines the timeline for this research programme, the transition tool web presence has been maintained to facilitate longitudinal data collection for further study.

Pathways to Trinity transition workshops. The Pathways transition workshops took place in two sequential phases: Phase 1 timeline spanned one Wednesday afternoon in each month between September 2011 and April 2012, Phase 2 timeline spanned one Wednesday afternoon each month between September 2012 and April 2013. Recruitment for Phase 1 of the workshops commenced on the 3rd August 2011, with invitations to all staff within one HEI in Dublin distributed by the Human Resources Department using staff email lists, flyers displayed in staff communal areas, and advertisement on the HEI online noticeboard (Appendix C7). Recruitment for Phase 2 began on the 20th June 2012 with email and print invitations to SENOs, Guidance Counsellors and Principals of schools in the Dublin area, identified in lists accessed from the Department of Education and National Council for Special Education (Appendix C8).

Students attended workshops one Wednesday afternoon in each month, between September 2011 and April 2012 in Phase 1, and September 2012 and January 2013 in Phase 2. At the conclusion of each monthly workshop, students were encouraged to feedback suggestions and requests for future content. A summary of topics covered, together with concrete resources and relevant links were uploaded to the Pathways Blog page. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered via an online survey created in SurveyMonkey®, and delivered by email to students, parents / carers, and practitioners at the conclusion of each workshop phase (Appendix C9 and Appendix C10).

In summary, this section has described the procedures for initiating data collection in Study One, Study Two and Study Three, and concludes the presentation of research methodology, research design, sampling procedure, quantitative and

qualitative components, and processes. The following section reviews the ethical considerations for research using Internet-mediated data collection, and sets out the ethical guidelines which informed this research programme.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Internet communities are rich sources of qualitative data for researchers, and whilst qualitative analysis of postings, comments and submissions provide valuable data on insider perspectives, use of such data raises questions about privacy and informed consent, particularly in relation to vulnerable populations (Eysenback & Till, 2009). For this reason, it was important to consider whether the method of data collection was intrusive or potentially harmful to participants, to what degree the research environment was a public or private space, how confidentiality could be protected, and how consent might be obtained.

Hoong Sin and Fong (2010) draw together a number of important strands in their discussion of research with children with disabilities:

It is important to point out that there are no blueprints for the involvement of disabled children and young people. Certainly a “one-size-fits-all” approach will not work as it ossifies what essentially has to be a reflexive process. The fear of doing it badly should not prevent us from attempting it and from embracing the positive promotion of disability equality. (p. 21)

Ethical guidelines provided by the Children’s Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin (Whyte, 2006) stipulated specific principles for consideration during the research process, namely, a commitment to children’s well-being (Beneficence), a commitment to doing no harm (Non-Maleficence), a commitment to children’s rights including the right of individuals to take responsibility for him or herself (Autonomy), and being child-centred in its approach to research, listening to children, treating them in a fair and just manner (Fidelity).

Whilst participants in this study were aged over 16 years the above principles were considered throughout the research as being reflective of good practice. In addition, it is advisable for researchers to familiarize themselves with the different ethical guidelines relevant to vulnerable groups produced by different organizations. Thus the Code of Ethics provided by National Disability Authority (NDA, 2009), the

British Psychological Society (BPS, 2011) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were also consulted.

4.7.1 Ethical Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research

BPS guidelines on conducting research via the Internet (BPS, 2007) discuss matters arising around verification of identity, public/private space, informed consent, levels of control, withdrawal, debriefing, deception, monitoring, protection of participants and researchers, and data protection. The supplementary guidelines relevant to the responsible use of social media (BPS, 2012) – taken to mean social networking sites, blogs, forums and email – were also observed, specifically the fact that “social networking sites are public and permanent. Once you have posted something online, it remains traceable even if you later delete it” (p. 1).

The BPS (2013) uses the term “internet-mediated research” (IMR) to describe quantitative and qualitative methodologies which involve “the remote acquisition of data from or about human participants using the internet and its associated technologies” (p. 3). The guidelines draw attention to the problems associated with research in the public domain, and the risks associated with lack of direct observation of participant response to the research materials. This document suggests and discusses four overriding principles for IMR: respect for autonomy and dignity of persons, scientific value, social responsibility, and maximising benefits and minimising harm. As these guidelines were published after the commencement of this study, a retrospective ethics assessment was conducted using the above principles; no issues were observed within the terms of the guidelines.

4.7.2 Ethical Procedures

Ethical guidelines for postgraduate researchers in the School of Education were consulted (Seery, Loxley, & O Sullivan, 2010), and an Ethics Review Checklist was completed in January 2011 and submitted to the Ethics Committee, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. Approval was granted by the Director of Research on the 26th January 2011, drawing the researcher’s attention to the need for consent from students in addition to parents and practitioners. For this reason, an explanation of the purpose of the study and ethical information is provided in the first page of the Internet survey, together with consent to participation and ethical guidelines. This is based on best practice for similar Internet studies, for example, DCD / Dyspraxia research from the Dyscovery Centre, University of Wales (Kirby,

2010), and Project IRIS: Inclusive Research in Irish Schools Project (NCSE, 2010), a three-year longitudinal study examining how special education is provided within Irish schools.

A letter of introduction, code of ethics and consent form were also provided on the website and for consultation at all times. These documents were also provided to participants who expressed an interest in participation via the website and by email. Participants were assured that whilst data from surveys used for the research study would not remain confidential, it would be anonymized. Contributors to the discussion forum and blog were reminded that postings were submitted in the public domain; they were advised not to identify themselves or others through user names or content of submissions.

The *Data Protection Act, 1998* stipulates that data must only be kept for lawful purposes and “not used or disclosed in any way that is not compatible with those purposes” (Department of Health and Children, 1999, p. 27) and is applicable to adults and children. The Act requires that data should be stored securely and that computerized data should be password-protected, printed documents should be kept in secured storage and all data should be anonymized by replacing names with ID numbers or codes. Regulations for data controllers stipulate eight responsibilities: obtain and process the information fairly, keep it only for one or more specified and lawful purposes, process it only in ways compatible with the purposes for which it was provided, keep it safe, secure, accurate and up-to-date, ensure that it is adequate, relevant and not excessive, retain it no longer than is necessary for the specified purpose or purposes, and provide a copy of personal data to any individual, on request (Data Protection Commission, 2010).

The entire corpus of quantitative and qualitative data for Study One, Study Two and Study Three was stored electronically in a password protected network drive within one HEI. No hard copies of any data were retained. Ethical procedures relating to specific methods of data collection are presented in the following sections.

4.7.3 Interviews

All interview transcripts for Study One and Study Two were anonymised for person and place names, and any other data that might conceivably identify the participant, such as disability, school, place of domicile, HEI and course choice.

Participants for Study Two were recruited from students with disabilities registered with the Disability Service in one HEI, and were randomly allocated to a member of staff with whom they had had no previous contact or service relationship, as follows.

All disabled students are assigned to one of four Disability Officers (DO) at the point of requesting registration with the Disability Service. Specific student cohorts (MHC, AS/ASD/, ADHD, DCD) may be supported by the Occupational Therapy team (OT), and students availing of Assistive Technology supports are referred to, and work with, the Assistive Technology Officer (ATO). Finally, across all disability cohorts, students can request or be referred to an Academic Support Tutor (AST) within the Disability Service. Thus, there are a number of permutations of support personnel relationships. To ensure that students had no historical working relationship with a member of staff that might potentially contaminate research findings, a cross-reference was conducted as follows: (a) construction of a Microsoft Excel list of students assigned to each staff personnel group indicating assigned DO, ATO, OT and AST, where applicable, (b) a review of case management interactions with staff (e.g. cross-checking electronic calendar appointments for support), and (c) provision of a preliminary list of prospective interviewees to interviewers.

Interviewers used a note-taking method where participants declined consent to audio recording. Transcripts were emailed to participants for approval, together with confirmation that whilst transcripts would not appear in the final thesis in their entirety, selected quotes might be used for illustrative purposes. Participants were invited to submit any additional thoughts or comments.

4.7.4 Survey data

SurveyMonkey® data was collated using a password protected professional account. Whilst it is possible to identify respondents using computer IP addresses, the option to save IP identities was switched off in the collection phase. In addition, professional account features permit the SSL encryption of responses to the SurveyMonkey® survey. Survey respondents were not required to identify themselves by name, and all comments were anonymized. During analysis responses were coded with a numerical ID.

4.7.5 Discussion forum and blog

The discussion forum and blog provided an introduction to the rationale and purpose of the research programme, directed attention to the data collection process

including collation of anonymized postings, and identified steps taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in reporting of findings. User rules and regulations were also posted in the forum header, advising contributors not to provide identifying details such as name, phone number, address or email to other people in the forum. In addition, posters were advised: (a) not to name friends, family, teachers, schools or any other individuals in messages, and (b) to remain friendly and polite. Disclaimer text was also added to the footer of the forum page.

This section has provided verification of the ethical principles that were taken into consideration as part of the research design and methodology. Due care and attention was taken to protect the identities of all participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of the research context. Data collection instruments for Study One and Study Three were delivered using an Internet-based research tool, and the design and construction of this research environment is presented in the following section.

4.8 Research Environment

Instruments of data collection for Study One and Study Three were situated within a web-based research environment, specifically designed for the research programme. Design of the research environment is critical to ensure participant engagement, as it is the primary source of data collection. Accessing and using online information requires specific skill sets (Evans, 2011), and therefore design and construction of ICT tools to support students and parents, must take this into consideration (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007). Principally, website designs should reflect the needs and wants of users, matched with readily available and pertinent content and resources; the interface should be clear, practical and attractive, and web metrics or analytics should be used to research user demographics (Franklin, 2011).

As a precursor to the design stage, existing web resources associated with transition planning were investigated, in order to critically analyse the content, delivery and structure of these entities, and to provide a qualitative benchmark. Extensive research was conducted between April 2010 and December 2010, to discover websites whose principal aim was to promote, encourage and facilitate transition to HE for post-primary students with disabilities. The search was confined to English language websites providing transition specific resources and/or planning tools for post-primary students with disabilities. Over the investigation period, 37 sites

were identified as meeting the research requirements outlined in the previous paragraph: USA (9), Canada (5), Australia (8), UK (8), Northern Ireland (2), and the Republic of Ireland (5). Findings from this investigation were presented in Chapter Three, section 3.5.6.

Consequently, a website was designed which: (a) met the data collection requirements of the research programme, and (b) provided opportunities for engagement between all stakeholders in the transition process: students, parents, practitioners and college staff, as a third space (e.g. Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda, 1999; Kapitzke & Renshaw, 2004; Svalberg, 2004) and Community of Practice (e.g. Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007; Guldberg & Pilkington, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Embedding data collection methods within the website facilitated capturing of data from an unlimited sample population, in a short amount of time (Wright, 2005).

The following sections present the creation and structure of each element of the Internet research environment, namely: (a) the website that functioned as a transition resources repository, (b) the discussion forum / blog which functioned as a Community of Practice and communication channel, (c) a modularized transition assessment and planning tool, and (d) interactive transition planning workshops. These elements were constructed using the facilities and resources of the HEI within which this research programme was conducted.

4.8.1 Website Design

A prototype transition website was constructed using drag and drop technology at Weebly www.weebly.com, a commercial web hosting domain which provides restricted access to design tools without subscription (Figure 13). Costs for this preliminary stage were funded through a successful application to the Trinity College Dublin Equality Office. This facilitated writing of content and provided the tools to establish a hierarchical framework for the website.

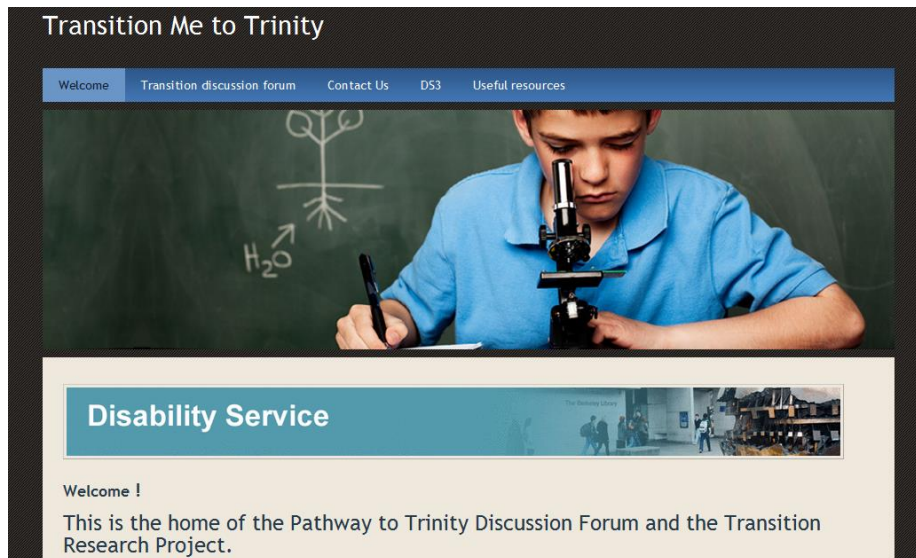


Figure 13. Study Three initial website design.

Design of the final website templates was provided by the Trinity College Dublin Web Office, and a professional web designer was contracted by the web office, also funded by the Trinity College Dublin Equality Office. The web design specification included a request for triple A Web 2.0 accessibility, and compliance with Trinity College Accessible Information Policy. In January 2011 two graphic designs were submitted to the web office for review and the website names “Transition to Trinity”, “Connect to Trinity” and “Connect to College” were submitted to the Communications Office in Trinity College, but were rejected as bearing similarity to other internal projects. The original graphic designs were rejected as not reflecting or being consistent with Trinity College Dublin web design style sheets. In November 2010, work had commenced on a fully accessible pathway around the campus and consequently “Pathways to Trinity” was selected as a site title. The final design is provided in Figure 14.

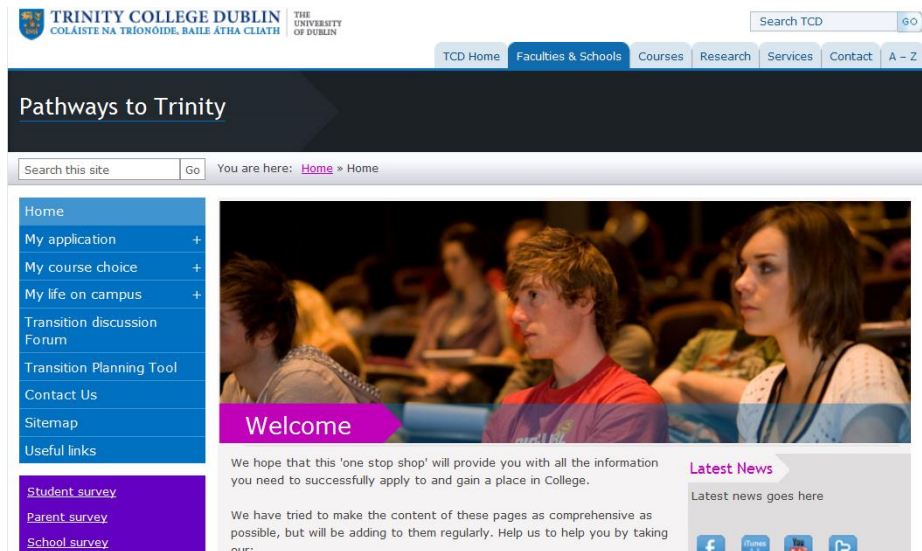


Figure 14. Study Three final website design.

The researcher undertook web design training in the use of Dreamweaver™, and was provided with access to design staff in the Web Office. These resources were made available for transfer of content from the prototype to the main site, and to construct additional pages. Web authorship permissions were provided for uploading, maintaining and amending of material on the web pages. All website content was written by the researcher and was not sourced or adapted from other websites. A sitemap is provided in Appendix C3.

4.8.2 Forum and Blog

The Weebly site (<http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com>) was initially retained as the vehicle for the online discussion forum, as no similar facility was available within the Trinity College web framework at that time. As this was an open access forum users were provided with clear pointers with regard to the purpose of the discussion board, anonymity and use of online forums. In December 2011, Trinity College Dublin introduced a hosted, user-managed blogging service to College staff, using Wordpress. In June 2012, a blog was added to the Pathways website (<http://blogs.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity>) to replace the Weebly discussion forum. The rationale for adding this resource was to retain data collection tools within the Pathways research environment. The Pathways blog facilitated interaction between students, parents, practitioners and HE staff. It was also used as a repository for resources used in the transition planning workshops described in section 4.6.3, which

were fully accessible to the public. Ethical principles of research on Internet communities were consulted during the design process and adhered to throughout the research programme, as discussed in the previous section (4.7).

4.8.3 Transition Planning Tool

The Pathways Transition Planning Tool is a web-based assessment and planning resource structured into five modules: (a) Preparing Myself for the Future, (b) Independent Living, (c) Academic Skills, (d) College Application and Course Choices, and (e) Identifying and Using Reasonable Accommodations (Appendix C5). Content for the planning tool was designed and written specifically for this research programme. Each module was initially downloadable from the Pathways website in Microsoft Word format, so that it could be easily adapted to individual needs. The Transition Planning Tool has a direct link from the main menu bar, which is available on the left hand side of every page. The landing page (<http://www.pathways-to-trinity/tap>) provides a link to register to use the tool, using an EmailMe form, linked to the pathways@tcd.ie email address. Whilst the transition planning content is free to download and use, the registration page collects demographic information on user profiles.

In 2012, the Equality Office in TCD funded a digital re-design of the Planning Tool permitting users to download the entire toolkit, or individual units, in an editable pdf format. The Equality Fund award was also used to finance filming of a video introduction to each unit. Students in Trinity College Dublin were recruited to film and produce the videos, based on a script provided by the researcher.

4.8.4 Transition Workshops

The purpose of the transition workshops was to engage students with disabilities in the senior cycle, by providing monthly, college-based workshops between October and April 2011/2012, and October and April 2012/2013. The workshops provided students with the opportunity to explore topics such as assistive technology, academic skills, sleep hygiene and stress management, planning a college career, and college application process. Parents and practitioners were also encouraged to attend parallel workshops, which provided advice on the DARE application process, supporting students through state examinations, managing student stress and setting up a study environment. Sessions were designed and delivered by the researcher together with input from Occupational Therapists in the Unilink service,

and current students with disabilities in the university. All participants in the workshop are introduced to the Pathways Transition Tool. Students, parents and carers from both cycles of workshops completed a satisfaction survey, and staff who delivered the workshop content submitted a reflexive analysis at the completion both cycles of the programme.

In conclusion, this section of the thesis has described the creation and design of the research environment which acted as a repository for the data collection elements of this research programme. The suitability and efficacy of the research environment was based on an inspection of literatures concerned with third spaces, Communities of Practice, Social Networking Sites and transition planning programmes, reviewed in Chapter Three. In continuation, an investigation of available websites, nationally and internationally, that focus on guiding post-primary students with disabilities to progress to HE, was used as a basis for determining the structure and content of the research environment. Subsequently, four data collection elements were designed and created: (a) the website that functioned as a transition resources repository, (b) the discussion forum / blog which functioned as a Community of Practice and communication channel, (c) a modularized transition assessment and planning tool, and (d) interactive transition planning workshops.

The following section presents the limitations of the research programme emanating from the methodological design and instruments of measurement selected for this investigation, and their influence on the interpretation of the findings and conclusions.

4.9 Limitations of the Research

The research limitations identified in this section encompass methodological limitations connected to election of sample populations, measures used to collect data, self-reported data, and lack of prior research studies in the area. Subsequently, researcher limitations consider the effects of ease of access to sample populations and participants which may have limited the quantity of data collected, temporal effects associated with working within defined timelines for data collection, analysis, interpretation and reporting of findings.

4.9.1 Methodological limitations

The methodological implications set out in this section address aspects of the research design and procedure which may have impacted on the reliability and validity of findings, and their consequent interpretation and analysis.

Sample populations. Studies conducted by lone researchers use smaller sample populations particularly when analysing a text corpus of interview transcripts. Whilst this might be viewed as a limitation, collecting more data or building a larger corpus, does not necessarily result in the acquisition of more information. As stated in section 4.2 and section 4.3, whilst it is difficult to demonstrate validity and generalisability with small sample populations, large samples do not lend themselves to deep analysis from a qualitative perspective.

The website, transition planning tool, blog and transition workshops, were designed, constructed and hosted within one HEI. Its status as a world class university with a highly academic reputation may have been off-putting for some potential respondents. Doubt and anxiety associated with making public statements about personal experiences, providing opinions on the quality of current transition practices, and uncertainty in relation to the appropriateness of commentary, may explain the non-submission of contact details for participation in interviews.

Conversely, it could be argued that only students / parents who identified Trinity College Dublin as a transition destination are accessing the transition resources and concomitant data collection instruments. This means that stakeholders who intended to transition to other post-secondary settings such as FE colleges, are less likely to have participated. This limitation could have been overcome by re-naming the website, surveys, transition planning tool and blog, for example 'Pathways to Further and Higher Education' and hosting them on a non-HEI specific website.

With respect to demographics, data on respondent gender and geocoding would have added richness to the study, and in particular could have provided important comparative data about gender and regional differences.

Measures used to collect the data: Study One. Data collection in Study One captured the pre-entry experiences of students with disabilities, parents or carers and practitioners in educational settings. Whilst the first two groups were asked similar questions about sources and quality of transition advice and support, only

parents were asked about IEPs, and success factors and barriers, and only students were asked about transition worries or concerns. Therefore, comparisons between student and parent experiences are limited. In addition, because there was no evident relationship between student and parent respondents, it is not possible to determine if there are intra-family differences. A defined, purposive sample sourced from disability action or community groups, or from specific school populations, would have addressed this limitation.

The first two questions in the practitioner survey sought information on qualifications, areas of expertise and professional experience of participants. This may have been perceived as personal, irrelevant or intrusive, as a significant percentage of respondents did not continue past this point. As the purpose of the survey was to identify transition enablers and barriers, this data should have been collated first to maximise completion rates.

The construction of survey questions precluded capture of inferential findings, for example the absence of identification of gender, resulting in purely descriptive results, as a consequence of inaccurate identification of predictors and outcomes. Data for respondent gender and geocoding would have added richness to the study, and in particular could have provided important information on gender and regional differences. Additionally, “response required” rules were limited to a minimum of one response, which permitted participants to move on to the next question, thereby resulting in incomplete or minimal data.

Surveys and interviews were limited to capturing data in the pre-transition phase, and opportunities to re-engage with respondents in the light of post-secondary outcomes were not built in to the research design. This limitation could have been overcome by including the intention to re-survey / re-interview participants in the consent form. Arguably, this may have provided more significant findings than investigating a separate post-transition population. However, only two students and seven parents provided contact details and attended a pre-transition interview and none were willing to engage in a post-transition survey or interview.

Measures used to collect the data: Study Two. Data collection in Study Two was focused on capturing the post-transition experience for students with disabilities in HE, and in particular their perspective on differences between second and third level supports. The construction of survey questions did not identify

gender and type of post-primary school attended, precluding a comparison of findings from Study One. Slight differences in the wording and structure of questions between Study One and Study Two, prevented a direct comparison of pre and post entry experiences and opinions. This is particularly the case for questions that explored sources and quality of support and guidance, and experience of the DARE process. A more comprehensive piloting of the surveys would have established the presence of these nuances.

Surveys and interviews took place seven months after transition into HE, and may have affected the accuracy of reflections on post-primary transition events, as emotions and memories associated with this period may have dissipated in the intervening months. A more immediate investigation of pre-transition experiences may have captured more intense data around enablers and barriers to transition. However, surveying and interviewing students in the first weeks or months in HE is logistically problematic, and represents an additional burden for students who are learning to manage new environments, practices and expectations.

Measures used to collect the data: Study Three. With respect to demographics, data on respondent gender and geocoding would have added richness to the study, and in particular could have provided important information on gender and regional differences. However, this was an additional feature added to Google Analytics nearing completion of the study.

Bias from self-reported data. Qualitative data from open ended comments and interviews was self-reported, and as such cannot be independently verified. In addition, the potential for bias must be acknowledged, in particular: (a) selective memory for specific experiences or events, and (b) exaggeration of experiences or events, in the context of support and guidance within post-primary settings. For this reason, sample size is a crucial factor in identifying replication of experiences that can be generalised. However, despite the small number of participants who agreed to interview in Study One, transcript analysis broadly reflected quantitative data from surveys.

Lack of prior research studies. An exploration of the literature surrounding the transition from school to post-secondary settings for students with disabilities was presented in Chapter Three. At the commencement of the design of this research programme in 2011, there was a significant lack of prior research in this

area in the Republic of Ireland, resulting in a lack of opportunity to identify specific research questions arising from previous research. In the intervening period, studies investigating access to the curriculum, equity of learning opportunities, the transition experiences of students with SEN, and the efficacy of the DARE scheme, have confirmed the value of the research parameters for this programme.

4.9.2 Researcher limitations

Access to sample populations. This research programme was dependent upon access to a sample population of post-primary students with disabilities, for whom ethical considerations were paramount. The research design identified a probability sample of unlimited size, therefore data collection methods centred on web-based surveys, from which participants for in depth interviews could be sourced. Arguably, a smaller purposive sample recruited from selected post-primary schools and community groups, would have facilitated a more intensive investigation, and permitted the exploration of differences in experiences and viewpoints between related populations of students, their parents or carers and practitioners. However, a principle objective of the research design was to discover the level of spontaneous interest and engagement with a range of transition planning resources, within a Community of Practice.

Longitudinal effects. The timeframe of this research programme was limited by the regulations for completion and submission of this thesis. Results are reported from a specified data collection period of 18 months (April 2011 to November 2013). However, the website and transition planning tool are still fully accessible by the public, and data collection for surveys has not closed. Each year brings new post-primary applicants to HE, supported by parents who may have no historical knowledge or experience of the application process or the DARE scheme. Response rates from students with disabilities ($n = 152$), parents / carers ($n = 77$), and practitioners ($n = 25$) have increased. This provides an opportunity to continue the research programme as a longitudinal study.

This section has drawn attention to methodological limitations which may have affected the quantity and quality of data collected for this research programme, but which also provide valuable indicators for improvement to the research design, from which an expanded programme can be implemented as a longitudinal study. The final section to this chapter summarizes its content, and provides a link to the

structure for reporting the findings and analysis of this research programme, in Chapter Five.

4.10 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter set out the approach taken to investigate enablers and barriers to post-primary transitions for post-primary students with disabilities. It discussed the methodological theory underpinning the research design, and the choice of method that was selected to most effectively address the research questions. It linked the methodology to findings from Chapter Three, which established factors which represent either a promoter or inhibitor to transition opportunities, from a bioecological perspective. The hypotheses, research aim, objectives and research questions were re-stated, followed by an audit of methods and procedures for Study One, Study Two and Study Three.

A Mixed Methodology within an exploratory and transformative paradigm was selected as the most suitable approach for measuring the scale, frequency, type and location of promoters or inhibitors to transition, and to capture qualitative data which illustrates how these are experienced by students with disabilities, parents / carers and practitioners. A concurrent-triangulation-convergent design was chosen within which to test the hypotheses that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, and (b) a dedicated transition planning strategy for post-primary students with a disability, can promote, encourage and assist with their transition journey.

The research sample for this programme was recruited from post-primary students with disabilities, parents or carers, and practitioners in educational settings. Quantitative and qualitative data extracted from surveys, interviews, blog submissions and web analytics, were sourced within a research environment specifically designed for this research programme: (a) the Pathways to Trinity website, (b) the Pathways Transition Planning Tool, (c) Pathways Transition Workshops; and (d) the Pathways Blogspot. Due care and attention were paid to ethical guidelines for researching vulnerable populations, particularly within Internet-based research, and these were acknowledged within data collection methods and procedures for each of the studies. A final section acknowledged the methodological limitations identified during the research process.

The next chapter presents an analysis of the data collected for Study One, Study Two and Study Three, in which quantitative and qualitative results are merged within the reporting of findings, and as a concluding interpretation for each study. A final section summarizes the findings from Study One, Study Two and Study Three as a precursor to Chapter Six, which discusses their relationship with the hypotheses, research aim, objectives and research questions, in preparation for recommendations.

**Scaling the Mountain: The Topography of Disability and
Transition to Higher Education in Ireland**

VOLUME TWO

A thesis presented to the University of Dublin Trinity College

in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

2015

By

Alison Doyle

DECLARATION

I have read and understood the Regulations for submission of a Doctoral thesis. I undertake that all the material presented for examination is my own work and has not been written for me, in whole or in part, by any other person. I also undertake that any quotation or paraphrase from the published or unpublished work of another person has been duly acknowledged in the work which I present for examination.

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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Date: 23rd November 2015

CHAPTER FIVE – FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This research programme examined the transition journey of students with disabilities as they move from post-primary to HE settings, based on primary evidence from students, parents or carers, and practitioners working with students and their families, as the principle stakeholders in the transition arc. The intent of this research programme was to establish: (a) the web of interactions between stakeholders, post-primary schools and HEIs, and (b) identify junctures within individual bioecologies and personal geographies that function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transitions for young people with disabilities. As an introduction, the following section presents the aims of this chapter, together with a map of its structure as a guide for the reader.

Chapter Aims

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings and analysis from this research programme, prior to a discussion of the main results in Chapter Six. In anticipation, this section clarifies the evolution of the research topic and the synthesis of elements that led to the final structure.

Chapter Three presented a review of current and historical literatures set within the theoretical framework adopted for this research programme: Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and Children's Geographies (Robson, Horton, & Kraftl, 2013; Skelton & Valentine, 1998). It established that there are potential systemic, contextual and personal factors that represent enablers or barriers to transition in Ireland, principally: (a) an absence of statutory obligation to provide transition planning to all students with disabilities (Lundy, Byrne, & McKeown, 2012; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Rix et al., 2013; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014), (b) an absence of transition planning procedures and programmes (Abbot & Heslop, 2009; Hanrahan, 2005; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Reindal, 2008), (c) competitive entry requirements that are further disadvantaging disabled students (Byrne et al., 2013; IUA, 2011; IOTI, 2011; Mc Guckin et al., 2013), (d) a variable quality of guidance and support for students with disabilities and their parents (Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Smyth & Hannon, 2007), and (e) a lack of collaboration between HEIs and post-primary schools, to support students and parents (Byrne & Smyth, 2011; McCoy, Smyth, Watson, & Darmody, 2014; Mc Guckin et al., 2013). The

hypotheses that emerged from this evidence were that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, which are determined by bioecological systems and personal geographies, and (b) targeted transition strategies built on a framework that takes into account individual circumstances, strengths, challenges, needs and opinions, can inspire, encourage and support students with disabilities to progress to HE.

To test these hypotheses, five research questions were distilled from the literature, with the intention that findings would: (a) establish the promoters and inhibitors of transition from post-primary to third level education for disabled students, (b) frame these within the context of education systems in Ireland, and (c) provide evidence for implications and recommendations:

1. Are students with disabilities, their parents, and other stakeholders in the transition process, provided with access to disability-specific transition advice and guidance?
2. Do all stakeholders have equal access to the same quality and quantity of transition support?
3. How useful / effective is this advice and guidance, what form does it take, and who provides it?
4. What are the enablers / barriers to transition identified by students with disabilities, their parents and practitioners?
5. Is there a need for dedicated, transition-specific resources, for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland?

Consequently, a mixed methodology was devised to test these research questions within an Irish context. An integrated design was selected for this research programme as it validates the central role of participants in the research (McKiernan, Guerin, Steggles, & Carr, 2007), and ensures that the “voice” of students with disabilities and their parents or carers, is valued (Hamill & Boyd, 2003; Kenny, McNeela, Shevlin, & Daly, 2000; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2002; Rose & Shevlin, 2004). Set within a transformative paradigm, a concurrent-triangulation-convergent design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003) was identified as the optimum method with which to capture viewpoints from students, parents / carers, and

practitioners, and to measure and analyse quantitative and qualitative data providing both scale and depth to the findings.

Subsequently, three separate studies were constructed to: (a) respond to each of the research questions simultaneously, (b) gather quantitative and qualitative data concurrently through surveys and interviews, (c) facilitate a triangulation of perspectives from each of the sample populations, and (d) converge these findings at each stage of data collection and analysis. This was achieved by replicating the research questions within quantitative measures (surveys) and embedding them within qualitative measures (interviews). Statistical and qualitative data extracted from the surveys was mixed with statistical and qualitative data extracted from interviews; both data types were mixed again in an interpretation of findings for each study. In continuation, this chapter presents the results for three concurrent studies, within the following structure.

Study One (section 5.1) investigated the research questions from a pre-transition / pre-entry to HE perspective; this section presents results from each of the surveys to students, parents/carers and practitioners. A statistical analysis of survey results is mixed with qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses (sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3). This is followed by a thematic content analysis of findings from interviews with each of those sample populations, mixed with a quantitative measure of the occurrence of these themes (sections 5.1.4 to 5.1.6). A final section merges significant quantitative and qualitative results for Study One in response to each of the research questions (section 5.1.7).

Study Two (section 5.2) investigated the research questions from a post-transition / post-entry to HE perspective; this section presents results from surveys to students with disabilities approaching the conclusion of the first year in HE, who accepted an offer on reduced points under the DARE scheme. A statistical analysis of survey results is mixed with qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses (sections 5.2.1), followed by a thematic content analysis of findings from interviews with the sample population, mixed with a quantitative measure of the occurrence of these themes (section 5.2.2). A final section merges significant quantitative and qualitative results for Study Two, in response to each of the research questions (section 5.2.3).

Study Three measured engagement with transition-specific resources, for post-primary students with disabilities, to ascertain the level of interest and need for such assets (section 5.3). This section presents web analytics relating to visitor demographics and engagement with content from the Pathways to Trinity transition website, Pathways discussion forum / blog, and the Pathways Transition Planning Tool (sections 5.3.1. to 5.3.3). A statistical analysis of website / tool engagement is mixed with a qualitative thematic analysis of email queries and forum submissions. This is followed by presentation of the findings in relation to the Pathways Transition Planning Workshops (section 5.3.4) in which a statistical analysis of surveys to students with disabilities and their parents who participated in the workshops, is mixed with qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses. A final section merges significant quantitative and qualitative results for Study Three, in response to each of the research questions (section 5.3.5). A final section to this chapter summarizes important findings from each of the studies as a precursor to an interpretation and discussion of their relationship to the hypotheses, research aim, objectives and research questions in Chapter Six.

This concludes a commentary on the aims of this chapter which set out to clarify both the structure and contents. For ease of reporting results, a key to abbreviations used is provided in Tables 35, 36 and 37. Whilst Post-Leaving Certificate was not included as a survey item, responses from Study Three data - engagement with transition resources - included this category of user, therefore these items have also been coded.

Table 35

Abbreviation Codes Disability Categories

<u>Code</u>	<u>Disability</u>
AS/ASD	Asperger's Syndrome/Autistic Spectrum Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
B/VI	Blind or Visually Impaired
DCD	Dyspraxia
Df/HI	Deaf or Hearing Impaired
MHC	Mental Health Condition
NC	Neurological Condition
PD	Physical Disability
SOI	Significant On-going Illness
SLC	Speech, Language and Communication Disorders
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulty

Table 36

Abbreviation Codes School Year

<u>Code</u>	<u>School Year</u>
TY	Transition Year
5 th	Fifth year of senior cycle education
6 th	Sixth year of senior cycle education
PLC	Post-Leaving Certificate

Table 37

Abbreviation Codes for School Type

<u>Code</u>	<u>School Type</u>
State	Post-primary schools including vocational, community, comprehensive which do not have an annual fee structure
Private	Post-primary schools charging annual fees to parents
DEIS	Designated disadvantaged post-primary schools

5.1 Study One: Pre-entry Transition Experiences

This section presents the results from each of the surveys to students, parents/carers and practitioners. A statistical analysis of survey results is mixed with

qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses (sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.3) within the reporting of results for each survey item. This is followed by a thematic content analysis of findings from interviews with each of those sample populations, mixed with a quantitative measure of the occurrence of these themes (sections 5.1.4 to 5.1.6). Finally, Section 5.1.7 collates major findings from Study One and provides a narrative to aid understanding of the data presented, with an initial interpretation that highlights the most salient results.

Three sets of data were collated from online surveys via SurveyMonkey® and from in-depth interviews from survey respondents who indicated a willingness to participate in an interview, as described in the methodological procedures in Chapter Four. Data set 1 consisted of responses from post-primary students (n = 122), data set 2 consisted of responses from parents / carers (n = 69), data set 3 consisted of responses from educational practitioners (n = 21).

The following section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from responses to surveys completed by students with disabilities in post-primary schools, firstly: (a) participation frequencies, and (b) demographic data identifying disability category, current school year of enrollment, and type of school attended. Secondly, it presents findings in response to the research questions, specifically: (a) access to disability-specific transition information, advice and guidance, (b) quality and equality of guidance to support transition, (c) sources and efficacy of transition advice and guidance, (d) identification of enablers and barriers to transition to HE, and (e) levels of interest and engagement with transition planning resources.

5.1.1 Survey Results: Student population

This section reports quantitative results from the surveys to students with disabilities, followed by qualitative findings from open-ended survey comments.

Participation frequencies. Completion rates across the research period 4th April 2011 to 30th November 2013 (Table 38) were calculated as: 76% (2011), 74% (2012) and 68% (2013), this latter figure representing the six months from April 2013 to November 2013; it was anticipated that full year results would be generally representative. Although the survey consisted of only ten questions, across the research period, there was a marked drop-off rate from question 1 to question 10.

Table 38

Study One Student Survey Participation Frequencies

<u>Survey item</u>	<u>Number of responses</u>
Q1: consent to participate	122
Q2 – Q4: demographic data	83
Q5 – Q7: transition data	61
Q8: transition planning tool	47
Q9: worries and concerns	14
Q10: consent to interview	14

Demographics. Questions 1 to 3 gathered demographical data on the type of school attended (Table 39), school year in which students were enrolled (Table 40), and disability category (Table 41). These questions were completed by n = 83 students (56% response rate).

Type and year of school attended. More than 60% of respondents were in the final year of school, however it is of note that 21.7% of respondents were enrolled in Transition Year.

Table 39

Study One Student Survey School Attended

<u>School Type</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Private	22	26.5
State	50	60.2
DEIS	3	3.6
Unknown	8	9.6
Total	83	100.0

Table 40

Study One Student Survey School Year Attended

<u>School Year</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
TY	18	21.7
5 th	13	15.7
6 th	52	62.7
Total	83	100.0

Disability frequencies. N = 31 (37%) of students indicated two or more disability types. Frequencies indicate that SpLD accounted for the highest number of students (23.6%), Df/HI (18.9%), and ASD (10.4%). A comparison of disability data between groups traditionally under-represented in HE (sensory and physical) with all other disability groups indicates that 36% of these respondents had a sensory or physical disability, compared to 64% of students in all other groups.

Table 41

Study One Student Survey Disability Categories

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
ASD	11	10.4
ADD/ADHD	9	8.5
B/VI	4	3.8
DCD	4	3.8
Df/HI	20	18.9
MHC	9	8.5
NC	4	3.8
PD	10	9.4
SOI	10	9.4
SpLD	25	23.6

A regression analysis of data to determine relationships between demographic variables was subsequently conducted. There was no relational significance between these variables; 66% of students with ADHD attended fee-paying (Private) schools, and all respondents indicating B/VI, DCD, NC and PD attended State schools. Of the students indicating attendance at a DEIS or Unknown school, almost 50% had an SpLD. Students with AS/ASD were spread evenly across TY, 5th and 6th years, all MHC and Df/HI respondents attended 6th year. More than half of respondents with SpLD attended State schools and two thirds were enrolled in 6th year. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient for demographic variables in Study One (Table 42) did not indicate any significant relationship between these variables, where Pearson's $r = .12$.

Table 42

Study One Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Demographic Variables

	<u>School type</u>	<u>School year</u>	<u>Disability</u>
School type	1		
School year	0.0732871	1	
Disability	0.1135267	0.13540077	1

Transition data. For questions 5 to 7 the response rate decreased from n = 83 participants (56% response rate), to n = 61 participants (52% response rate); of those, not every participant responded to all parts of each question.

Advice relating to disability and transitioning to HE. Ninety-six percent (96%) of students who responded to question 5 had generally received advice about going to college, 95% received disability-specific advice, and 90% provided with advice on being a student with a disability in college.

Sources of transition advice. Question 6 and Question 7 investigated sources of transition advice and guidance; participants were able to identify more than one provider of advice (Table 43). Parents were the main providers of advice (17.3%), closely followed by Guidance Counsellors (15.3%), DARE (12.1%), individual College websites (10.9%) and Friends (10.5%). These results can be extrapolated further by grouping responses according to entity. Practitioners (SENO, Guidance Counsellor, Teacher, Principal) represented 36.6% of advice providers, and HE sources (DARE, College and Disability Services) accounted for 29% of advice. Parents and peers together represent 27.8% of advice providers.

Table 43

Study One Student Survey Sources of Transition Advice

<u>Sources of advice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
DARE	30	12.1
SENO	10	4.0
Guidance Counsellor	38	15.3
Resource Teacher	14	5.6
College website	27	10.9
Principal	8	3.2
Teacher	21	8.5
Parents	43	17.3
Disability Services website	15	6.0
Friends	26	10.5
Nobody	16	6.5

Quality of transition advice. Sixty percent (60%) of students described the quality of advice they received in positive terms (Excellent to Fairly Good); 40% of students described this negatively, and of these 17.8% stated that they had no help at all, in particular in regard to independent living skills. With respect to academic factors affecting progression from post-primary to FE/HE (LC subject choices, college course choices, application to CAO/DARE), 76% of respondents felt they were well supported, the remaining 24% described the advice and guidance they received as either Poor or non-existent.

One item in question 6 and question 7 related to application for a waiver of Irish or the modern language requirement for matriculation to HE. The waiver is available to students with Specific Learning Difficulties or sensory disabilities. Thirty-six (36) students responded to this question, with Df/HI students (n = 6), B/VI (n = 1), and SpLD (n = 2) students indicating that they had never received guidance in connection with applying for a language waiver.

Transition planning resources. The Transition Planning Tool is available to download from the Pathways website, and respondents were asked whether they considered this to be useful resource as part of the transition process; 57.4% indicated that they thought this would be useful to include as a transition resource, 40.4% were

unsure whether this would be useful or not, one student felt that this would not be useful.

Worries or concerns relating to transition to HE. Question 9 asked participants to indicate worries or concerns relating to transition to HE across 15 items (Table 44). Principal areas of concern were connected with occupational and academic tasks: academic skills (22.6%), finding accommodation and living with other people (21.1%), course choice (13.2%), and accessing supports in college (13.2%). Disclosure of disability to staff (6.8%) and peers (6.8%) were of least importance.

Table 44

Study One Student Survey Concerns Associated with Transition to HE

<u>Student Concerns</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Choosing the right course	25	13.2
Accommodation	40	21.1
Choosing the right college	14	7.4
Making friends	17	8.9
Disclosing to college staff	13	6.8
Academic skills	43	22.6
Disclosing to peers	13	6.8
Accessing supports in college	25	13.2

Consequently, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient for all Independent Variables in Study One was calculated. Results (Table 45) did not support any significant relationship between type of school attended, school year, disability, providers of transition advice and quality of advice received, where Pearson's $r = 0.20$.

Table 45

Study One Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Independent Variables

	<u>School type</u>	<u>School year</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>Advice provider</u>	<u>Advice quality</u>
School type	1.00				
School year	0.07	1.00			
Disability	0.11	0.14	1.00		
Advice provider	0.08	-0.01	-0.07	1.00	
Advice quality	-0.14	-0.01	0.05	-0.09	1.00

Qualitative analysis of free text responses. No free response comments were submitted by student participants for any of the survey questions. Participants were invited to submit contact details for a post-survey interview; eight students submitted email addresses, and two students subsequently agreed to interview (section 5.1.4).

This concludes results from the survey completed by $n = 122$ post-primary students prior to entry to third level education. Key findings are extracted to a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results for Study One (section 5.1.7). The following section reports results for the second part of Study One, an investigation of viewpoints of parents and carers of students with disabilities prior to transition from post-primary education.

5.1.2 Survey Results: Parent Population

This section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from responses to surveys completed by parents or carers of students with disabilities, firstly: (a) survey participation frequencies, (b) demographic data identifying disability category, current school year of enrollment, and type of school attended. Secondly, it presents findings in response to the research questions, specifically: (a) access to disability-specific transition information, advice and guidance, (b) quality and equality of guidance to support transition, (c) sources and efficacy of transition advice and guidance, (d) identification of enablers and barriers to transition to HE, and (e) levels of interest and engagement with transition planning resources.

A total of $n = 69$ parents / carers consented to participate in the survey between the launch date of 4th April 2011 and collection of data on 30th November 2013.

Participation frequencies. Completion rates across the research period were calculated as 48% (2011), 26% (2012) and 58% (2013), this latter figure represents six months from April 2013 to November 2013; it was anticipated that full year results would be generally representative. The survey consisted of ten questions, the opt-out rate was discovered as $n = 69$ consenting to participate, $n = 55$ completing questions 2 to 4 (80%), and $n = 44$ (64%) completing all questions.

Demographics. Questions 2 to 4 gathered demographical data about type of school attended by son/daughter, school year in which they were enrolled, and disability category.

School year and school type attended. Results for school type were broadly similar to student responses, 52.7% of parents / carers had students attending non fee

paying (State) schools, 30.9% attended fee paying (Private) schools, and 10.9% were enrolled in schools designated as disadvantaged (DEIS). As might be expected, the majority of parents (64.2%) indicated that their student was enrolled in 6th year, 20.8% were enrolled in 5th year, and it is of note that 14.5% of respondents were in Transition Year.

Disability category. Question 4 recorded the disability category of students supported by parents (Table 46), with n = 26 (47%) indicating two or more disability types. Frequencies indicate that SpLD accounted for the highest number of students (21.5%), followed by ASD (17.7%), ADD/ADHD (13.9%), and DCD (12.7%).

Table 46

Study One Parent Survey Disability Categories

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
ASD	14	17.7
ADD / ADHD	11	13.9
B/VI	5	6.3
Df/HI	5	6.3
DCD	10	12.7
MHC	5	6.3
NC	4	5.1
PD	4	5.1
SOI	4	5.1
SpLD	17	21.5

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient for demographic variables in Study Two (Table 47) did not indicate any significant relationship between these variables, where Pearson's $r = .16$.

Table 47

Study One Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Demographic Variables

	<u>Fee paying</u>	<u>School year</u>	<u>Disability</u>
Fee paying	1		
School year	0.010679	1	
Disability	0.149945	-0.30625	1

Transition data. Questions 5, 6 and 7 examined sources of transition advice, and quality of transition advice in connection with eight transition-related tasks or skills: assistance with identifying strengths and challenges, guidance on choosing appropriate LC subjects, selecting college courses and HEIs, and assistance with identifying available supports in college; n = 43 parents (62%) submitted a response to this question.

Sources of transition advice. Of the agencies or stakeholders who would be perceived to have expertise in this area, the most frequent source of advice was DARE (22.7%), followed by Guidance Counsellors and Resource teachers (13.6%). Merging results for College Disability Services and College websites indicates that 16.7% of transition advice is sourced from HEIs (Table 48). However, 15.2% of parents stated that nobody had provided them with this guidance. Three additional providers of advice were indicated as: Psychiatrist, older sibling with a disability, and Educational Psychologist.

Table 48

Study One Parent Survey Sources of Transition Advice

<u>Sources of advice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
DARE	18	27.3
SENO	2	3.0
GC	9	13.6
HEI website	7	10.6
Resource teacher	9	13.6
Principal	1	1.5
DS website	4	6.1
Other parents	1	1.5
Friends	5	7.6
Nobody	10	15.2

Access to IEPs and transition planning. Question 6 investigated the frequency of meetings held to discuss student IEPs in relation to transition from post-primary school with key transition stakeholders (Table 49). Responses indicated that meetings were held with Guidance Counsellors (38.7%) or Resource Teachers (32.3%). Consultations with SENOs were held significantly less frequently than any

other advisor; 21 parents (48%) indicated that they had never discussed the IEP in relation to transition with any school linked practitioner, or any other individual.

Table 49

Study One Parent Survey Frequency of IEP and Transition Meetings

<u>Transition advisor</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
SENO	3	9.7
Guidance Counsellor	12	38.7
Resource Teacher	10	32.3
Principal	6	19.4
Total	31	100.0

Open-ended responses submitted in comments (n = 17) described high levels of frustration and inadequate access to transition information, with thirteen parents stating that no IEP existed for their student, eleven of whom attended DEIS or State post-primary schools: “My son was never offered an IEP despite enquiring about him and his progress. I don’t know what an IEP plan is as never given opportunity to avail of one” (DCD, 6th, State).

Quality of advice relating to transition tasks or skills. Question 7 examined the quality of advice parents had received for each of eight transition-related tasks or skills. This question was completed by 26 parents (38%), of whom 30% described support in positive terms (Excellent, Very Good, Good and Fairly Good), 19.4% described the experience as Poor, and 50.7% stated that they had received no advice with respect to such tasks and skills (Table 50).

Table 50

Study One Parent Survey Quality of Transition Advice

<u>Quality of advice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Excellent to Fairly Good	83	29.9
Poor	54	19.4
None	141	50.7
Total		100.0

Quality of advice relating to LC subject choices. In relation to assistance with choosing Leaving Certificate subjects, parents indicate high levels of dissatisfaction, with 37% stating that they had received no advice in this area, and 29.6% describing this as Poor.

Quality of advice about applying to the CAO. Quality was generally deemed to be positive (68.1%) which is unsurprising as the process is well understood and guidance is widely available through school staff and the CAO website.

Quality of advice about applying to the DARE scheme. This is a disability-specific task and therefore has a significant bearing on transition outcomes. Whilst the majority of parents (60%) had received guidance on applying to the DARE scheme, 12% described the experience as Poor, with a further 28% stating that they had received no advice (Table 51).

Table 51

Study One Parent Survey Quality of DARE Advice

<u>Quality of advice</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Excellent	2	8.0
Very good	2	8.0
Good	4	16.0
Fairly good	7	28.0
Poor	3	12.0
None	7	28.0
Total		100.0

Quality of advice relating to HE providers. In relation to guidance in selecting appropriate courses, n = 31 parents responded to this question, with 45.2% indicating a positive experience, 29% describing this as Poor, and 25.8% stating that they had received no guidance in this respect. Fewer parents (n = 26) responded to assistance with identifying HE providers, 38.5% indicating a positive experience, however 30.8% described it as Poor, and 30.8% stated that they had received no guidance in this matter. Of note, 55% of these parents had students who attended a Private school.

The final part of this question asked parents to identify whether they had received assistance with identifying specific support requirements in college. For

students with high needs such as sensory or physical disabilities, this would be a significant factor in the transition process, and would have an impact on overall experience of the transition process. Whilst 38.4% of parents described this assistance positively, an almost equal number felt that the quality of guidance they had received was Poor (34.6%), with 26.9% stating that they had received no advice.

Nine parents left general comments in relation to quality of advice, most of whom expressed disappointment and disillusionment with the standard of guidance provided by schools, attitudes towards disability, and feelings of isolation such as: “Its left to us as parents to sort everything out” (ADHD/MHC, 6th, DEIS), “Limited advice/help from school with little joined up thinking to meet his needs,” (SpLD, 5th, Private), and: “Would really appreciate any help you could give us here, ” (ADHD/SpLD, 5th, State).

Transition planning resources. The Transition Planning Tool is available from the main menu of the Pathways website. Question 8 examined whether parents thought that this would be useful from TY onwards; n = 30 parents submitted a response of whom 77% indicated that this would be a useful resource. Positive comments in response to this question were submitted by three parents, with one stating that: “Think written confirmation and plans would reinforce that student would be able for college,” (ADHD, 5th, State).

Factors that enable successful transitions. Questions 9 and 10 respectively investigated significant factors that enable or inhibit successful transition from post-primary school to HE for students with disabilities. Twenty-six parents submitted comments which were thematically analysed using eleven a priori codes as described in Chapter 4 section 4.5.2; these are semi-quantified and summarized in Table 52. Subsequent coding passes distilled these into eight distinct sub-themes which were quantified. Parents submitted comprehensive comments in response to identifying enabling factors associated with successful transition (n = 23). Principally these focused on: (a) internal or emotional factors affecting self-esteem and confidence, (b) post-primary support and guidance from schools / colleges, (c) access to information, (d) matriculation requirements, (e) college application procedures and paperwork, (f) formal transition planning, (g) understanding effects of disability / needs of students with disabilities, and (h) parental guidance and support.

Table 52

Study One Parent Survey Factors that Enable Transition to HE

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Internal / emotional factors	5	6.3
Post-primary support and guidance	28	35.4
Access to information	5	6.3
Matriculation requirements	9	11.4
College application	10	12.8
Transition planning	11	13.9
Disability awareness	9	11.4
Family support	2	2.5
Total		100.0

Post-primary support and guidance was deemed to be the most important enabler to transition appearing in 35% of comments, and this included guidance for parents and practical and emotional support for students in school, in particular encouragement and developing self-esteem: “Helping them feel good about themselves despite challenges,” (DCD, 6th, State), in addition to guidance from HEIs: “Maybe the Access office could go to the schools and talk to the students with disabilities” (PD, 6th, State). From the perspective of third level providers, links to HEIs, orientation opportunities and advice on supports in college, were important.

Formal transition planning accounted for almost 14% of enabling factors, with TY identified as the optimum time for introducing transition tasks: “A lot of the groundwork should take place in transition year” (SpLD, 6th, State), and: “I would recommend that all the groundwork be done pre 5th and 6th year” (ADHD, 6th, State). Parents were of the opinion that planning should encompass course options and application workshops, and one parent additionally identified a transition partner as being useful. College application and matriculation requirements are closely tied to transition planning and were noticeable themes encompassing alternative matriculation examinations, making the right subject choices in senior cycle, and flexibility in combining points from different LC cycles.

Disability awareness was also referred to in 11% of comments as being an enabler in terms of guidance that can: “Differentiate various challenges students can have, which are often masked by students’ strengths” (DCD, 6th, State), such awareness being the responsibility of both post-primary schools and HEIs.

Barriers to successful transition. N = 23 parents submitted comments for this question providing detailed opinions; these are semi-quantified and summarized in Table 53. It is notable that barriers essentially reflected different aspects of factors identified as enablers, namely: (a) internal or emotional factors affecting self-esteem and confidence, (b) post-primary support and guidance from schools / colleges, (c) access to information, (d) matriculation requirements, (e) college application procedures and paperwork, (f) formal transition planning, (g) understanding effects of disability / needs of students with disabilities, and (h) parental guidance and support.

Table 53

Study One Parent Survey Factors that Prohibit Transition to HE

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Internal / emotional factors	12	18.8
Post-primary support and guidance	18	28.1
Access to information	11	17.2
Matriculation requirements	6	9.4
College application	2	3.1
Transition planning	3	4.7
Disability awareness	10	15.6
Family support	2	3.1
Total		100.0

With respect to perceived barriers to successful transition, 23.1% of parents identified disability specific issues connected to awareness and understanding of the difficulties experienced by students with disabilities, within a competitive environment. Also of significance, 20.5% of parents cited emotional and behavioural issues, which included confidence and self-esteem, 15.4% attributing this to lack of support in school, and a further 5.1% implicating the effects of school culture or ethos, and attitudes of school staff. These concerns were also closely related to issues around independence and self-awareness (7.7%) and anxiety around disclosure of disability (5.1%). Comments also expressed frustration with factors associated with admissions and matriculation (CAO points, Irish and modern language matriculation requirements), particularly with regard to students whose disability affects language processing (12.8%). Finally, 10.3% of parents felt that HEIs had a responsibility to

disseminate information, make links with schools, parents and students, and provide transition assistance.

Criticism of support and guidance in post-primary settings was expressed in almost 30% of the comments, and in explicit terms: “Lack of support in secondary school. Lack of proper guidance (ADHD, 6th, State),” but specific comments also highlighted the influence of school expectations of student performance:

The biggest barrier I have found is the attitude of school staff, particularly those who have held up standardised testing and predicted grades based on them and told me my child is not intelligent enough to attend university.
(ASD/MHC, 6th, Private)

Inevitably, this has a cumulative effect on the self-perception and confidence of students themselves: “The fear of being different, not being cool enough or together enough to cope. Fear of everybody finding out that they are (in my child’s words) a Freak” (ADHD/MHC, 6th year, State school), with emotional factors accounting for 18.8% of comments. Issues with confidence and self-esteem were attributed to lack of support in school which in turn is linked to school culture or ethos, and attitudes of school staff. These concerns were also closely related to issues around independence and self-awareness and anxiety around disclosure of disability. There was also recognition of how these factors impact on self-determination and self-advocacy in relation to support and guidance:

Perhaps at a guess, slowness of people, esp [sic] young people to go about accessing information for a variety of reasons. Self-esteem, identity issues, confidentiality issues. Secondary school environment in general, hard for students to approach teachers for many and complex reasons. Seldom unfortunately do secondary teachers approach students individually to enquire how they are getting on. (DCD, 6th, State)

Access to concrete information and resources accounted for 17% of themed responses and reflects an element of competitiveness for such resources: “Lack of

awareness for parents and students at second level, everything is a fight, information is not shared freely or perhaps schools are not aware” (SpLD, 5th, State).

Inadequate knowledge or understanding within schools in regard to disability, both generally and specifically, was another reoccurring theme (15%): “If they don't know or understand they should at least support, at best find out. I received little or no support from any of the three schools they attended. All the knowledge I received was through my own research,” (ADHD/MHC, 6th, State). This knowledge base was identified as being particularly important in respect to guiding students: “She has no idea how to proceed, how to prepare for a future with a disease, what career path is right for her. It’s very difficult” (SOI, 6th, Private). Formal transition planning in school (4.7%), and aspects of the transition to HE such as matriculation requirements (9.4%) and the application process (3.1%), were of least concern to parents.

Consequently, the Pearson Correlation Coefficient for all Independent Variables in Study One was calculated. Results (Table 54) did not support any significant relationship between type of school attended, school year, disability, providers of transition advice and quality of advice received, where Pearson’s $r = .2$.

Table 54

Study One Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Independent Variables

	<u>Fee paying</u>	<u>School year</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>Advice provider</u>	<u>Advice quality</u>
Fee paying	1				
School year	0.010679	1			
Disability	0.149945	-0.30625	1		
Advice provider	-0.11926	-0.06739	0.154898	1	
Advice quality	0.110217	0.184407	0.034554	0.023661	1

Participants were invited to submit contact details for a post-survey interview; n = 16 parents submitted email addresses, and seven parents subsequently agreed to be interviewed. This data is analysed in section 5.1.5.

This concludes the description of results from a survey completed by n = 69 parents or carers of post-primary students with disabilities. Key findings are extracted to a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results for Study One (section 5.1.7). The following section reports results are reported for the third part of Study

One, an investigation of viewpoints of practitioners working with students with disabilities prior to transition from post-primary education.

5.1.3 Survey Results: Practitioner Population

This section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from responses to surveys completed by practitioners supporting students with disabilities, firstly: (a) survey participation frequencies, (b) demographic data identifying gender, professional experience, qualifications, disability category of students supported, and number of students with disabilities supported. Secondly, it presents findings in response to the research questions, specifically: (a) access to disability-specific transition information, advice and guidance, (b) quality and equality of guidance to support transition, (c) sources and efficacy of transition advice and guidance, (d) identification of enablers and barriers to transition to HE, and (e) levels of interest and engagement with transition planning resources.

Participation frequencies. Completion rates across the research period 4th April 2011 to 30th November 2013 were not calculated due to the small number of respondents. The survey consisted of ten questions, the opt-out rate was discovered as n = 21 (100%) practitioners completed the first question of the survey which requested confirmation of participation in the research programme, thereafter n = 13 (62%) submitted information on years of experience in the education sector, decreasing to n = 10 (50%) providing data on qualifications, n = 8 (38%) provided data on students supported within specific disability cohorts; n = 6 (29%) completed all questions in the survey.

Demographics. The first five questions gathered demographical data; 77% of participants were female, n = 5 practitioners indicated 5 - 10 years of experience within the education sector, n = 3 indicated 15 - 20 years of experience within the education sector. With respect to experience in SEN, n = 4 indicated 5 - 10 years of experience, one practitioner indicated 1 - 5 years, one practitioner indicated 10 - 15 years, and one practitioner with 20+ years of SEN experience. Three practitioners indicated that they had no experience in this area at all.

Participants were asked to indicate their experience of supporting students in specific disability categories, the most frequently supported students being PD (13.8%), SOI (13.8%) and Df/HI (10.8%). Thereafter all other disabilities were evenly represented. Finally, practitioners were asked to state how many students with

disabilities they supported each year, with 7.7% of participants stating that they supported more than 15 students. Two practitioners indicated that supporting students with disabilities was not applicable in their case.

Quality of transition information and resources. Question 7 asked practitioners to describe their experience of resources / information for disabled students in connection with transition to HE, provided by a range of individuals and institutions. Likert scale response choices of Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor or Unacceptable, were provided for selection. As response numbers for this section of the survey were not significant (n = 6), responses were categorized as positive or negative. Fifty-four percent of practitioners (54%) indicated positive experiences of transition resources overall, DARE materials, college and school information were described in both positive and negative terms, however TY activities / curriculum received no positive comments and were generally described as Poor.

Only five practitioners submitted comments and whilst these were thematically analysed and coded, they were not semi-quantified. Practitioners indicated that the quality and content of information available to school staff was an important factor in determining how well students were supported, including clear guidelines on access schemes such as DARE. “Lack of information” was frequently cited, despite the provision of extensive information via DARE, the CAO and college websites, with one practitioner stating that clearer navigation was required.

Difficulties faced by schools in supporting disabled students through transition. Practitioners indicated frustration with students with disabilities and their parents, where they relied upon school staff to manage applications for language waivers or for DARE: “Being prepared and gathering information was being left until the last minute and parents were blaming schools and GCs and vice versa,” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary school). However, concern was also expressed in regard to understanding of how to support vulnerable students at a critical moment of psycho-social development:

Many school staff including Guidance Counsellors and teachers do not understand many of the functional difficulties experienced by many students as a result of disability... Additionally, the emotional and practical challenges of living and maximising opportunities when you live with a disability is not

always appreciated. Adolescence is a difficult time for all young people but some people with disabilities experience specific issues and some professionals are unsure on how best to support young people and parents. (Guidance Counsellor, FE)

Such difficulties were closely tied to transition enablers and barriers, and emergent themes from comments were similar to those identified by parents, namely: (a) internal or emotional factors affecting self-esteem and confidence, (b) post-primary support and guidance, (c) access to information, (d) matriculation and college application procedures, (e) formal transition planning, (f) development of self-awareness and self-determination, (g) disability awareness, and (h) parental guidance and support.

Enablers and barriers relating to successful transition. A quarter of comments (23.5%) were connected to pre-entry activities between post-primary schools and HEIs: “Immediate link with disability service learning support for skills required at third level delivered in an accessible student friendly way” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary, SEN). In particular practitioners identified attendance at HEI events such as Open Days and Better Options as being crucial, but described the DARE scheme in relation to: “Uncertainty, mixed information, unclear instructions, difficult language used,” (Teacher, post-primary, SEN). Access to information was crucial, but lack of information was also referred to frequently.

Practitioners also felt that development of skills that led to self-awareness, self-determination and independence were vitally important, stating that students also needed to actively participate in researching options and opportunities: “Students need to be facilitated and encouraged to research different career options and opportunities so that they feel empowered and can acquire self-advocacy skills” (Guidance Counsellor, FE).

However, practitioners were also clear on the division between student and school responsibility for elements of the college application process: “Simple things like not processing exemptions with the NUI with regard to 3rd language waivers, and omitting to tick the disability box on the CAO, were unnecessary reasons for students not being successful with their applications,” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary). Failure to engage in pre-entry research constituted a barrier to successful transition “Not being aware of the criteria and matriculation requirements. Not attending DARE

clinics or open days. Not processing exemptions regarding third language” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary).

Understanding and awareness of disability-related difficulties was closely linked to provision of emotional support to students and parents: “The emotional and practical challenges of living and maximising opportunities when you live with a disability is not always appreciated” (Guidance Counsellor, FE). Practitioners were aware that this frequently led to poor self-confidence, low self-esteem affecting motivation and expectations, and that inadequate emotional support was also a function of uncertainty about how to support young people and parents. Only one respondent referred to transition planning, and the requirement for: “Access to information, assistance from a transition partner, such as a parent, teacher etc.” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary).

Participants were invited to submit contact details for a post-survey interview; two practitioners provided email addresses, and subsequently agreed to interview. This data is analysed in section 5.1.6.

This concludes presentation of merged quantitative and qualitative data extracted from survey results with students, parents and practitioners, submitted via the Pathways to Trinity website. The following three sections describe qualitative and quantitative data extracted from interviews with students, parents and practitioners, who indicated agreement to participate in an in-depth interview, in their completion of the survey.

5.1.4 Interview Findings: Students

Eight students (n = 8) submitted an email address for participation in an interview. Two students, both female, subsequently responded indicating a preference for this to be conducted by telephone as neither student lived in the Dublin area. Both Student A (PD, 6th, State) and Student B (SpLD, 6th, DEIS) had completed their LC examinations and had accepted an offer to HE. Both interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and an anonymized copy sent to the interviewee. Initial qualitative analysis used four a priori codes based on semi-structured interview questions, as described in the Methodology. Subsequent re-reading and re-coding of transcripts identified eleven distinct themes across the two interview transcripts (Table 55), which were semi-quantified and summarized.

Table 55

Study One Student Interviews Frequency of Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Frequency (n =/78)</u>	<u>Percentage %</u>
Internal / emotional factors	6	8
Links with colleges	3	4
Emotional support	3	4
Guidance and support in school	10	13
Access to information	9	12
Application to DARE / HEAR	11	14
Course choice	8	10
Self-awareness, self-determination	14	18
Provision of transition planning	4	5
Pathways transition resources	4	5
Orientation into college	5	6
Total		100

Of the 78 coded items, the most frequently occurring were self-awareness and self-determination (18%), assistance with or knowledge of the college application process (14%), and guidance and support received in school (13%). Whilst occurrences under the theme of “access to information” have been counted as specific references to availability of information, they were also counted in “guidance and support in school”. Findings for major themes are presented in the following subsection.

Self-awareness, self-determination and independence. There was a noticeable difference in tone between the two transcripts. Student A (PD, 6th, State) had a very positive transition experience, having been well supported in school, but she also expressed high levels of self-awareness and motivation: “Like I spent, I don’t even know how many hundred hours on the Internet looking stuff up and on the phone asking people and ... and like sending out emails and just literally asking for more information.” The time Student A had invested in researching options had enabled her to make informed decisions based on interests, strengths and challenges: “I needed to look into something that offers what I want, and at the same time that’s good for me and I can get around on my own you know?” This student made the point on many occasions, and provided many examples, of the need for students to take charge of determining their own future:

There were still people at the end of 6th year and said ‘Oh I still don’t know what I want to do, there’s no information out there for me’. I was like ‘You didn’t look for it’ that’s the problem like! I think that there is more than enough information out there, it’s just people are lazy ... they don’t go and look for the information ... they’re not very active about it you know?

Student B (SpLD, 6th, DEIS) described how self-awareness of strengths and challenges informed subject choices: “I always kind of leaned on the sciences more than anything else because like I was scoring better than I was in the languages,” but also acknowledged that decisions made earlier in post-primary should have been reviewed: “In first year I was like no, I didn’t want to be different, but then for Leaving Cert I should have really re-evaluated and looked at it in a different way.” Clearly, this is why early and informed guidance is so critical in the senior cycle of education, if students are to make informed decisions which may have long term consequences.

Application to the DARE scheme. Student A experienced a very positive transition to HE and consequently comments about the DARE application process reflected that positivity: “I thought the DARE process was really good. I just applied so the college would know about my disability.” This was also reflected in confidence around course choices and likely outcomes: “Not to sound bad but I knew I was going to get the points that I wanted I knew that I didn’t need them to get into the course.” Student B described a very different experience, where information about the application process itself was scant:

I met people from HEAR at the Higher Options but ... I really didn’t find them that helpful either, they just kind of told me to apply and see what happened. They didn’t really have that much information, they gave me the brochure and they told me go on the Internet and apply for it.

This information was also at times misleading: “I got a little bit of help from my careers guidance counsellor but apparently your teachers and parents really aren’t supposed to help you.” Given that students with a disability from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have a dual disadvantage, any and all “help” with

applying to access routes is critical. Student B also felt that she had been misled with respect to eligibility for the schemes: “I was always led to believe that I would get in on it. I felt that I’d been given the impression that it was kind of a given,” and this lack of success tinged her perception of the whole transition process: “Me trying to get into college like everything has just been a little bit ... off.” Student B was not successful in gaining a place on her first or second choice courses, and had already decided to investigate applying through the UK clearing house as a less complicated option: “I’m actually thinking about re-applying to UCAS, because it’s a lot easier.”

Guidance and support in school. Student A described a high level of dedicated support from the Guidance Counsellor:

Like our guidance counsellor did something completely out of the ordinary for our class, and she got us all in and did profiles for us and then would look into the career we were going to get out of our degree, and looked into what course was actually going to be looking at, and what we were actually going to be studying.

Nevertheless, this student also acknowledged that access to this quality of guidance was disparate, even within her own school: “Other Guidance Counsellors they were just there if you needed them, if not they didn’t really care, you know,” and she also described a somewhat mechanical approach to supporting students: “And the Guidance Counsellor didn’t even tell them to look more into it, they were like ‘Oh you want to do that, that’s fine then. Next student.’”

Student B acknowledged that school had encouraged students to visit Higher Options and provided one hour a week of careers guidance, but the ratio of teacher to students affected the quality and quantity of guidance: “I had one careers advice counsellor looking at about 600 people, so I don’t really know what much more she could have done?” Student A was very aware of the negative effects of this lack of guidance, and in particular for students who still have no clear transition pathway and who are in need of dedicated planning:

You can definitely tell the difference between people who did ... have a good guidance counsellor and someone, you know, even tutors or the school

principal and stuff like that, and then those who don't and who didn't and ...they're very lost, like very lost...and that's...where the mistakes are made.

The importance of access to this support and guidance is reflected in outcomes in respect to course choices, offers and acceptances.

Determining course choices. Student A benefited from intensive discussion about options and choices, resulting in a late change of mind for the course preferences identified in her CAO application: "I had another interview with my Guidance Counsellor and she helped me so much because she kind of looked at what I was good at, what I liked, and this turned out to be the perfect course for me." This had a positive outcome as she was subsequently offered her first preference: "I am so ecstatic it's actually very funny cos this course was my third option at the middle of June." Student A also reported that preferences were also affected by external advice, for example visits to schools by current HE students.

In contrast, Student B based course choices on how her disability might affect Leaving Certificate results and performance in third level: "Because it's a science, and spelling and being bad at languages doesn't get in the way of being good at science." This student did not receive the level of intensive input described by Student A: "But it was really up to us to decide what order you should put your courses down on and look into the course content and stuff yourself," and whilst this suggests that students were encouraged to be more insightful and self-aware, arguably this is only successful if a solid foundation of knowledge and skills has been developed over time.

As only two students were interviewed, it is not possible to make generalizable hypotheses about the transition experiences of students with disabilities. However, findings suggest that quality and frequency of guidance counselling is crucial in all aspects of transition planning - from course choice to the application process - but that this is also closely linked to development of skills that promote independence, self-knowledge and self-determination.

This concludes presentation of merged qualitative and semi-quantified data extracted from interview results with two students, which are summarized and discussed in Section 5.1.7. The following section describes qualitative data extracted from in-depth interviews with parents who completed the survey and subsequently agreed to interview.

5.1.5 Interview Findings: Parents

Sixteen (n = 16) parents submitted an email address for participation in an interview, and all were contacted by email outlining the procedure, and requesting confirmation of consent. Two parents subsequently responded indicating a preference for this to be conducted in person, and attended for interview in Dublin; an additional five parents agreed to a telephone interview. The demographic profile of the seven parents who completed interviews (Table 56) was broadly representative across disability, school year and school type.

Table 56

Study One Parent Interviews Demographics

<u>Identity</u>	<u>Disability</u>	<u>School Year</u>	<u>School Type</u>
Parent A	MHC	6th	State
Parent B	SpLD	TY	Private
Parent C	PD	5th	DEIS
Parent D	SpLD	5th	DEIS
Parent E	VI	6th	State
Parent F	PD/SpLD	6th	State
Parent G	ADHD	5th	State

All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and an anonymized copy sent to the interviewee. The data was then coded using the methodology described in Chapter Four. Initial qualitative analysis used ten a priori codes based on semi-structured interview questions, as described in the Methodology. Subsequent re-reading and re-coding of transcripts identified eighteen themes across the seven interview transcripts, which are semi-quantified and summarized in Table 57. Frequencies have been calculated as a percentage of the total number of coded text items (n = 370).

All of the parent interviewees were female. Interviews with parents lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and a large corpus of data was transcribed. For this reason, main findings from the thematic analysis are discussed in the following subsections by theme.

Table 57

Study One Parent Interviews Frequency of Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Frequency</u> <u>/n = 370</u>	<u>Percent</u> <u>%</u>
Access to information, support and guidance	44	12.0
Course and / or college choices	12	3.0
Post-primary school support and guidance	43	12.0
Support from external professionals	13	3.0
College application process	8	2.0
Links, outreach and information from HEIs	23	6.0
Supports provided at third level	19	5.0
Understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability	32	9.0
Factors associated with successful transition	2	0.5
Factors that constitute barriers to transition	21	6.0
Independence, self-awareness, and self-determination	37	10.0
Formal transition planning	27	7.0
Support from peers	1	0.2
Family and parental attitudes, guidance and input	53	14.0
Disclosure	9	2.0
Emotional / disability factors affecting transition	30	8.0
Aspects of the DARE scheme	23	6.0
Pathways transition resources	6	2.0

Family and parental attitudes, guidance and input. “Even my husband wouldn’t understand, he goes ‘God’ he says, ‘This is crazy,’ he said, ‘What is the matter with him?’” (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

The most frequently occurring theme (14%) identified in the interview transcripts are aspects of family and parental attitudes, guidance and input that are connected to the transition process. In relation to practical concerns, parents talked about the time spent on supporting their student: “I just took a day off this week and I said ‘Right, this is the DARE day’” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State), and the financial resources required to do so: “We tried, we scraped together to get Maths grinds and English grinds for him every week” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Parents also expressed high levels of commitment to any action that would make a difference: “I would be trying to help in whatever way I can, and do anything I can to” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), often for fear of the consequences that lack of support might lead to: “I don’t think if I did that, I would hate to think of where he is, where he would be” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State). This commitment and support

spanned diverse activities and circumstances, such as diagnosis and intervention, support in school, locating information about the DARE scheme, and awareness of and attitudes towards disability. For one parent, this meant taking extreme action: “I have fought, I have battled for two years to get him into another school, this is the first school who would take him, I would have talked to people in high places” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

Self-doubt and anxiety were features of parental comments, particularly where they felt they were working alone to source information and help on behalf of their students: “I’m hoping I’m doing the right job, I’m not sure whether or not I am, but I’m trying” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Parents described the emotional effects of supporting their student: “So I felt it was a real case well if anything happens to [him] cos of course as a parent I’m thinking about suicide, whatever, at this vulnerable age” (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). Statements often described their feelings in terms of stress: “It’s a big, it’s a big stress and strain on us” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), and utter fatigue: “I would be very supportive of my children, but I just couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t do it any more” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State). These high levels of distress were frequently connected to lack of understanding of the struggle that their student experienced, and in particular where this emanated from within their own family:

And then this begrudging ... I have a family member ... and then she’s checking the points ‘Oh my God...well he just didn’t have enough like, you don’t know how lucky you are’ and I think It’s like ‘how LUCKY I am?’ (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State)

Access to information, support and guidance. “The school have given me very little information, I have beaten myself up trying to find ... to get to see if somebody could help me,” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Arguably, access to information, support and guidance is reflected in all of the themes identified in parent interviews, however, comments were assigned to this theme where the term “information” - principally relating to CAO and DARE applications, course choices and supports in third level - was used specifically, and accounts for 12% of the comments made by parents. Limited or no access to

information is frequently cited in the corpus, and the reasons for these opinions are many and varied. For example, Parent C (PD, 5th, DEIS) points out that the nature of her son's condition has resulted in many hospital appointments and multiple surgeries, with consequences that are not necessarily appreciated in school or by HEIs: "I went back onto the CAO and looked and a lot of the [DARE] clinics would have been on dates that [he] couldn't attend." Other parents felt that schools made little or no effort to disseminate information, even in disadvantaged areas where parents would require additional support: "There's no information from the school, it's up to me to try and find it" (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

This particularly applies to application to access schemes, where assistance with documentation and process is crucial: "I'd say straight away the information on this application, we didn't get enough of it" (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). This is critical in circumstances where the information is passed directly to the student: "If someone would give them, even a little bit more information, cos they're told 'Just apply though DARE'" (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). This "handing off" responsibility has implications for students who may not be fully supported by parents in regard to their aspirations. Additionally, guidance on completing such applications was superficial: "'Mam, my teacher said you should have a look at that and fill it out', and it was the DARE form, the DARE clinics - I didn't even know there was such a thing" (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). Where HEIs or access schemes do provide print and human support to students, parents and schools, there is often a failure to recognize the difficulties with specialist terminology: "Language – jargon – is one of the barriers I would have found. Jargon tends to be discipline-specific, so people from other disciplines or outside academia can have difficulty with it," (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

None of the parents interviewed had been made aware of disability-specific events provided by HEIs such as Better Options, which would allow them to meet with disability services and ask questions about third level supports. Most parents stated that they relied upon their own initiative: "There's no information from the school, it's up to me to try and find it, at this moment, do you know?" (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Critically, it was clear that this search for knowledge - in the absence of dissemination by schools - was dependent upon access to concrete tools: "There wasn't very much information available only that what we went looking for

ourselves on the Internet, you know?” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). Parents who were confident and expert users of computers, software and search engines clearly benefitted from having these skills, but were also aware of the disparity of opportunity for those who do not: “It’s not easy but as a family we are computer-literate. For families without computers - there are some - or without the knowledge about where to look, it must be very difficult,” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private). There was also recognition of how this limited knowledge might affect self-determination and the development of independence:

I’m sure disability services in colleges would find it helpful if parents and students were better informed of both what help to expect, how to find it, and of what things they could do to help themselves, perhaps specific to their own disabilities (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

Post-primary school support and guidance. “I’d say you could be sending information into the secondary schools all day long, every day, I don’t think they have any interest,” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

Support and guidance provided by post-primary schools via school staff, accounted for 12% of the comments made by parents. Comments were largely critical of teachers and Guidance Counsellors, although in some instances this referred to lack of knowledge rather than negative attitudes: “The career guidance was great but she didn’t, she wasn’t, she didn’t know what was available to us” (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). However, government cuts to the resourcing of guidance counselling means that teachers are often the only providers of advice to parents, and this is not always easy to access:

I can honestly say, he never saw a Guidance Counsellor like ... when you go to approach teachers ... they are kind of...they’re busy in their classes and class subjects and teaching, it’s very hard to get them outside a lot of the time. I don’t know whether they want to, or whether they haven’t got the time, but it’s very hard to. (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS)

In some cases, individual resource and SEN staff provided more positive support: “The disability teacher at the time was a very experienced person who was particularly interested in our daughter’s case” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private). However, this seems to be dependent upon individual teachers and parents of students with significant disabilities reported failings in the support system: “He’s a very, very good student but they seemed to forget ... somewhere along the way, that he was visually impaired as well” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). This kind of situation forces parents to step in and demand support from the school: “So it was like trying to pull teeth to get help for him at that stage” (Parent E), which in turn has an effect on how both student and family are perceived: “I think they just sit there and listen to me and ‘Yeah, this is another parent’, but I am actually feeling ... I am telling the truth. I don’t think it’s getting through” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). It is difficult to know who is responsible for this kind of “forgetting” but in the opinion of one parent it is because: “Difficulties, disabilities are at the bottom rung in busy secondary schools” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State) an opinion echoed by several other parents:

My honest opinion of this, being a DEIS school, the students who are excellent are up at the top, the students who are disadvantaged are here <gesture towards the bottom>, and then my son is somewhere a bit up from them, and his kind of level ...are just kind of... left there? (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Independence, self-awareness, and self-determination. “I think that, you know, they’re only 18 and ... particularly boys. I think boys are very immature at 18. And sure they’ll say ‘Oh everything’s fine, yeah’ ... and everything around them is fine ... And really, really it’s not,” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

The development of skills leading to independence, self-awareness, and self-determination was another of the most frequently occurring themes. Comments were coded under this theme where parents provided explicit descriptions or examples of why this would be an important skill for their student to acquire. There was a distinct difference in comments from parents of female students, and parents of male students, with the latter group referencing a lack of maturity at crucial stages in

transition: “Maybe in transition [year] you could be as young as 15, I don’t think they’d take it on board, not at that age. They’re young, free and single, they’re invincible, they don’t think (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). This reference to choices in Transition Year was reiterated by several parents: “At the age of 15, 16, which I think is extremely young, a lot of them haven’t an idea what they want” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). This expression of immaturity places an additional burden on the parent: “‘It was too stressful mammy. I can’t cope. It’s too stressful to do all this myself.’ So it is like a child, at the back of it, he is very young” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Parents also described differing levels of motivation and confidence associated with adverse experiences of support in school, leading either to a strong sense of self-determination: “Even if he was missing from school, he’d be on the phone to somebody to catch up with what he missed during the day” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State), or conversely, a degree of hopelessness / helplessness: “When they’ve little motivation themselves and little drive themselves, even though they have dreams they can’t get their act together” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State), which may also affect how successful students believe their transition may be: “By the time you’re getting to university you actually feel you’re not going to be able to cope. This would be my daughter’s reflection,” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

Whilst parents naturally empathized with the difficulties faced by their students, almost all parents exhibited a strong sense of awareness for the need for independence: “I’m trying to help him, and trying to put something in place for him, and then realising that he kind of has to stand on his own two feet as well” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). One parent suggested that development of self-knowledge should be addressed in post-primary school: “In school they do need a lot more learning as regards self-learning” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State), and this would include acquiring skills in self-advocacy which are a vital tool for survival in college: “There probably was support there, but he didn’t look for it, I don’t know whether he didn’t know how to look for it, or whether he just didn’t bother looking for it,” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

Finally, parents felt that self-awareness and self-determination was also linked to self-esteem: “So is it that they just don’t feel they’re as good as, and is that what stops them from achieving their goal? Is that what’s taking them longer?”

(Parent A, MHC, 6th, State) This in turn has consequences for educational achievement: “As a parent, that fills me with worry as I know through my own early education how difficult life is if you don’t achieve in accordance with the level of your intellect,” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

Understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability. “Well I just think that as a society we aren’t open to people with a disability, maybe we don’t like to look at them, maybe we don’t like to think they exist? And I think it is just society as a whole kind of tries to shut the door behind them,” (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

This theme represented 9% of coded text, and is concerned with viewpoints on the extent to which “outsider” understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability, affect the quality and provision of support and guidance during senior cycle education, and through the transition period. Parents alluded to the complexities of inclusivity and integration: “They have huge problems and, and in some ways I think they’re kind of expected to fit in with everybody else, and they’re not like everybody else” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State), and a failure to acknowledge students with disabilities as individuals with individual differences: “I obviously wish that the DES itself was more supportive to students with disability. I believe their supports are geared towards a general norm, rather than helping students of high ability who also have disability,” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

The experiences of parents whose students had a “hidden” or non-visible disability, such as sensory, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty, described this lack of awareness as a particular barrier: “His journey has been very tough. He went through primary school without being assessed, teachers not noticing,” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Despite the existence of an IEP, replete with recommendations, if teaching staff are simply unaware of the physical access issues associated with a disability, and that disability is also “hidden” the consequences can be disastrous: “When he went to [post-primary school] for the first six weeks he could see nothing, because everything was whiteboards, and the glare on the whiteboards, he couldn’t see,” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State).

Additionally, parents described the lack of understanding in respect to specific disabilities, in particular mental health conditions: “The principal of the school, she just had no interest. She thought it was all crazy and ‘pull yourself

together' she said to him in front of me one day," (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State), which can have devastating consequences: "But it went on from there that he didn't leave the house for a year and a half," (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

Emotional / disability factors affecting transition. "She can't write, she damages her joints by writing, she's now at the moment in pre-mocks and sitting all day writing, because the Department refused permission for a laptop," (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

Coded text under this theme represents 8% of the interview corpus, and includes parental views on the extent to which disability-specific factors, or issues as a result of emotional stress, have affected their students across the senior cycle of education. For some students, progress through post-primary can be a lonely place: "I think he's covered it for years, from the teachers. He's just battled away himself" (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), a situation that is all the more difficult in adolescence: "She just feels such a NUISANCE at this stage. She just, like her eyes glaze over, it's awkward enough being a teenager, besides being 'special', as she says herself" (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

This feeling of being different is exacerbated by lack of understanding from peers and school staff, and in some instances may result in an escalation of anxiety, with significant consequences: "He couldn't attend school. He went for two months in 5th year and then he would ring me crying from a toilet cubicle, crying, saying 'I can't go in. I can't breathe'" (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). Similarly, when teachers are unaware of how a specific learning disability manifests itself within the framework of academic skills, students may often be the target of unfair or unrealistic expectations: "For spelling, her reading, her grammar, her writing, her working memory problem, they criticized her all year and sent home bad notes" (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

Finally, there is the additional pressure of attitudes and social acceptance from within the family, which can have long term psychological consequences: "I have become so much more aware, particularly through my own family. 'Don't tell anybody. Why are you going to tell people?' But what choice do we have?" (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

Formal transition planning. “A dedicated transition planning programme would be very useful, I found that most of the transferring aid was done by me,” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

Comments about transition planning accounted for 7% of coded text. Parents were of the opinion that this should begin as early as possible, leaving students in 6th year free to focus on study, without the burden of making choices: “I don’t know but 6th year would be studying and revising, you can concentrate, you know where you’re going, because you’ve got a clear idea of what to apply for, where you want to go” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Parents acknowledged the usefulness of early transition planning, leaving time for students to make appropriate subject choices for senior cycle: “I absolutely think it should take place in Transition Year. I think knowing the subjects that they’re going to be strong in or weak in, you know, knowing the subjects they shouldn’t touch,” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State). However not all students complete TY, either for financial reasons or because their student was not offered the opportunity: “But he wanted to stay in that school and that school don’t do transition year, so no. No it doesn’t happen there,” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Critically, schools may not be aware that because the structure of the TY curriculum leans towards inherently physical activities, such as school trips, sporting opportunities, work experience and tactile subjects such as woodwork or cookery, it may automatically exclude students with disabilities: “Because the transition year then again to us it wouldn’t have been very beneficial to him, a lot of what was getting offered in it wouldn’t have suited [him],” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS).

Suggestions and ideas about the format and rationale for transition planning were also offered: “I think it should, it should have probably started last September. And like a little kind of like plan for each student, a kind of a stepping stone, ‘Well this is a path you could take, if you go this way’ you know an arrow pointing out or whatever,” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Additionally, parents made reference to transition planning post Leaving Certificate, which is intrinsically linked to supports at third level. This latter theme accounted for 5% of coded text, and was a source of concern and anxiety for parents: “I think it’s just a huge thing to leave them - from school supports and parental supports and then sometimes to no supports,” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th year, State school).

Application to the DARE scheme. “I found it hard myself, the whole CAO form even and everything, I found it a bit daunting and a bit difficult. I just found the whole process difficult,” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

The greatest criticism of this supplementary admissions route was access to information about the scheme: “They mentioned DARE but only in a brief conversation, it wasn’t elaborated on, it’s what I’ve tried to find out myself (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), and advice on completing documentation: “What got in the way? I’d say straight away the information on this application, we didn’t get enough of it,” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). Again, parents mentioned the possibility of DARE representatives attending school functions: “Like they have their open nights and they have their career nights, and there is people there, but there’s no-one actually there from the DARE,” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). Consequently, students and parents are often left to their own devices with regard to completing an application: “But he filled in the DARE application, but really, like, without a whole lot of support. He did it himself,” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State).

Links, outreach and information from HEIs. “What helped? Your phone call now has actually helped him, to be honest with you,” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS).

Representing 6% of coded text, parents largely referred to HEI visits to schools as a method of strengthening the links between post-primary and third level, and as sources of information: “It would also be good if colleges could send people to schools to talk about what they offer to students,” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private), although they also acknowledged the practical limitations of a small number of HEIs visiting every school across the country:

There’s the link between the colleges and the school I feel could be better ... so where do you go like, how would you support that? Even leaflets or something, that stepping stone or pathway or whatever, any information would be greatly appreciated. It would be hard to fund and do it (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Parents also mentioned assistance with DARE applications, pre-entry orientation information and the provision of more detailed information from colleges and their associated websites, aimed at students with disabilities.

This concludes presentation of the qualitative and semi-quantified data extracted from interviews with parents. Key findings are extracted to a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results for Study One (section 5.1.7). The following section describes semi-quantified qualitative data from interviews with practitioners, who indicated agreement to participate in an in-depth interview in their survey response.

5.1.6 Interview Findings: Practitioners

Two practitioners, both female, submitted an email address for participation in an interview, and were contacted by email outlining the procedure, and requesting confirmation of consent. Both respondents subsequently indicated a preference for this to be conducted by telephone. The interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and an anonymized copy sent to the interviewee. This data was then coded using the methodology described in Chapter Four. Initial qualitative analysis used six a priori codes based on semi-structured interview questions, as described in the Methodology. However, subsequent re-reading and re-coding of transcripts identified fourteen distinct themes across the two interview transcripts, which are semi-quantified and summarized in Table 58.

Of the 95 coded items, the most frequently occurring were access to information, support and guidance (26.3%), links with and information from HEIs (15.8%), and issues at post-primary level and effectiveness of the DARE scheme (10%). Whilst occurrences under the theme of “access to information” have been counted as specific references to availability of information in print, media, and face-to-face communication, they were also counted in additional themes such as “Links / information from HEIs”.

Table 58

Study One Practitioner Interviews Frequency of Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Frequency</u> <u>/n = 95</u>	<u>Percentage</u> <u>%</u>
Access to information, support and guidance	25	26.3
Course choices	5	5.3
Issues at post-primary level	9	9.5
Elements of the application process including paperwork.	3	3.2
Links / information from HEIs	15	15.8
Understanding and awareness of disability	3	3.2

Factors associated with successful transition	1	1.1
Factors associated with barriers to transition	6	6.3
Development of independence and self-awareness, self-determination	6	6.3
Formal transition planning	4	4.2
Parental guidance and input	5	5.3
Emotional factors	1	1.1
DARE scheme	9	9.5
Pathways transition resources	3	3.2

As only two practitioners were interviewed, it is not possible to make generalizable hypotheses about the transition experiences and viewpoints of practitioners supporting students with disabilities. However, analysis of the transcripts indicates two quite distinct perspectives which reflect the specific context of each practitioner. The interview with Practitioner A was short as this participant did not wish to be interviewed at work, and the interview was conducted by phone in the evening.

Practitioner A provides guidance to students with disabilities as part of a national post-Leaving Certificate scheme / service. Students who participate in the programmes have not successfully transitioned to third level, and are usually beginning transition journeys in smaller stages, most likely to FE rather than HE contexts. Practitioner A expressed opinions that focused more on socio-political and cultural factors surrounding support for students with disabilities. Post-primary staff attitudes and institutional cultures were identified as issues affecting transition, and constituting a barrier: “Lack of training and awareness in second level staff, this is good in some schools, and poor in others. It is dependent upon the ethos of the school, attitudes towards inclusion and expectations, especially for Special Educational Needs.”

Only Practitioner A commented about difficulties arising from emotional factors: “It’s not just about learning – there is the impact for example of being bereaved in TY or 5th year, bullying, which could be common, has a huge impact”, awareness and understanding of disability: “It’s a big thing, learning differences that are not adequately provided for, lack of an open mind and encouragement”, and insufficient input from parents:

Parents need to be more informed sometimes there is a lack of support at home, this needs to be addressed, it is integral to transition. Parents suffer from lack of involvement, it depends on whether parents have attended FE/HE themselves, if not there is no history or cultural expectations from parents.

In contrast, Practitioner B is a Guidance Counsellor practicing in a Private school located in a wealthy city suburb. Opinions with respect to accessibility of information were largely focused on input from HEIs: “I mean there just seems to be - not a lack of information - but where do you access that information for specific colleges,” and dissemination of information to school staff: “The information needs to get to the to the learning support coordinator, because sometimes this information gets to the guidance department but it’s not actually filtered down to the learning resource department, do you know what I mean?” However, whilst criticizing the perceived lack of, or availability of, information despite personal familiarity with Internet-based resources, Practitioner B was clear about the level of importance assigned to dissemination of information to students: “It wouldn’t be, to be totally honest with you, it wouldn’t be one of my big things to prioritize and say like ‘students you have to go to this Better Options thing’.”

With regard to the DARE scheme, whilst acknowledging its importance as a transition pathway, Practitioner A described it as “very medicalised”, with no acknowledgement of other factors. Practitioner B was conscious of the value of the DARE scheme: “I mean last year I can say all of my students wouldn’t have got on their course only for having DARE”, but was both complementary: “The DARE website is quite self-explanatory and it’s a good website for accessing information”, and critical: “You know I think that they’ve got to be very clear with regard to what they require because this student actually ended up not getting his DARE,” regarding DARE information. However, negative opinions were expressed specifically in relation to evidence of disability for Dyslexia. Despite the fact that very specific criteria for eligibility under this category is provided, in writing, on the DARE website, Practitioner B clearly had negative experiences with the application procedure: “Part of me, I should have checked the WISC results but I just presumed, you know, it was a full ed psych assessment and sent it in”, although arguably,

Guidance Counsellors should not have to take responsibility for accuracy of reporting provided by other professionals.

Whilst both practitioners supported the need for transition planning, Practitioner A was specific in relation to timeframe and governmental responsibility: “More comprehensive planning in TY should be piloted, the State should do this, it should be a separate process.” In addition, many of the suggestions for disseminating information already exist, for example: “I think more information with regards to supports that are available within third level and within specific colleges”, “If I had something that I could hand to them and say ‘Listen you need to get there, you need to get your information’”, and: “You know what would be beneficial for students would be to have some sort of an information day.”

Summary. This section concludes the presentation of quantitative and qualitative data extracted from survey results with students, parents and practitioners, submitted via the Pathways to Trinity website, and the qualitative and quantitative data extracted from interviews with two students, seven parents and two practitioners, who indicated agreement to participate in an in-depth interview. The final section that follows presents a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results for Study One, as described in Chapter Four (Methodology). Statistical data with respect to respondent demographics are presented first, followed by a summary of merged statistical and thematic analyses accompanied by a discussion of significant findings.

5.1.7 Study One Summary of Merged Results

This section presents a summary of merged results from Study One sections 5.1.1 to 5.1.6: surveys and interviews with students, parents and practitioners prior to transition to HE as: (a) merged quantitative demographic data, and (b) a summary of insider viewpoints from students, parents and practitioners. These findings represent the key themes emerging from qualitative and semi-quantified data, and are presented in sections that relate to the research questions specified earlier in this work, namely: (a) access to disability-specific transition information, advice and guidance, (b) quality and equality of guidance to support transition, (c) sources and efficacy of transition advice and guidance, (d) identification of enablers and barriers to transition to HE, and (e) levels of interest and engagement with transition planning resources.

Demographics. Results for school type and school year were broadly similar between students (n = 122) and parents (n = 69) as illustrated in Table 59.

Practitioners were not asked to identify these factors as it was assumed that the range of practitioner type - teacher, visiting teacher, Guidance Counsellor, psychologists, clinicians - would make these difficult to specify. The majority of respondents in student and parent surveys indicated attendance at a State school, of which there are 729 nationally; similar numbers of respondents in student and parent surveys attended a Private school, of which there are 56 nationally; 14.5% of participants attended a post-primary DEIS school, of which there are 195 nationally.

Table 59

Study One Merged Demographic Data

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Students Percentage %</u>	<u>Parents Percentage %</u>
<u>School Type</u>		
State	60.0	52.7
Private	26.5	30.9
DEIS	3.6	10.9
<u>School Year</u>		
6 th	64.0	64.0
5th	14.0	21.0
TY	22.0	15.0

The majority of respondents indicated enrolment in 6th year, but it is of note that a combined total of 37% of respondents from both surveys attended, or had a student who attended, Transition Year. This would indicate that there is an appetite for transition planning to begin early.

Table 60 illustrates the frequency of disability categories reported in survey responses, showing that SpLD accounted for 22.7% of respondents, which is broadly in line with incidence within the general population, currently estimated as 1:4 to 1:10 (Nag & Snowling, 2012). A comparison of disability data between groups traditionally under-represented in FE/HE (sensory and physical) with all other disability groups indicates that 28% of these respondents had a sensory or physical disability, compared to 72% of students in all other groups.

Table 60

Study One Merged Disability Categories

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
AS/ASD	25	13.5
ADD/ADHD	20	10.8
B/VI	9	4.8
DCD	9	4.8
Df/HI	30	16.2
MHC	14	7.5
NC	8	4.3
PD	14	7.5
SOI	14	7.5
SpLD	42	22.7

Practitioners (n = 21) indicated between 5 and 20 years of experience in post-primary education, and broadly supported students in all disability categories, the highest ranking being PD (13.8%), SOI (13.8%), and Df/HI (10.8%), thereafter all other disabilities were evenly represented. Practitioners generally worked with between 1 and 5 students with disabilities each year, with 7.7% stating that they supported more than 15 students.

Responses from each of the stakeholder groups (students, parents, practitioners) were cross-tabulated for each of the survey questions, no significant correlation between school year, school type and disability was identified in any of the three surveys.

Sources of transition support. Participants in both surveys were asked to identify individuals / institutions that had provided them with college and disability specific advice (Table 61). Parents were the main providers of advice to students (17.3%), closely followed by Guidance Counsellors (15.3%). Similarly, parents identified Guidance Counsellors (13.6%) and Resource Teachers (13.6%) as the main providers of support and guidance within the post-primary environment. However, they were the only reliable source of advice to students and parents, other school-related personnel (teachers, Principals and SENOs) provided little or no guidance in respect to transition.

Table 61

Study One Merged Sources of Transition Advice to Students and Parents

<u>Source of Advice</u>	<u>Student Percentage %</u>	<u>Parent Percentage %</u>
DARE	12.1	27.3
SENO	4.0	3.0
Guidance Counsellor	15.3	13.6
Resource Teacher	5.6	13.6
College website	10.9	10.6
Principal	3.2	1.5
Teacher	8.5	0.0
Parents	17.3	1.5
Disability Services website	6.0	6.1
Friends	10.5	7.6
Nobody	6.5	15.2
Total	100	100

Students (12.1%) and parents (27.3%) also identified DARE resources as being important, with both students (16.9%) and parents (16.7%) consulting HEI sources (HE and Disability Service websites) for information and advice. Whilst only 8.5% of students indicated that they accessed a teacher for guidance, none of the parents stated that they were able to do so. These findings support the idea that a strategy of providing school staff with pertinent and timely information is inherently valuable to students, and in addition draws attention to the importance of providing comprehensive resources via formal HEI websites.

Parents indicated that IEP meetings were held with Guidance Counsellors (38.7%) or Resource Teachers (32.3%), and consultations with SENOs were held significantly less frequently than any other advisor, with 48% of parents indicating that they had never discussed planning in relation to transition with any type of practitioner. Comments described high levels of frustration and inadequate access to transition information, with $n = 13$ parents stating that no IEP existed for their student, of whom $n = 11$ attended DEIS or State post-primary schools. Of these, $n = 2$ were students with an SOI, $n = 3$ were students with ASD, $n = 3$ were students with ADHD, and $n = 2$ who indicated that their student had a MHC: "Nobody has ever helped us with this" (ASD / MHC, 6th, Private).

Two questions in the survey invited students with disabilities, parents and practitioners to comment on enablers and barriers to transition; these responses are merged with findings from a thematic analysis of interview transcripts and are presented in the following three sections.

Viewpoints of students. Student concerns were associated with academic skills (22.6%), locating accommodation and living with other people (21.1%), course choice (13.2%), and accessing supports in college (13.2%). Disclosure of disability to both staff (6.8%) and peers (6.8%) were of least importance. None of the student survey respondents submitted comments for open-ended questions, therefore qualitative data relates to thematic analysis of interview transcripts. The most frequently occurring themes were knowledge-based: self-awareness and self-determination skills (18%), assistance with the college application process (14%), and guidance and support received in school in regard to aspects of transition (13%). Thematic statements have been collated under each of the research questions.

Access to transition information, advice and guidance. With respect to LC subject choices, college and course choices and the college application process, although 76% of students felt that they were well supported, the remaining 24% described the support they received as either poor or non-existent. High levels of satisfaction with CAO guidance is unsurprising as this is a long established national clearing house for college applications, however 30.5% of students - those with sensory disabilities or specific learning difficulties - indicated that they had never received guidance in connection with applying for a waiver of the modern language, as an admissions requirement.

Student A (PD, 6th, State) expressed high levels of self-awareness, self-determination and independence in relation to sourcing information: “I think that there is more than enough information out there, it’s just people are lazy, they don’t go and look for the information, they’re not very active about it.” This student began gathering information about course and college choices at the beginning of 5th year, attending open days and other events, and believed that transition planning should begin early in the senior cycle of post-primary education. As practitioners (SENOs, school staff) represented 36.6% of advice providers, and HE sources (DARE, College and Disability Service sources) accounted for 29% of advice sources, providing school staff with pertinent and timely information is inherently valuable to students, and in

addition draws attention to the importance of providing comprehensive resources via HE related websites and events.

Quality and equality of guidance to support transition. Overall, 60% of students described the quality of advice in positive terms ranging from Excellent to Fairly Good however 40% of students described this as a negative experience. For students with high needs such as sensory or physical disabilities, awareness of potential supports in third level education is a significant factor in the transition process, impacting on the overall transition experience, in particular during the early weeks of college. Student A (PD, 6th, State) drew attention to the importance of guidance in relation to directing students who might lack in confidence, motivation or investigative skills: “Actually a push or a shove in some cases into the right direction, showing them what to do and how to look it up, and where to look it up, and where to get the information.”

Student comments also suggested that the quality and quantity of this guidance was dependent upon the interest level and engagement of individual Guidance Counsellors, and the size of the student cohort for whom they were providing support: “I had one careers advice counsellor looking at about 600 people so I don’t really know what much more she could have done” (Student B, SpLD, 6th, DEIS). However, they also stated that the success of transition planning might be dependent upon approach and delivery: “It depends on the student I’d say they tend to not do stuff they’re forced into” (Student B), but equally, negative expectations are not encouraging to students if they are not accompanied by positive alternatives: “Obviously they want to be realistic, but telling someone they’ll never get into a certain college and stuff like that isn’t a very helpful transition process,” (Student A, PD, 6th, State).

Student B felt that she had been misled in terms of expectations and success by both the Guidance Counsellor and HEAR personnel: “I felt that I’d been given the impression that it was kind of a given, and I didn’t get in on it.” This inaccuracy of advice extended to how much support she should seek when completing the HEAR application: “I got a little bit of help from my careers guidance counsellor but apparently she said your teachers and parents really aren’t supposed to help you.” Given that the application process is complex in terms of paperwork and process, and that Student B is Dyslexic, guidance would have been crucial. Student B

expressed disappointment with the accuracy of information she had received with respect to college application and access routes; overall, comments were more negative. This viewpoint spanned advice sought at public events: “I met people from HEAR at the Higher Options but I really didn’t find them that helpful either, they just kind of told me to apply and see what happened” provision of information from HEIs: “A lot of the colleges came to us and they gave course specific lectures . . . and the different options available. None of the Dublin colleges came down” and guidance in school: “But it was really up to us to decide what order to put it down on, what order you should put your courses down on and look into the course content and stuff yourself.”

Both students attributed the effectiveness of guidance in part to student attitude and motivation: “It kind of needs to be a conscious effort on the student’s behalf really. In my opinion” (Student B), and in particular, expectations about their own role in sourcing information: “It’s all in the research, it’s like in the information you look up and like loads of people don’t think that way they’re like ‘Oh the information should be given to me’. But it’s actually that I should be looking for information” (Student A).

Identification and availability of transition resources. The Transition Planning Tool is available to download from the Pathways website, and almost 60% of students indicated that they thought this would be useful to include as a transition resource, the remainder were unsure whether this would be useful or not. This uncertainty may be due to a lack of awareness / understanding of the meaning of “transition planning tool”, and may have been dependent upon whether students had accessed it prior to completing the survey.

Both of the students who were interviewed had consulted the Pathways transition site and both commented positively: “It’s really good. It just kind of enlightens you and tells you what you’re doing and where you’re going and how things are done and everything” (Student A), “I did find it very, very helpful, not many other colleges have something like that” (Student B). In addition, they offered observations with respect to how the resource could be improved: “I’d say make it a bit more specific for each type like a physical disability” (Student A), and provided specific examples of how it could be used: “I went on that website really to find out

about how many people were accepted to, I wanted to see how many people were accepted to DARE, this year” (Student B).

Transition enablers and barriers. Student A described a positive transition experience having been well supported in school, and expressed high levels of self-awareness and self-determination and self-efficacy. The time Student A had invested in researching options had enabled her to make informed decisions based on interests, strengths and weakness, and consequently this student had accepted an offer on her first preference course. Student A attributed this positivity to her relationship with the Guidance Counsellor stating that: “My guidance counsellor was even my best friend to be completely honest.”

Student B stated that she was reluctant to seek disability specific support, and that perhaps this had acted as a barrier to transition, in terms of opportunity, performance and success: “I was like no, I don’t want that, because I didn’t want to be different, but then for Leaving Cert I should have really re-evaluated and looked at it in a different way.” Similarly, Student A pointed out that: “You know when you have a disability things are a lot more complicated,” which potentially affects educational achievement: “It made school so much harder, I’ve got to work a lot harder than my peers did,” (Student B). Inevitably, this has long term consequences for self-esteem and confidence, and any of the factors discussed in this section has the potential to affect the transition experience, with the result that students can be left behind or wander away from a positive transition pathway: “They’re very lost, like very lost, and that’s where the mistakes are made” (Student A).

Merged findings from student viewpoints suggest that quality and frequency of guidance counselling is crucial in all aspects of transition planning - from course choice to the application process - but that this is also closely linked to development of skills that promote independence, self-knowledge and self-advocacy skills. The following section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from surveys and interview with parents in Study One.

Viewpoints of parents. The following viewpoints merge comments submitted in the survey and in interviews with parents. Comments extracted from surveys also identify the student’s disability, school year and school type, comments extracted from interviews also carry the identifier of the parent.

Access to transition information, advice and guidance. Whilst aspects of this theme are reflected in all of the questions addressed in the survey and identified in parent comments and interviews, findings were assigned to this theme where the term “information” was used specifically, and accounts for 12% of the comments made by parents. The most frequently cited source of advice was DARE (22.7%), followed by Guidance Counsellors and Resource teachers (13.6%). Merging results for HE Disability Services and HEI websites, indicates that 16.7% of transition advice is sourced from HEIs. Limited or absence of information is frequently cited in the corpus, with 15.2% of parents stating that nobody had provided them with this guidance, for a range of reasons. Parent C (PD, 5th, DEIS) pointed out that the nature of her son’s condition had resulted in many hospital appointments and multiple surgeries, affecting attendance at information events, a fact that is not always acknowledged by schools or HEIs. Other parents felt that schools made little or no effort to disseminate information, even in disadvantaged areas where parents might require additional support: “There’s no information from the school, it’s up to me to try and find it” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

This aspect was specifically mentioned in relation to access schemes, where assistance with documentation and process is crucial. Often DARE / HEAR information is passed directly to the student: “If someone would give them, even a little bit more information, cos they’re told ‘Just apply though DARE’,” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS), and has implications for students who may not be fully supported by parents in regard to their aspirations. Additionally, guidance on completing such applications was superficial: “‘Mam, my teacher said you should have a look at that and fill it out’, and it was the DARE form” (Parent C).

Criticisms of the DARE scheme were located in the intricacies of the application process itself, including completing online and paper forms, acquiring evidence of disability documentation, and understanding timelines. Parents described this experience as “difficult” and “daunting”, with the most frequent complaint relating to the inadequacy of DARE information provided by the school: “They mentioned DARE but only in a brief conversation, it wasn’t elaborated on.” Consequently, students and parents are often left to their own devices with regard to completing an application: “He filled in the DARE application, but really, like, without a whole lot of support. He did it himself” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). Where HEIs or access schemes

do provide print and human support to students, parents and schools, there is often a failure to recognize the difficulties with specialist terminology: “Language – jargon – is one of the barriers I would have found” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

Parents (13%) felt that some form of transition planning - whether this is guidance time in relation to courses, application workshops, or provision of transition resources - should at least begin in TY, if not 5th year, and one parent additionally identified a transition partner as being useful. Support with choosing the right LC subjects was also identified as a crucial part of pre-transition planning (9.3%), and 12% of parents felt that links to HEIs, orientation opportunities and advice on supports on college were of importance, with 10.3% indicating that HEIs have a responsibility to disseminate information, make links with schools, parents and students, and provide transition assistance: “What helped? Your phone call now has actually helped him, to be honest with you” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). Representing 6% of coded text, parents largely referred to HEI visits to schools as a method of strengthening the links between post-primary and third level, and as sources of information: “It would also be good if colleges could send people to schools to talk about what they offer to students” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private), although they also acknowledged the practical limitations of a small number of HEIs visiting every post-primary school on a national scale.

Parents also mentioned the necessity for some HEIs and their associated websites to provide more detailed information for students with disabilities, in respect to DARE applications and pre-entry orientation: “Some colleges [are] smaller and little information offered on their websites” (SOI, 6th, State). None of the parents interviewed had been made aware of disability-specific events provided by HEIs such as Better Options, which would allow them to meet with disability services and ask questions about third level supports. Most parents stated that they relied upon their own initiative to source guidance, and it was clear that this search for knowledge - in the absence of dissemination by schools - was dependent upon access to concrete tools: “There wasn’t very much information available only that what we went looking for ourselves on the Internet, you know?” (Parent E, VI, 6th, State).

Parents who were confident users of computers, software and search engines clearly benefitted from having these skills, but were also aware of the disparity of opportunity for those who do not: “For families without computers - there are some -

or without the knowledge about where to look, it must be very difficult” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

Quality and equality of guidance to support transition. Almost 30% of parents described transition support and guidance in positive terms, 19.4% described negative experiences, but critically 50% of parents stated that they had received no advice with respect to transition tasks and skills, post-secondary supports and opportunities: “I’d say you could be sending information into the secondary schools all day long, every day, I don’t think they have any interest” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State). In relation to assistance with choosing Leaving Certificate subjects, parents indicated high levels of dissatisfaction, with 37% stating that they had received no advice in this area, and a further 29.6% describing it as poor. Quality of advice about applying to the CAO was generally deemed to be positive (68.1%) which is unsurprising as the process is well understood and guidance is widely available through school staff and the CAO website. Applying to the DARE scheme and applying for a waiver of the modern language requirement, are disability-specific tasks and would thus have a direct bearing on successful transition. Whilst the majority of parents (60%) had received guidance on applying to the DARE scheme, 12% described the experience as inadequate, with a further 28% stating that they had received no advice.

Parents were also asked to rate quality of advice in relation to choosing HE courses, with 45.2% indicating a positive experience, 29% describing it as a negative experience, and 25.8% stating that they had received no guidance in this respect. Support and guidance provided by post-primary schools via school staff, accounted for 12% of the comments made by parents. Comments were largely critical of teachers and Guidance Counsellors, although in some instances this referred to lack of knowledge rather than negative attitudes: “The career guidance was great but she didn’t, she wasn’t, she didn’t know what was available to us” (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

In some cases, individual resource and SEN staff provided effective support: “First person in school to show and share some knowledge regarding stresses associated with extra challenges that students can have” (DCD, 6th, State), but parents of students with disabilities also reported failings in the support system: “They have been made to feel such a nuisance that they just want to fade into the crowd and not

have to stand out looking for extra help/support/special group etc.” This kind of situation forces parents to step in and demand support from the school, which in turn has an effect on how both student and family are perceived. This lack of understanding and awareness may be dependent upon the existence of an IEP, and to what extent its content is disseminated to school staff. Twenty-one parents (48%) indicated that they had never discussed the IEP in relation to transition with any school linked practitioner, and meetings with SENOs were held significantly less frequently than any other advisor. Consequently, inequitable access to an IEP affects opportunities to plan for successful transition opportunities.

Overall, parents highlighted the need to be independently proactive in sourcing information, and many expressed disappointment and disillusionment with the standard of guidance provided by schools, attitudes towards disability, creating feelings of isolation.

Identification and availability of transition resources. Comments about transition planning accounted for 7% of coded text in transcripts, and a significant majority of survey respondents (77%) indicated that a transition planning tool would be a useful resource. Parents felt that some form of transition planning - guidance in relation to courses, application workshops, or provision of transition resources - should at least begin in TY: “There is little point in bombarding a child with difficulties with loads of information in 5th and sixth year as they have enough to worry them in these years. So I would recommend that all the groundwork be done pre 5th and 6th year” (ADHD, 6th, State). This would also ensure that appropriate subject choices for senior cycle are provided in a timely manner: “Knowing the subjects that they’re going to be strong in or weak in, you know, knowing the subjects they shouldn’t touch” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State). However, not all students complete TY, either for financial reasons, because their school does not provide TY, or because they are not selected for a TY place. Consequently, early transition planning would not be provided on an equitable basis to all students with disabilities. Suggestions and ideas about the format and rationale for transition planning were also offered: “Kind of like a plan for each student, a kind of a stepping stone” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), and: “Written confirmation and plans would reinforce that [the] student would be able for college”; one parent stated that a transition partner would be valuable.

Additionally, parents made reference to transition planning to include the period after the Leaving Certificate, which is intrinsically linked to supports at third level. This latter theme accounted for 5% of coded text, and was a source of concern and anxiety for parents. Locating relevant transition resources was problematic for many parents, and was dependent upon the way in which individual HEIs made this available, including the clarity and structure of websites: “Trying to find information about disabled access from most universities is like searching for a needle inside a haystack inside a maze” (ASD/MHC, 6th, State).

Transition enablers and barriers. Transition barriers reflected oppositional aspects of factors identified as enablers, and vice versa. School guidance and support was the most frequently identified enabler (22.2%), and this included both practical and emotional support for students attending post-primary school, in addition to guidance for parents. Significant findings were grouped into four distinct sub-themes presenting as enablers and barriers: (a) family attitudes and input, (b) independence, self-awareness, and self-determination, (c) understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability, and (d) emotional / disability factors affecting transition.

Family and parental attitudes, guidance and input. This was the most frequently occurring theme identified in interview transcripts (14%). Parents drew attention to the high level of parental commitment required to support their student, but also highlighted that this was dependent upon the skill set and financial resources at their disposal: “Parents have to be very focused and supportive and not all parents have either the awareness or the means to provide this. There is definitely not a level playing pitch in secondary school” (ASD, 6th, Private). This commitment and support spanned diverse activities and circumstances, such as diagnosis and intervention, seeking supports in school, locating information about the DARE scheme, and managing awareness of and attitudes towards disability. For one parent, this meant taking extreme action: “I have fought, I have battled for two years to get him into another school” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

Self-doubt and anxiety were features of parental comments, particularly where they felt they were working alone to source information and help on behalf of their students. Parents expressed the emotional burden of supporting their student in terms of “stress” and “fatigue”. High levels of distress were frequently connected to

lack of understanding of the struggle that their student experienced, and in particular where this emanated from within their own family.

Independence, self-awareness, and self-determination. Parents referenced a lack of maturity at crucial stages in transition, in particular in regard to choices in TY: “At the age of 15, 16, which I think is extremely young, a lot of them haven’t an idea what they want” (Parent C, PD, 5th, DEIS). This placed an additional burden on the parent: ““It was too stressful mammy. I can’t cope. It’s too stressful to do all this myself.’ So it is like a child, at the back of it, he is very young” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS).

Parents also described differing levels of motivation and confidence associated with adverse experiences of support in school, leading either to a strong sense of self-determination: “Even if he was missing from school, he’d be on the phone to somebody to catch up with what he missed during the day” (Parent E, VI, 6th year, State school), or conversely, a degree of hopelessness / helplessness: “When they’ve little motivation themselves and little drive themselves, even though they have dreams, they can’t get their act together” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State). This can affect how successful students believe their transition may be: “By the time you’re getting to university you actually feel you’re not going to be able to cope. This would be my daughter’s reflection,” (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

Whilst parents naturally empathized with the difficulties faced by their students, many described a strong sense of awareness for the need for independence: “I’m trying to help him, and trying to put something in place for him, and then realising that he kind of has to stand on his own two feet as well” (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). One parent suggested that development of self-knowledge should be addressed in post-primary school: “In school they do need a lot more learning as regards self-learning” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State), and this would include acquiring skills in self-advocacy which are a vital tool for survival in HE: “There probably was support there, but he didn’t look for it, I don’t know whether he didn’t know how to look for it, or whether he just didn’t bother looking for it” (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State).

Finally, parents felt that self-awareness and self-determination was also linked to self-esteem: “So is it that they just don’t feel they’re as good as, and is that what stops them from achieving their goal? Is that what’s taking them longer?”

(Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). This in turn has consequences for educational achievement: “As a parent, that fills me with worry as I know through my own early education how difficult life is if you don’t achieve in accordance with the level of your intellect” (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private). There was also recognition of how limited self-knowledge might affect self-determination and the development of independence: “By the time the pupil has completed the leaving certificate their confidence is shattered and they really find it hard to get to the next stage and believe that they can achieve.”

Understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability. Almost a quarter of parents (23.1%) highlighted disability-specific issues connected to awareness and understanding of the difficulties experienced by students with disabilities, within a competitive environment: “The biggest barrier I have found is the attitude of school staff, particularly those who have held up standardised testing and predicted grades based on them and told me my child is not intelligent enough to attend university” (ASD/MHC, 6th, Private). Also of significance, 20.5% of parents cited emotional and behavioural issues with 15.4% attributing this to lack of support in school, and a further 5.1% implicating the effects of school culture or ethos, and attitudes of school staff, as a contributing factor:

My daughter was diagnosed with MS in TY year. The school were informed but have left her to her own devices. No extra support, educational or emotional was offered. No discussions on college choices or courses for her. She is very bright but very private about her condition, however I feel that her disability should be monitored a lot more in school in terms of her progress. Guidance should be offered in terms of subject choices for leaving cert and also for college choices. She has no idea how to proceed, how to prepare for a future with a disease, what career path is right for her. (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State)

These concerns were also closely related to anxiety around disclosure of disability (5.1%). Inadequate knowledge or understanding within schools in regard to disability, both generally and specifically, was frequently cited in survey comments, and specifically the effect this might have on self-perception: “The fear of being

different, not being cool enough or together enough to cope. Fear of everybody finding out that they are (in my child's words) a Freak" (ADHD/MHC, 6th, State). This theme accounted for 9% of the coded text in transcripts, and represents viewpoints on the extent to which "outsider" understanding, awareness and attitudes towards disability, affect the quality and provision of support and guidance during senior cycle education, and through the transition period.

Parents also alluded to the complexities of inclusivity and integration: "They have huge problems and, and in some ways I think they're kind of expected to fit in with everybody else, and they're not like everybody else" (Parent G, ADHD, 5th, State), and a failure to acknowledge students with disabilities as individuals with individual differences: "I obviously wish that the DES itself was more supportive to students with disability. I believe their supports are geared towards a general norm, rather than helping students of high ability who also have disability" (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private).

The experiences of parents whose students had a "hidden" disability such as sensory, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty, described this lack of awareness as a particular barrier: "His journey has been very tough. He went through primary school without being assessed teachers not noticing" (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS). Despite the existence of an IEP, if teaching staff are unaware of the impact of disability on curriculum access, the consequences can be significant: "When he went to [post-primary school] for the first six weeks he could see nothing, because everything was whiteboards, and the glare on the whiteboards, he couldn't see" (Parent E, VI, 6th, State). A similar lack of understanding was expressed in respect to mental health conditions: "The Principal of the school she just had no interest. She thought it was all crazy and 'pull yourself together' she said to him in front of me one day" (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State), which can have devastating consequences: "But it went on from there that he didn't leave the house for a year and a half" (Parent A).

Emotional / disability factors affecting transition. This theme represented 8% of the interview corpus, and included parental views on the extent to which disability-specific factors, or issues as a result of emotional stress, had affected their students across the senior cycle of education. For some students, progress through post-primary can be a lonely place: "I think he's covered it for years, from the

teachers. He's just battled away himself" (Parent D, SpLD, 5th, DEIS), a situation that is all the more difficult in adolescence: "She just feels such a NUISANCE at this stage. She just, like her eyes glaze over it's awkward enough being a teenager, besides being 'special', as she says herself" (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State).

This feeling of being "different" is exacerbated by lack of understanding from peers and school staff, and in some instances may result in an escalation of anxiety: "He couldn't attend school. He went for two months in 5th year and then he would ring me crying from a toilet cubicle, crying, saying 'I can't go in. I can't breathe'" (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State). If teachers are unaware of how a specific learning disability manifests itself within the framework of academic skills, students may often be the target of unrealistic expectations: "For spelling, her reading, her grammar, her writing, her working memory problem, they criticised her all year and sent home bad notes" (Parent F, PD / SpLD, 6th, State). The additional pressure of attitudes and social acceptance from within the family were also identified: "I have become so much more aware, particularly through my own family. 'Don't tell anybody. Why are you going to tell people?'" (Parent A, MHC, 6th, State).

Parents expressed frustration with factors associated with HE entry requirements (CAO points, Irish and modern language matriculation), and the extent to which application, admission and entry requirements create a barrier to transition: "With both our daughters their disability is affecting or has affected their choice of course, as they won't make the points requirement because of it, rather than because of their level of application or intelligence" (Parent B, SpLD, TY, Private). Comments focused specifically on the mismatch between individual differences and inflexible admissions requirements:

My daughter has actually left school (which she hated and where she failed) and is learning from home this year. This is good for her, as it allows her to learn at her own pace and in safe surroundings, but there needs to be more flexibility in allowing points from different sittings for the exams she is taking. (ASD/MHC, 6th, Private)

This section concludes a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results from surveys and interviews with parents of students with disabilities attending post-

primary settings in Ireland. The following section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from surveys and interviews with practitioners in Study One.

Viewpoints of practitioners. The following viewpoints merge comments submitted in surveys and interviews with practitioners. Professional experience of the education sector ranged between 5 and 20 years, with 33% of practitioners also working within SEN, and 7.7% stating that they supported more than 15 students. Two practitioners indicated that supporting students with disabilities was not applicable however, given the incidence of “hidden disability” in post-primary settings, it is possible that they are unaware that they are supporting students with disabilities.

Access to transition information, advice and guidance. Whilst 54% of practitioners indicated positive experiences of transition resources overall, DARE materials and HE information were described in both positive and negative terms. TY activities / curriculum received no positive comments and were generally described as poor. Practitioners felt that the quality and content of information was an important factor in determining how well students were supported by school staff, including clear guidelines on access schemes such as DARE. Only one practitioner submitted a comment in response to a specific question about access to information, citing the need for “clearer navigation.” Despite the provision of extensive audio, visual and print information provided by DARE, the CAO and HE websites, “lack of information” was frequently expressed. Practitioners were of the opinion that: “Constant contact with schools (pre -entry) is imperative to ensure successful transition.”

Opinions with respect to accessibility of information were largely focused on input from HEIs: “I mean there just seems to be - not a lack of information - but where do you access that information for specific colleges” and dissemination of information to school staff: “The information needs to get to the to the learning support coordinator, because sometimes this information gets to the guidance department but it’s not actually filtered down to the learning resource department, do you know what I mean?” Practitioner B (GC, Private) criticized the availability of information despite familiarity with Internet-based resources, but admitted that dissemination of information to students was not high on the agenda: “It wouldn’t be, to be totally honest with you, it wouldn’t be one of my big things to prioritize and say like ‘students you have to go to this Better Options thing’.”

Quality and equality of guidance to support transition. Practitioners indicated frustration with students with disabilities and their parents, where they relied upon school staff to manage applications for language waivers or for DARE: “Being prepared and gathering information ... was being left until the last minute and parents were blaming schools and GCs and vice versa” (GC, Private). However, concern was also expressed in regard to understanding disability and how to support students with disabilities at a crucial time in their life:

Many school staff including Guidance Counsellors and teachers do not understand many of the functional difficulties experienced by many students as a result of disability. Additionally, the emotional and practical challenges of living and maximising opportunities when you live with a disability, is not always appreciated. Adolescence is a difficult time for all young people but some people with disabilities experience specific issues and some professionals are unsure on how best to support young people and parents. (GC, PLC/FE)

Practitioner A (GC, PLC/FE) focused on socio-political and cultural factors surrounding support for students with disabilities. Post-primary staff attitudes and institutional cultures were identified as problematic:

Lack of training and awareness in second level staff, this is good in some schools, and poor in others. It is dependent upon the ethos of the school, attitudes towards inclusion and expectations, especially for Special Educational Needs.

Identification and availability of transition resources. Critically, none of the practitioners referred to the necessity for transition planning in survey responses. Both interviewees supported the need for transition planning; Practitioner A was specific in relation to timeframe and governmental responsibility: “More comprehensive planning in TY should be piloted, the State should do this, it should be a separate process.” Practitioner B placed the onus for assistance with transition planning on HEIs through school visits, open days, print materials. Many of the suggestions for disseminating information already exist: “I think more information with regards to supports that are

available within third level and within specific colleges,” “If I had something that I could hand to them and say ‘Listen you need to get there, you need to get your information’” and: “You know what would be beneficial for students would be to have some sort of an information day.”

Transition enablers and barriers. Almost a quarter of comments (23.5%) were connected to links between HEIs, Disability Services and post-primary schools: “Immediate link with disability service learning support for skills required at third level delivered in an accessible student friendly way” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary, SEN). Barriers to transition included reference to: “Poor self-confidence”, “Low self-esteem, low and/or unrealistic expectations,” and the failure of students and parents to acquaint themselves with fundamental information in relation to applying to HE: “Not being aware of the criteria and matriculation requirements. Not attending DARE clinics or open days. Not processing exemptions regarding third language” (Guidance Counsellor, post-primary school).

Transition difficulties were located within the student in terms of lack of skills, awareness and maturity. Only one practitioner felt that this was a function of inadequate guidance: “An expectation that these students can teach themselves the skills required, unawareness among staff,” and importantly drew attention to the role of the IEP in developing and encouraging these skills: “Students are not fully informed, they don’t know that they have a responsibility or ownership. Students, parents and schools all need to be made aware of rights, responsibilities and entitlements,” (GC, PLC/FE).

Only Practitioner A commented about difficulties arising from emotional factors: “It’s not just about learning - there is the impact for example of being bereaved in TY or 5th year, bullying, which could be common, has a huge impact” and awareness and understanding of disability: “It’s a big thing, learning differences that are not adequately provided for, lack of an open mind and encouragement.” Insufficient parental input was also acknowledged:

Parents need to be more informed sometimes there is a lack of support at home, this needs to be addressed, it is integral to transition. Parents suffer from lack of involvement, it depends on whether parents have attended FE/HE themselves, if not there is no history or cultural expectations from parents.

Practitioner A viewed the DARE scheme as an important transition pathway but described it as “very medicalised” with no acknowledgement of the impact of disability on education. Practitioner B was conscious of the value of the DARE scheme: “I mean last year ... I can say all of my students wouldn’t have got on their course only for having DARE,” but also offered contradictory opinions which simultaneously acknowledged the quality of information: “The DARE website is quite self-explanatory and it’s a good website for accessing information,” and criticized its inadequacy: “You know I think that they’ve got to be very clear with regard to what they require because this student actually ended up not getting his DARE.” This opinion was expressed in relation to evidence of disability for Dyslexia, despite the availability of specific criteria for eligibility on the DARE website. Practitioner B referred to negative experiences: “Part of me, I should have checked the WISC results but I just presumed, you know, it was a full ed psych assessment and sent it in.” Arguably, Guidance Counsellors should not have to take responsibility for the accuracy of reporting provided by other professionals. As only two practitioners were interviewed, it is not possible to make generalizable hypotheses about the transition experiences and viewpoints of practitioners supporting students with disabilities.

This concludes Section 5.1.7 which presented merged quantitative and qualitative data extracted from survey results and interviews with students, parents and practitioners. It completes the findings from Study One, an examination of the pre-entry transition experience. These findings will be discussed in Chapter Six, which provides an interpretation of merged data from Study One, Study Two and Study Three in comparison to the literature review provided in Chapter Three. Section 5.2 which now follows presents the findings for Study Two, reflections on the transition to HE experience described by students with disabilities approaching the conclusion of their first year.

5.2 Study Two: Post-entry Transition Reflections

The following section presents merged quantitative and qualitative findings from responses to surveys completed by students with disabilities in the first year of HE, firstly: (a) demographic data identifying disability category, and Faculty of study, and secondly, findings in response to the research questions, specifically: (a) access to disability-specific transition information, advice and guidance, (b) quality and equality

of guidance to support transition, (c) sources and efficacy of transition advice and guidance, (d) identification of enablers and barriers to transition to HE, and (e) levels of interest and engagement with transition planning resources.

A statistical analysis of results from surveys to students with disabilities in one HEI in Ireland, is mixed with qualitative thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses (sections 5.2.1) within the reporting of results for each survey item. This is followed by a thematic content analysis of findings from interviews with each of those sample populations, mixed with a quantitative measure of the occurrence of these themes (sections 5.2.2). Finally, Section 5.2.3 collates major findings from Study Two and provides a narrative to aid understanding of the data presented, with an initial interpretation that highlights the most salient results.

The probability sample population for Study Two was identified as DARE entrants to one HEI in the academic years 2011 / 2012 and 2012 / 2013 (n = 166). Whilst there was an assumed probability that this population would include all disabilities, the actual distribution is illustrated in Table 62. The largest cohorts in this sample were students with a MHC (39.4%), SpLD (23.9%), and SOI (21.0%). Low rates of participation are indicated for students with sensory (7.8% combined) disabilities, but in particular the B/VI cohort (1.8%).

Table 62

Study Two Probability Sample

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage %</u>
AS/ASD	12	7.2
ADD/ADHD	14	8.4
B/VI	3	1.8
Df/HI	10	6.0
DCD	9	5.4
MHC	26	39.4
NC	3	1.8
PD	13	7.8
SLC	1	0.6
SOI	35	21.0
SpLD	40	23.9

Two phases of recruitment were employed sequentially for Study Two. Recruitment for Phase 1 took place in March 2012 with the purpose of capturing data spanning the pre-entry and post-entry period in the academic year 2011 to 2012; email invitations were sent to first year undergraduate students with disabilities in one HEI (n = 66). Recruitment for Phase 2 took place in March 2013 with the purpose of capturing data spanning the pre-entry and post-entry period in the academic year 2012 to 2013; email invitations were sent to first year undergraduate students with disabilities in one HEI (n = 100).

5.2.1 Survey Results

Demographics. Question 1 and question 2 captured demographic data relating to disability category (Table 63) and Faculty of study (Table 64). Of the 166 first year participants invited to complete the survey in 2012 and 2013, n = 59 (35.5%) students responded, indicating one or more disability (Table 59). Students with SpLD group accounted for the highest number of respondents (27.1%) which was not unexpected as they represented almost 25% of the sample, as a high incidence disability category in HE. Response rates were higher within some cohorts than others: whilst there was a 40% response rate from students with ASD, only 16% of students with SOI responded; no responses were received from students with PD or B/VI. Response rates by Faculty reflected normal population ranges for students with disabilities in the HEI.

Table 63

Study Two Student Survey Disability Categories

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
ASD	8	13.6
ADHD	6	10.2
B/VI	0	0.0
Df/HI	3	5.1
DCD	5	8.5
MHC	12	20.3
NC	1	1.7
PD	0	0.0
SLC	6	10.2
SOI	11	18.6
SpLD	16	27.1

Table 64

Study Two Student Survey Faculty of Study

<u>Faculty</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences	31	52.5
Engineering, Maths and Science	16	27.1
Health Sciences	9	15.3
Cross-faculty	3	5.1
Total	59	100.0

Transition data. Questions 3 to 10 were designed to capture experiences of the transition process relating to: (a) experience of the transition process, (b) sources of advice and guidance in post-primary school, (c) comparisons with support and guidance in HE, (d) observations on the DARE process, (e) viewpoints on transition planning resources, and (f) enablers and barriers to transition.

Experience of the transition process. Eighty percent (80%) of students described the process of transition from school to college as positive (Very Easy, Manageable, Fairly Easy), 20% described this as Very Difficult or Difficult, 72% submitted comments on the quality of their transition experience. Thematic analysis of this qualitative data indicates that positive experiences were a function of timely and effective pre-entry information / programmes, supports from HE staff and services, and good course choices. Negative experiences were attributed to distinct differences between: (a) post-primary and HE structures, systems, teaching and learning approaches and academic expectations, and (b) lack of individual guidance.

Before college started, I felt very nervous about the whole transition. These worries quickly faded and I started to really enjoy my first few weeks. As time has gone on I have realised that school work and college work is very different. There is a big change in the way one must approach college assignments and exams compared to the leaving cert. This is the one aspect of college life I have found difficult. (MHC)

Many comments highlighted the added pressure of heavy workloads and long hours in relation to specific courses, principally those in the Sciences, not anticipated

by students: “Deadlines and workload difficult to manage and meet when things like lack of sleep, struggling to attend class and volume of work is taken into account” (MHC). Conversely, students enrolled on Arts courses experienced a more gradual introduction to the change in academic expectations and workload: “Lots of time to get things done, and time to make mistakes and learn from them” (ADHD), leading to a smoother transition. The degree of freedom and independence expected of students was identified as a positive: “I found that the flexibility of college life suited me a lot better than the rigidity of life in second level education” (ASD). For some students, disability-related difficulties meant that changes were experienced negatively: “High level of freedom in relation to attendance made it difficult for me to be strict with myself about punctuality. The scale of the difference between school and college life caused a surge in new compulsions for me” (MHC). For other students a larger physical environment posed additional difficulties: “It has been very hard for me with my illness to be able to adjust my chronic fatigue to be able to get myself into town for college” (SOI).

Differences between post-primary and HE systems and structures and teaching and learning styles featured prominently. Many students acknowledged the opportunity to develop skills in self-awareness, self-determination and independence: “I listened and understood what was needed of me and I feel I have taken responsibility for my education.” Others found that the larger physical environment, increase in student numbers, and lack of individual guidance compared to post-primary school, left them feeling “overwhelmed”.

Sources of transition advice. Respondents were asked to identify key support providers by selecting one or more variables (Table 65), indicating school friends / current friendships (39%) and parents / family (29%), as key supporters in the transition process.

Table 65

Study Two Student Survey Key Transition Supporters

<u>Providers of Support</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Unilink	12	5.0
Family	64	29.0
Friends	85	39.0
Tutor	11	5.1
Disability Service	32	15.0
Academic staff	10	4.6
Nobody	2	0.9

Note: The Unilink Service is a confidential support service for students with mental health conditions, Asperger’s Syndrome, ADHD, physical and sensory disabilities, which is provided in four HEIs in the Dublin region. Unilink staff are qualified Occupational Therapists and provide individual support to students.

Peer groups, friendships and social relationships featured frequently in open-ended responses to many of the questions, the importance of this aspect of transition was highlighted in positive terms: “I made friends easily in the beginning. Living in Halls was really an advantage as I got to know many so many people so fast” (Df/HI), and in regard to negative effects: “Completely new environment, didn't know that many people, felt lost and insignificant, wasn't ‘safe’ like school” (MHC). HE support services (Disability Service and Unilink Service) were also identified as key supporters.

It was nice that there was someone there who understood that things weren't easy for me and that I was struggling at times. At one time in particular during the college year I was having a particularly hard time but Unlink was there for me and helped me through. (ADHD)

Only one respondent mentioned a teacher, and no other school-related support was stated.

Advice relating to disability and transitioning to HE. Respondents were asked to describe the kind of support provided by key individuals or agencies, by

selecting one or more variables (Table 66). A broadly similar rate of response was measured across all variables.

Table 66

Study Two Student Survey: Post-entry Supports

<u>Post-entry support</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Provided information	35	20.0
Explained options	26	14.8
Assisted with decisions	30	17.0
Discussed and advised on supports	29	16.5
Aware of specific disability needs	22	12.5
Provided encouragement	32	18.1
Did not receive any support	2	1.1

Free response comments referred to specialist support services, and also acknowledged the valuable assistance they had received from academic staff:

With regards to encouragement, I found great help from confiding in my course's first year co-ordinator. I approached her at a time when I truly believed that I was not going to do well in my exams ... Her help and support was very much appreciated in this matter, for which I thanked her greatly.
(MHC)

Students were asked to rate a number of variables associated with their experience of support in college. Responses to each of these factors were described in positive terms in regard to overall experience of support in college (69.9%), locating help, advice and/or support (79.4%), and opportunities to discuss any difficulties (67.6%).

Comparisons with post-primary support. Comparisons of support between post-primary school and HE were measured on a Likert scale (Much better, Better, Same, Worse, Much worse). Levels of satisfaction with support in college were high with 62% indicating needs and supports were better understood, 81% believed staff to be more professional, 47% believed staff attitudes towards disability was improved, and 59% rated quality of advice as better than post-primary school.

Twenty-four students (n = 24) submitted additional comments; positive experiences were linked to relationships with key people such as Tutors: “My tutor has been wonderful” peer mentors and the Unlink service: “Unilink have been a vital source for me. I was made very aware that the door was always open to me and that no problem was never too big or bad to sort out” (ADHD). Many students were also aware of the need to seek support independently, and to make judgments on who might best be of assistance: “I don't have one particular person who I can rely on for help. Rather, I decide what the problem is and then ask or assistance from an appropriate third party” (SpLD).

Negative experiences were similarly associated with managing independence: “I just find it weird how it's not like school where if you're stressed you go up to a teacher and they advise you but if you want advice it seems like such a process like emailing them having to meet them” (SpLD). For some students confidence and personal difficulties affected their willingness to seek help:

I am aware of people I can see and things I can do to help situations. Perhaps personal pride prevents that always being the case. Genuine struggle with college involvement perhaps makes any attempt to rectify it seem pointless because I have often become so overwhelmed that it doesn't seem possible to fix. (MHC)

Negative response associated with availability of supports and quality of advice were measured at 1.7%.

Application to the DARE scheme. Students were asked to rate their experience of application to the DARE scheme (Table 67); 83% of students described this as Very Easy or Straightforward, 15.2% indicated that it was Very complicated or Confusing.

Table 67

Study Two Student Survey: Experiences of the DARE scheme

<u>Response</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Very easy	20	33.9
Straightforward	29	49.2
Confusing	8	13.5
Very complicated	1	1.7

Thirty-one (31) students submitted an additional comment. Negative experiences were attributed to the complexity and volume of paperwork required: “I started panicking when filling in the forms that I might have missed something” (Specific Learning Difficulty). Specific aspects of the application procedure - both in print and online - are highlighted: “I didn't apply to college through the DARE process. Didn't know what button to click” (SpLD), “I by mistake did not tick the box to apply for dare yet sent in all my dare applications and doctors letters, but even so could not get dare due to my dyslexic mistake” (SpLD). Additionally, students drew attention to the requirement of a personal statement: “One thing that I found slightly troubling was the word count on my personal statement. Even when I had a number of characters left, my statement rarely presented itself in its entirety on the screen” (SpLD).

The process seemed more straightforward for students whose application was managed and submitted by parents or professionals: “I hardly had to do anything with the process, it was very easy, my doctor and supports teacher at school helped with my form,” (ADHD). However, there was also an appreciation of the opportunity DARE eligibility provided: “Significant to my transition to college” (SOI), and an appreciation that disclosing via DARE facilitated an easier transition: “Made college life easier knowing there were people there to help whenever I needed it,” (MHC).

Transition tools and resources. A penultimate question asked students to reflect on the usefulness of targeted transition initiatives for disabled students that could be included in the senior cycle of post-primary education, specifically: (a) workshops on applying to HE and the DARE scheme, (b) advice clinics for students

with disabilities, (c) a dedicated transition website, (d) visits to HEI Disability Services, (e) disability specific information about supports, and (f) transition planning as a compulsory feature of the curriculum (Table 68). Potential transition strategies were viewed positively in relation to application workshops (85%), advice clinics (83%) and disability specific information (80%), visits to disability services in colleges (76%), a transition website (68%) and curriculum time dedicated to transition planning (73%).

Table 68

Study Two Student Survey: Viewpoints on Transition Resources

<u>Transition resources</u>	<u>Essential</u>	<u>Useful</u>	<u>Not useful</u>
Application workshops	26	24	5
Advice clinics	21	28	4
Transition website	12	28	11
Visits to HEIs	10	34	6
Disability specific information	25	22	4
Dedicated curriculum time	18	25	8

Transition enablers and barriers. In a final question, 95% of students submitted transition advice for future disabled students completing the Leaving Certificate. These represent viewpoints on promoters or inhibitors to successful transition. Statements were coded into themes as described in Chapter Four and these themes were semi-quantified.

Of particular note is the general tone of the majority of comments which was positive and enthusiastic, encouraging prospective students to make the most of their years in college: “Don’t let your disability hinder whatever you want to do in college, be it the course you choose, societies you join or activities you take part in” (SLC). Students were encouraging about the need to ask for help and specifically that students should act as self-advocates and actively seek help for themselves: “Students must always remember that help is always given to those that seek it” (MHC). The need for self-awareness, self-determination and independence was mentioned by 15% of respondents: “College life is something that you will have to manage on your own, no one will tell you what to do and when to do it as much as they did in school, so it’s up to you” (ADHD).

The importance of course choice was acknowledged by 18.4% of students, particularly with reference to the role of planning and organization. Students highlighted the importance of selecting not just the right course, but one that would be of sustainable interest and play to the strengths of the student, as opposed to making tactical choices: “A few of my friends who believed that they were suitable candidates did not in fact end up with a DARE allowance and therefore were not served well by their CAO choices” (MHC). Similarly, they emphasized self-directed choices as opposed to selecting courses based on the opinions of friends and family. Options needed be fully researched by attending open days, information sessions, talking to other students and researching on line. A number of students drew attention to the fact that course summaries in the prospectus did not necessarily reflect the reality of course content, affecting their academic expectations and preparedness. Of critical relevance to this process is the quality of guidance and advice that a student receives, however only eight students referred to post-primary support, mainly in negative terms: “Personally my career guidance teacher was very unhelpful, she didn't want to assist me and she made this very clear when she kept telling me that I was no different from anyone else” (ADHD).

A concordance was also conducted to examine language tags associated with feelings and emotions using the corpus of text for each of the free response questions: (a) ease of transition to college, (b) descriptions of DARE experiences, and (c) advice to future students. Results were subsequently collated as a word cloud using the online application Wordle™ (Figures 15, 16 and 17), where high frequency occurrences of specific words result in a more prominent visual representation.



Figure 16. Study Two: Student experiences of the DARE scheme.

Advice to future DARE applicants emphasised the necessity of developing self-awareness and self-determination, principally advising that students needed to be proactive in seeking “help” and supports, and to ensure that they “talk” to support services.



Figure 17. Study Two: Advice to future DARE applicants.

This concludes presentation of merged quantitative and qualitative data from surveys administered to students who accepted a DARE offer on reduced points in one HE, who were nearing completion of their first year. Surveys asked students to reflect on their experience of transition, including advice, guidance and choices during the pre-entry period, in addition to early experiences of college life. These results are

merged in section 5.2.3 with findings from qualitative (themed) and semi-quantified data from interviews, which are presented in the following section.

5.2.2 Interview Findings

Of the 166 students who were invited to participate in the survey and interview, n = 41 (24.7%) subsequently attended an interview. Initial qualitative analysis used fourteen a priori codes as described in Chapter Four (Section 4.5.2) however, subsequent re-reading and re-coding of transcripts identified 14 distinct themes across interview transcripts, which are semi-quantified and summarized in Table 69. Frequencies have been calculated as a percentage (rounded) of the total number of coded statements (n = 151).

Table 69

Study Two Student Interviews Frequency of Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Frequency</u> <u>(n = /151</u>	<u>Percentage</u> <u>%</u>
Links between school and HE	5	3
Access to information	12	8
College supports	6	4
Pre-entry orientation programmes	15	10
Physical environment	4	3
Knowledge and understanding of the course	11	7
Independence, self-awareness and self-determination	21	14
DARE	7	5
Change from post-primary to third level	17	11
Peer support and friendships	19	13
Family support	4	3
Access programmes	3	2
Post-primary support, advice and guidance	6	4
Personal transition experiences and expectations	20	13

Interviews with students lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and a large corpus of data was transcribed. For this reason, main findings from the thematic analysis are discussed below, in separate sections for each theme.

Independence, self-awareness and self-determination. “College supports you as you embark on your journey of independence” (ASD). Fourteen percent (14%) of students included reference to acquiring independence within their interview statements, generally from a positive perspective. Many students felt that

whilst first year had exposed them to challenging circumstances, they had benefited from learning to be independent: “I think that overall college marks a change in how you should deal with things. Once you get to college you should be an adult and try to find things out yourself. That is how I tried to do it and I think that it worked quite well” (SpLD). Students also acknowledged this as being part of the student responsibility: “If you seek help no one will close a door on your face. The only thing is you need to be prepared to go to offices yourself. If you don’t seek help then no one will chase you” (SpLD), and not necessarily part of the role of third level institutions: “But is it really college’s role? Is this not the responsibility of the student?” (MHC). Many students also contrasted this with their school experience: “Even though I am living at home it was still an adjustment because in school they always tell you what you should be doing” (ADHD).

Personal transition experiences and expectations. “I found the first few months difficult as I was not sure what to expect” (ADHD). Although students were not directly questioned about their personal transition experience, 13% of statements included opinions on how they had fared. Again, the majority stated that whilst initially difficult and at times overwhelming: “The campus was a huge change for me. There were only 250 in my school. I knew all my teachers” (SpLD), most students adapted within a few weeks: “Now I like to sit and chill out in the Arts Block. You always bump into people you know when sitting there, it is really social” (ADHD). Many comments linked the transition experience to making friends in the halls of residence, or through sporting activities: “I found it so stressful leaving home and it helped me to make friends here in college” (MHC), or by joining college societies. However, they also emphasized the need for the individual to take responsibility: “I have friends but you have to be thick skinned at the beginning and put yourself out there” (ADHD). A small number of students described feeling “isolated” and the first few weeks as “difficult”, “intimidating” and “stressful”. However, as they approach the end of their first year in college, the majority expressed satisfaction with how they had coped: “Overall I’m very happy with college. Intellectually I feel stimulated and fulfilled. I enjoy my college life more than secondary school” (ASD).

Peer support and friendships. “I think that it can be daunting to make friends but you just have to put yourself out there” (ADHD). Friendship is a theme

that runs through many of the other sub-themes, and is explicitly mentioned in 13% of the statements. Students who already had siblings or school friends in college experienced a gentler transition, in itself a barrier for their peers: “But people already knew each other from schools and so already had friends. It was hard to break into groups” (SpLD). However, this advantage could also be potentially restrictive: “I haven’t really ventured too far from my own bubble because I knew people coming in” (MHC).

It was clear that students who lived in halls of residence - whilst potentially having more difficulty with homesickness and living skills - made friendship groups much more quickly: “Being in Hall is good for meeting people. It is very friendly and people are always knocking in to each other’s flats” (SpLD). However, students who live at home expressed difficulty with participating in social events due to commuting difficulties. Social acceptance during a period of physiological and environmental change is not easy, but as one student stated: “There is not much point in going on a course beforehand, because they will not be able to help you with this” (SpLD).

Comparing post-primary and post-secondary experiences. “College is more work than I thought” (SpLD). Students generally felt that college was more open and welcoming: “Generally it was the atmosphere that made me feel welcome and safe” (ASD), and more supportive than at post-primary level: “Supports have been great compared to secondary school” (SpLD). However, a significant number of comments (53%) spoke about the requirement to be an independent learner: “There’s a gap between LC and College. College is more self- directed. It’s a stereotype, but it’s true” (MHC), and changes in teaching: “There is a huge difference in teaching in college. You are left on your own more” (ADHD), and learning: “In the Leaving Cert you are spoon fed and College is very different. That can be a shock” (SpLD). Several students commented about the contrast in knowledge and awareness of their academic performance: “I feel I was doing better in secondary school, because I knew how well I was doing with continued assessment,” (ADHD). Students described the transition from post-primary to college variously as an “adjustment”, “a gap”, “a jump” and a “huge change”.

Pre-entry orientation programmes. “Orientation to college and preparation on a one to one basis is most effective” (SOI). The two national access schemes –

HEAR and DARE – were mentioned as providers of pre-entry orientation, as were college linked schools access programmes: “I met with the Disability Service in August. During the orientation the information was everything I needed to know” (ADHD). However, there were differences of opinion with respect to disability-specific orientation events: “Would not take part in group disability orientation programmes as are compulsory in other universities” (SOI), but conversely: “Disability should do one, one or two days to get to know campus” (SpLD). Similar disparities were seen in opinions on effectiveness of orientation and first year information: “I think college could help students get a better idea of where things are, you are expected to know a lot of things and information in the first week” (AS), with more positive experiences: “All the resources online and the open days etc available to students give them a good opportunity to be aware of what to expect in 1st year of college” (SpLD). In conclusion, viewpoints appeared to be directly linked to individual experiences, as opposed to a general opinion on pre-entry initiatives.

Knowledge and understanding of the course. “While I chose the right course for me, there is a lot I would have liked to know about it in advance” (Df/HI). Eleven students (7%) mentioned their knowledge and understanding of course content and structure in relation to the overall transition experience, and many of these statements were lengthy and detailed. Generally, students were happy with their course choice, but would have welcomed more detail on weighting of assessments and examinations: “This is something that I found particularly difficult I did not do enough research into my course maybe” (SpLD). However, within the HEI attended by all of the students who were interviewed, access to this type of information is School specific, as some course handbooks can be accessed freely by prospective students, whilst others are available only from password protected internal web sites. Students also identified the usefulness of hearing from students already studying on specific courses, and more information on differences between years of study, although arguably both of these are provided at college Open Days.

Access to information. “The information sent out was comprehensive and straightforward” (DCD). Statements made under this sub-theme were short and to the point, with 100% of comments indicating that access to information provided by college was accurate and transparent: “Found all the material online very helpful if

needed and could not add to the resources already available” (MHC), however students felt that their availability could be better promoted in post-primary school, and reiterated the need to be proactive in accessing information themselves: “I found the necessary information was there but you needed to research it yourself - you didn’t get it in school” (SpLD).

Additional themes. The DARE scheme was mentioned on seven occasions, specifically in relation to accessing information on the application process. Surprisingly, few students (n = 4) referred to parental or family support as part of the transition process, other than in terms of providing some guidance on course choice and workload, with one student enjoying his new independence: “My parents give me more freedom, my mam and dad know that I’m not a child anymore, it’s liberating, I’m allowed to go around town now” (ASD). Links between school and HE, college supports, the physical environment, access programmes, and post-primary support, advice and guidance, were referred to infrequently by students.

As the conclusion of the first year in college approaches, the significance of transition support has dissipated and students have left behind their post-primary years, and for many, that last link with “pre-adulthood” has been severed. However, one comment is a forceful reminder of the emotional and psychological pressures that young people experience during the transition period: “I don’t mean to be dramatic but the LC was the most traumatic time of my life, and I wouldn’t want to repeat that experience” (B/VI).

This section has presented quantitative and qualitative data extracted from survey results, together with qualitative and quantitative data extracted from interviews with students with disabilities, all of whom were approaching completion of their first year in college. The following section presents a summary of these merged results for Study Two, as described in Chapter Three (Methodology).

5.2.3 Study Two Summary of Merged Results

This section provides a synopsis of merged findings from surveys and interviews in 2012 and 2013, describing the first year experience of students with disabilities as they reflect on their transition to HE, collated under thematic headings associated with post-primary transitions that occurred most frequently in the coding process. These are: (a) access to transition information, advice and guidance, (b)

quality of guidance and support in transition, (c) identification and availability of transition resources, and (d) enablers and barriers to transition.

Access to transition information, advice and guidance. The majority of students (80%) described the process of transition from school to college in positive terms, attributing this to timely and effective pre-entry information, and support from HEI staff and disability services, at the pre-entry stage. Guidance in respect to appropriate course choices was a reason given for ease of transition, and this featured in advice to future DARE students. Conversely, 20% of students described transition negatively, stating lack of awareness of differences between post-primary and third level structures, academic expectations, and the need for self-management skills. More than half of students (68%) identified peers and family as making the transition to college easier, all of whom are located within a student's microsystem, having provided information and guidance on options, and disability-related support decisions. Generally, students were happy with their course choice, but would have welcomed more detail on weighting of assessments and examinations, although they acknowledged that this aspect should be researched by students. By association, students rated advice from current undergraduate students as important, together with information on differences between years of study.

Quality and equality of guidance to support transition. Of critical relevance was the quality of guidance and advice that a student receives, almost 60% of students indicated that the format or content of advice and support they had received was personalized, such as exploring options, help with decision-making, discussion of available supports and disability-related needs. Students were encouraging about the need to ask for help and specifically that students should act as self-advocates and actively seek help independently. Responses to each of these factors were described in positive terms in regard to overall experience of support in college (69.9%), locating help, advice and/or support (79.4%), and opportunities to discuss any difficulties (67.6%), however differences in organizational structure and size were a main source of difficulty: "I just find it weird how it's not like school where if you're stressed you go up to a teacher and they advise you" (MHC).

Comparing the quality of support in college to support received in post-primary school, results indicated an overall improvement in quality of support in HE with 62% of students indicating needs and supports were better understood, 81% believed staff

to be more professional, 47% believed staff attitudes towards disability was improved, and 59% rated quality of advice as better than post-primary school. Statements in relation to information provided by the HEI described this as accurate and transparent, however students reiterated the need to be proactive in accessing information themselves, as generally this was not provided in school.

Identification and availability of transition resources. Potential transition strategies from TY onwards were viewed positively in relation to application workshops (85%), advice clinics (83%) and disability specific information (80%), visits to disability services in colleges (76%), a transition website (68%) and curriculum time dedicated to transition planning (73%).

With respect to the DARE application process, 83% of students described this as Very Easy or Straightforward, 15.2% indicated that it was Very Complicated or Confusing which is concerning given the transparency of the scheme, the levels of publicity, and availability of online and print materials: “It was confusing but when it was explained to me it became simple to understand” (SpLD), and: “I started panicking when filling in the forms that I might have missed something” (DCD). This would suggest that students need a transition “partner”, be that a parent, carer, teacher, Guidance Counsellor or other stakeholder. The value of applying to DARE was a feature of many comments, others stated that they had not been made aware of the scheme by their school.

Both HEAR and DARE were mentioned as providers of pre-entry orientation, as were “link” school access programmes, although opinion was divided in regard to the usefulness of attending both disability-specific and general pre-entry orientation activities. In conclusion, viewpoints appeared to be directly linked to pre-entry experiences specific to the individual, rather than general opinions.

Transition enablers and barriers. Study Two asked student to reflect on their transition experience, but did not specifically ask students to identify enablers and barriers to post-secondary opportunities. Data has been collated under this theme where these factors contribute to the period of transition that spans point of entry to HE, and the first few weeks or months of college, a critical period in transition. Students were emphatic about the importance of selecting not just the right course, but one that would be of sustainable interest and play to the strengths of the student (57%). Comments included reference to the riskiness of making tactical choices in terms of

ordering preferences and calculating points, and how this might sometimes have unexpected outcomes.

Independence, self-awareness and self-determination. Self-efficacy and determination were recognized as important in 25% of comments: “Self-advocate and seek out whatever help or advice you feel you need. The supports are there for you to use, don't be a martyr” (DCD). Many students felt that whilst first year had exposed them to challenging circumstances, they had benefited from learning to be independent, and that whilst this had initially presented difficulties, outcomes were positive. Students acknowledged that the onus or responsibility falls to the student to acquire these skills, but also felt that the post-primary school structure and environment did not necessarily promote or encourage development of independence as: “In school they always tell you what you should be doing” (SpLD).

More than half of comments (53%) also described the necessity of independence in relation to learning and academic skills, describing the difference between the post-primary skill base and HE skill requirement as “a gap”, “a huge difference”, “a jump”, “a huge change”, and in regard to the Leaving Certificate curriculum in particular: “You are spoon fed and college is very different. That can be a shock” (SpLD). Several students commented about the contrast in awareness of their own academic progress and performance, stating that this was made more evident in post-primary school.

However, there was equally a very clear message from students that self-awareness is critical:

Do something you want to do, there's no point applying for a course just to apply for something or if that's what your friends are doing. Ultimately if you don't like the course you're going to be unhappy and possibly drop out.

There's no rush to go to college, and sometimes college isn't even for everyone! It's really not the end of the world if you don't get in or if you don't want to go. (SpLD)

Social skills, peer groups and “fitting in”. The move from school to college - and frequently from home to away - is a period of intense emotional and psychological change, in a period where many young people are also continuing to

develop physiologically. With additional disability-related factors, this can exacerbate concerns with social acceptance and “fitting in” with a group of strangers.

The social aspects of college were referred to frequently throughout the data, with 13% of students explicitly referring to the importance of friendships. Students with siblings or friends at HE experienced a gentler transition, having access to immediate friendship groups, which in turn created a barrier for other students: “People already knew each other from schools and so already had friends. It was hard to break into groups” (SpLD). However, other statements provided examples of how ready-made friendship groups might also restrict social exploration.

This contrast is also expressed in differences between students living independently, and those still living at home. Whilst students who had moved away from home expressed more homesickness and the steep learning curve of acquiring living skills, they also made friendship groups more quickly. Students who were still living at home expressed difficulty with participating in social events due to difficulties with commuting in terms of expense, travel time and scheduling; they also described a feeling of being estranged from the group, where social activities amongst peer groups took place off campus in residential settings.

Many viewpoints associated positive transition experiences with successful social orientation, through making friends in the halls of residence, sporting activities, or by joining college societies. Again, students emphasized individual responsibility for making this happen, although a small number stated that they felt “isolated”, and described the first few weeks as “difficult”, “intimidating” and “stressful”. However, students generally felt that the atmosphere in HE was more open and more supportive than at post-primary level, and importantly more accepting of diversity and difference.

Additional themes. Links between school and HE, college supports, the physical environment, access programmes, and post-primary support, advice and guidance, were referred to infrequently by students. As the conclusion of the first year in college approaches, the significance of transition support has dissipated students have left behind their post-primary years, and for many, that last link with “pre-adulthood” has been severed. However, one comment is a forceful reminder of the emotional and psychological pressures that young people experience during the

transition period: “I don’t mean to be dramatic, but the Leaving Certificate was the most traumatic time of my life, and I wouldn’t want to repeat that experience” (B/VI).

This summary of merged survey and interview results concludes Section 5.2, which described the findings from Study Two: an investigation of the post-entry experiences of students with disabilities, nearing completion of their first year of third level education. These findings will be discussed in Chapter Six, which provides an interpretation of merged data from Study One, Study Two and Study Three in comparison to the literature review provided in Chapter Three. The following section presents merged quantitative and qualitative data for Study Three, which investigated user interaction with web-based and human transition resources provided via the Pathways to Trinity transition initiative, and which represents a Community of Practice for students with disabilities and associated stakeholders in the transition to HE. Specifically, it examined responses to the Pathways to Trinity transition website, the Pathways to College Transition Planning Tool, and the Pathways Transition Workshops.

5.3 Study Three: Responses to Transition Resources

Study Three examined responses to transition resources created specifically for the purposes of this research programme for use by students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and practitioners supporting students with disabilities in their transition journey. The focus of this study was to determine the perceived usefulness of a suite of transition resources freely available to the public: (a) a web-based transition resources repository for which findings are presented in section 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, (b) a structured transition planning tool for which findings are presented in section 5.3.3, and (c) transition planning workshops for students with disabilities in their final year of post-primary education, for which findings are presented in section 5.3.4. A final section (5.3.5) presents a summary of merged quantitative and qualitative results for Study Three.

5.3.1 Transition Website Analytics

Web statistics were collected via Google Analytics (GA), an enterprise-class web analytics solution that provides in-depth analysis of website traffic. There are a range of tools available within GA, and Pathways data presented in this section examines the number of site visits, visitor profile, page views, page content analysis, time on site, referring sites, and demographics by town / city, country and language.

Page views refers to the number of times a page is viewed, whereas Unique Page views describe the number of unique visits in which a specific page is viewed. Exit percentages represent the number of times a particular page was the last page viewed within a browsing session, and Bounce Rate is the percentage of entrances to a specific page, that resulted in no further interaction with the website. Bounce Rate is an efficient diagnostic tool as it provides data on the rate of visitors leaving the site after viewing only a single page. A high percentage bounce rate would indicate that the information that directed people to visit the website or specific page on the website, does not match either the interest level or expectations of the visitor.

Potential web site visitors. The number of potential students with a disability taking the Leaving Certificate examination is unknown, as not all CAO applicants indicate a disability on their application, and not all students with disabilities apply to DARE. However, using CAO data can provide a broad estimate of the number of disabled students applying to HE (Table 70), and who are therefore potential visitors to the transition website and users of transition resources.

Table 70

Study Three Comparison of Website Visitors with CAO / DARE Applicants

<u>Profile</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>
Pathways unique visitors	3,000	10,456	15,257
CAO applicants indicating a disability	n/a*	4,646	4,654
DARE applicants	2,551	2,942	3,312

*Note: Data not available prior to 2012. Source: Central Applications Office

Visitors to Pathways represented approximately three times the potential number of students with disabilities applying to HE and were likely to include parent / carers and practitioners supporting those students.

Visitor analytics. Between the launch of the Pathways to Trinity website on 4th April 2011, and the final data collection point of 30th November 2013, there were 39,270 site visits, of which 25,316 were unique visitors. Of these, 63.8% were new visitors and 36.1% returning visitors, between them accumulating 78,668 page views (Figure 18).

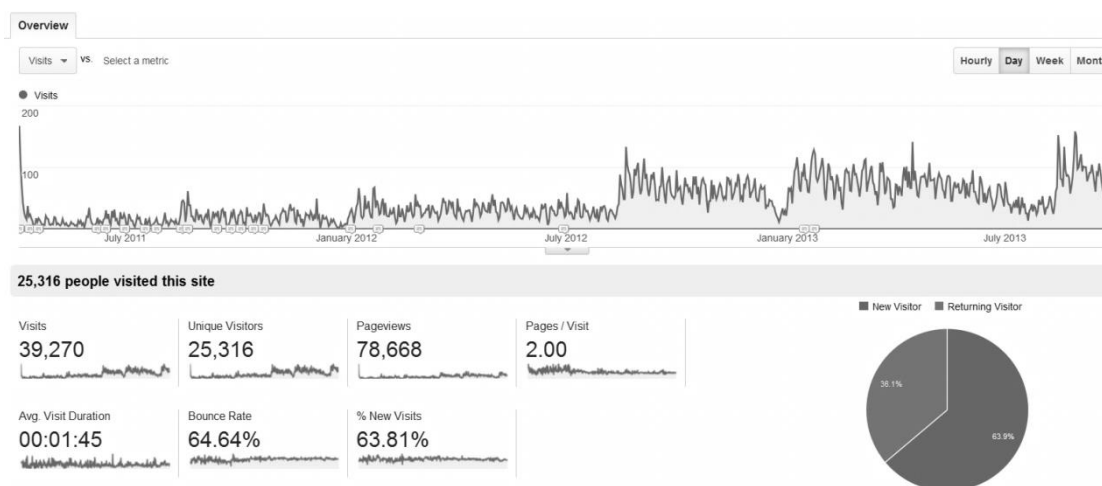


Figure 18. Study Three: Website visitor statistics Pathways to Trinity 2011 – 2013.

Unique visitor statistics for 2011, 2012 and 2013 compared with CAO and DARE applicants (Table 66) suggest that the website is being viewed by users with an interest in transition to HE, including students with disabilities, parents / carers and associated transition stakeholders.

Google Analytics also permits annotation of specific events on the timeline as in order to view increase in traffic tied to such events. Annotated calendar items were added for a range of publicity events and key dates within the second level education sector (Table 71), such as publication of Leaving Certificate results, between April 2011 and September 2013. This permits an analysis of levels of engagement with the website, in response to promotion of the resource.

Table 71

Study Three Website Promotion Events and Visitor Traffic

<u>Date</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Visitors</u>
Apr 4, 2011	Launch date	71
Apr 13, 2011	Letters to 463 guidance counsellors	37
Apr 20, 2011	posting to TCD notice board	17
Jun 8, 2011	Leaving Certificate examinations begin	18
Jun 15, 2011	CSSI conference presentation	15
Jul 1, 2011	Last date for CAO change of mind	24
Jul 18, 2011	Qualifax added link to two pages	17
Jul 27, 2011	DARE eligibility letters issued / received	12
Aug 17, 2011	Leaving Certificate results	23
Aug 22, 2011	1st round offers	25
Sep 15, 2011	Higher Options and DARE	21
Sep 27, 2011	Workshop to Enable Ireland	25
Oct 5, 2011	1st Pathways workshop	22
Oct 16, 2011	Transition Planning Tool web link	11
Oct 24, 2011	Letters to 500+ resource teachers	41
Jan 4, 2012	Email invitation to TCD DARE clinic	28
Mar 1, 2012	Take My Advice page added	42
Jun 29, 2012	Transition tool added to Pathways	33
Aug 21, 2012	College offers via CAO	104
Sep 19 - 21, 2012	Higher Options in the RDS	225

The 17 website visits recorded on the 20th April 2011 indicate visitor engagement after letters were posted to 463 Guidance Counsellors the previous week; this represents only 8% of the target audience. By contrast, visitor figures showed significant increases in 2012 after the resources was promoted at the Higher Options event, and again in 2013 after an invitation to complete the student and parent surveys was re-issued to disability support groups (n = 112). However, noticeable along the timeline is a steady increase of visits between the launch date of 4th April 2011 and

November 2013, rising significantly from an average of 15 visits per day, to 70 visits per day.

Visitor demographics. For the purposes of this analysis, the top ten results for key demographics are presented (Tables 72, 73 and 74). As expected, the highest volume of traffic originated from English language visitors, accounting for 37,536 visitors (96%), additional languages in the top ten visitors were French, German, Polish, Italian, Spain and Eastern European visitors.

Table 72

Study Three Website Visitor Demographics by Language

<u>Language</u>	<u>Visits</u>	<u>% New Visits</u>	<u>New Visits</u>	<u>Bounce Rate</u>
en-us	28589	63.83%	18247	64.08%
en-gb	7588	60.41%	4584	62.57%
en	1059	71.39%	756	75.26%
en-ie	300	56.33%	169	71.33%
fr	182	70.33%	128	65.38%
pl	116	65.52%	76	72.41%
de-de	106	71.70%	76	67.92%
es	94	88.30%	83	75.53%
zh-cn	84	88.10%	74	88.10%
de	69	82.61%	57	69.57%
Total	39270	63.85%	25075	64.64%

However, visitor location indicates an interesting international access picture (Table 73). Again, as expected, 15, 319 (82%) of visitors were located in English speaking countries, the high number of UK visitors may be accounted for by students who apply to Irish universities, with the remainder perhaps indicating interest from prospective international students.

Table 73

Study Three Website Demographics by Country

<u>Country / Territory</u>	<u>Visits</u>	<u>% New Visits</u>	<u>New Visits</u>	<u>Bounce Rate</u>	<u>Pages / Visit</u>	<u>Avg. Visit Duration</u>
Ireland	28434	56.54%	16077	60.08%	2.17	122.33
UK	2344	77.13%	1808	70.44%	1.83	71.38
India	1283	92.83%	1191	85.74%	1.26	29.71
United States	1204	77.16%	929	71.10%	1.77	63.69
(not set)	864	88.08%	761	80.90%	1.32	48.99
Australia	550	89.09%	490	79.64%	1.36	56.94
Philippines	365	96.16%	351	81.64%	1.35	61.07
Pakistan	305	95.08%	290	79.02%	1.48	48.45
New Zealand	259	93.82%	243	88.03%	1.21	148.08
Malaysia	250	62.80%	157	58.40%	1.60	46.14
Total	39270	63.85%	25075	64.64%	2.00	104.86

With respect to the Irish demographic, 57% of visitors were located in the capital city of Dublin, followed by the three major university cities Cork, Limerick and Galway.

Table 74

Study Three Website Demographics by City

<u>City</u>	<u>Visits</u>	<u>% New Visits</u>	<u>New Visits</u>	<u>Bounce Rate</u>	<u>Pages / Visit</u>	<u>Avg. Visit Duration</u>
Dublin	20860	55.03%	11480	59.31%	2.22	125.14
Cork	1403	59.94%	841	65.29%	1.92	102.74
(not set)	1347	82.18%	1107	77.80%	1.46	66.56
Limerick	950	65.16%	619	64.00%	2.06	117.23
Galway	747	65.86%	492	59.44%	2.07	114.45
London	596	75.17%	448	70.81%	1.82	76.85
Sligo	495	60.00%	297	66.67%	1.81	123.69
Mumbai	379	93.93%	356	86.02%	1.22	16.09
Leixlip	314	60.51%	190	61.46%	2.27	114.82
Dundrum	290	51.72%	150	60.69%	2.19	94.72
Total	39270	63.85%	25075	64.64%	2.00	104.86

Page visits. High level page views for single visits (50+) have been discounted, as it is logical to assume that these may be accounted for by webmaster and web office views when changing or editing content. Of the 19,463 total page visits, 42,190 pages have been viewed across the research period 4 April 2011 to 30 November 2013 period. Unique, one-time visitors viewed an average of two pages, more frequent visitors viewed approximately three pages on each visit, suggesting that their search may have been focused on locating or checking specific information. With respect to page depth (Table 75), single page visits accounted for 25,383 visits, which suggests that visitors are searching for specific information located in specific pages.

Table 75

Study Three Website Traffic Frequency and Page Views

<u>Page Depth</u>	<u>Visits</u>	<u>Page views</u>
1	25383	25383
2	6443	12886
3	2886	8658
4	1374	5496
5	911	4555
6	600	3600
7	401	2807
8	275	2200
9	228	2052
10	186	1860

Analysis of the top ten page views (Table 76) indicates that 25.8% of visits are made to pages containing study skills resources for Leaving Certificate students, 23% are related to the process of applying to college, including the DARE programme, applying for a language waiver, downloadable application documents and the process of transition. Across an extended view of site content, 2,291 visitors accessed information on course choice, and 1,680 visitors accessed the “Take My Advice” contributions from students with a disability in HE. An investigation of the flow of visitor traffic through the website enables a vision of how visitors engage with the content, and can inform an adaptation or modification of the order of content. The

majority of traffic initiated through the study skills pages, flowed through to applying to college, and culminated in course choice.

Table 76

Study Three Website Traffic Page Views 2011-2013

<u>Page Title</u>	<u>Page views</u>	<u>Unique Pageview</u>	<u>Avg. Time on Page</u>	<u>Entrance</u>	<u>Bounce Rate %</u>
Organising study and revision	17103	12533	222.69	11840	72.85
Pathways to Trinity	12118	9484	88.98	7105	53.37
Leaving Certificate study skills	7461	5085	103.10	4230	60.17
What is DARE?	4182	2917	143.37	1726	59.97
How do I apply to college?	4153	3348	38.72	2696	43.92
Essays and exams	2847	2162	189.28	971	76.11
How can I transition successfully?	2437	1809	38.67	217	54.84
My course choice	2291	1793	26.44	198	38.89
What is a Language Waiver	1977	1639	135.88	1328	71.16
Take my advice	1680	1222	103.75	985	55.53
Total	78668	59761	104.52	39269	64.64

The Contact page provides a feedback form on which visitors can indicate whether they are a student, parent or practitioner, to rate the website, and to offer suggestions for additional content. Across the research period, 609 visitors accessed the Contact page, and two feedback forms were completed, firstly from a student who described the site as “Excellent”, and secondly from a practitioner: “I am a resource teacher at second level working with students with ASD. I found the website very student friendly. I thought the transition planning tool very useful and relevant to students.”

Email enquiries. Pathways to Trinity has a unique email address pathways@tcd.ie which is provided at the foot of each web page, and also via the Contact page. Over the course of the research period emails were received from all three sample groups (students n = 65, parents n = 24, practitioners n = 23), 34% referred to the presence of SpLD, and 33% of responses did not identify a specific disability (Table 77). Students reported a wider range of disabilities than parents or practitioners, particularly within sensory and physical disability cohorts.

Table 77

Study Three Email Enquiries by Disability Category 2011 - 2013

<u>Disability</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Practitioners</u>	<u>Students</u>
ADD/HD	1	3	0
ASD	2	2	3
B/VI	0	4	1
Df/HI	0	0	6
DCD	2	0	0
ID	0	0	0
MHC	0	0	2
NC	0	0	0
PD	0	0	9
SOI	1	0	1
SLC	0	0	0
SPLD	14	3	24
Unspecified	6	11	20
Total	26	23	66

The content of all emails was thematically analysed and semi-quantified (Table 78). DARE queries account for 20% of email queries and focused on aspects of the application, quotas for allocation of DARE places, and potential points reduction. Information requests also accounted for just over 20% of email content, and were concerned with access to hard and soft copy information resources, open days and clinics. Matriculation questions related to the requirement to present specific subjects and grades, whilst admissions points (14%) referred to potential increases in points requirements and potential reductions via the DARE scheme. Enquiries in relation to supports (11%) focused on determining the nature and range of support provided in HE. Disability-specific queries provided detailed background information of current functioning and generally sought advice on how this might affect access to and progression through HE. Similarly, accessibility queries were concerned with physical access in the environment and were generally concerned with accommodation on campus.

Table 78

Study Three Thematic Analysis of Email Enquiries 2011 - 2013

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Practitioners</u>	<u>Students</u>
DARE	8	5	8
Matriculation	0	1	5
Admissions points	2	5	8
Language waiver	0	2	5
Supports in college	2	1	9
Accessibility	0	0	2
Funding for supports	2	0	3
Orientation	0	0	2
Disability-specific	2	0	6
Information	12	10	1
Transition planning	1	1	1
Total	29	25	50

Students. The content of student emails contained significantly more themes than either parents or practitioners. Students enquired about completing forms for DARE in particular content for the personal statement, and also requested information on subjects required for matriculation. All points queries from students were associated with Health Science courses, principally in relation to Medicine and performance in the HPat. Language waiver requests for information were submitted by Df/Hi and SpLD students. Support queries were submitted primarily by students with sensory and physical disabilities these students also enquiring about funding and accessibility. One student attending the junior cycle of post-primary school indicated that they had already started to plan their transition journey:

Hello! I am in 3rd year in secondary school and deciding what subjects to choose for leaving cert. I would like you ask a few questions about Trinity College. 1. How do you get a place in Trinity College? 2. How many subjects do you choose to study? 3. How much does it cost to study in TCD? (22nd March 2013)

In a few cases students provided additional information in relation to their post-primary experiences:

As a dyslexia repeat leaving certificate student I feel the system is severally flawed and feel exhausted and demotivated by the second level education system through repetitively proving my disability, only for the results to be ignored with no explication. (4th April 2011)

Generally, students were more likely than either parents or practitioners to follow up a response to their query with a sign off email.

Parents. Parents did not submit any queries about matriculation, language waivers, accessibility or orientation; concerns were focused on completing DARE applications correctly and concrete information regarding points reductions. Parents were less concerned about identifying supports in HE than they were about accessing information sources including opportunities for face-to-face consultation with DARE and disability personnel, as part of transition planning:

Our son is in 5th year in school and has dyslexia. I am wondering do you hold any open day or session for kids hoping to enter Trinity through the DARE system? We are keen that he goes through the courses on offer and understands what supports would be available to him. (29th January 2014)

Parents were more likely to submit lengthy emails contextualising the nature of their query in relation to student history and present circumstances.

Practitioners. No questions were received about accessibility, funding for supports, orientation or disability-specific information. Practitioners were primarily interested in the mechanics of DARE applications, points reductions and access to information. Longer emails focused on detailed enquiries in relation to specific student circumstances:

I am a secondary school teacher, as well as a trainee guidance counsellor, and would like to be in a position to explain your [transition planning] system to a senior cycle student with Asperger's Syndrome who may shortly be applying to TCD for a place. (7th December 2011)

Social media. Twitter is an excellent means of communicating real time events, and is particularly useful for disseminating information on deadlines and community meetings. The Pathways website has a Twitter account which was initiated in April 2011, and currently has 35 followers and has tweeted 132 messages since launch of the website. Followers regularly re-tweet messages, thereby expanding the audience for Pathways information:

AHEAD Ireland @get_ahead retweeted to 535 followers:

@pathwaystoTCD

DARE deadline 1st March, apply via the CAO and don't forget to confirm your DARE application by selecting 'Yes' to Question 5.

Examining the top ten referring websites, 63% of social media referrals originated from the DARE website www.accesscollege.ie, followed by the Disability Service Facebook account, HEI main website, and the Dyslexia Association of Ireland website (Table 79). Google searches accounted for 55% of new referrals, followed by two Guidance Counselling sources: Career News and Qualifax.

Table 79

Study Three Website Social Media Referrals 2011 - 2013

<u>Source</u>	<u>Visits</u>	<u>% New Visits</u>	<u>New Visits</u>	<u>Bounce Rate</u>	<u>Pages / Visit</u>	<u>Avg. Visit Duration</u>
accesscollege.ie	267	63.67%	170	38.95%	2.89	179.85
facebook.com	220	45.00%	99	64.55%	1.80	86.75
tcd.ie	218	36.70%	80	56.42%	2.40	112.64
dyslexia.ie	217	60.83%	132	46.08%	3.00	148.12
google.ie	205	55.61%	114	65.85%	1.78	71.94
qualifax.ie	113	55.75%	63	59.29%	2.65	107.30
careersnews.ie	95	43.16%	41	26.32%	3.79	177.68
search.tcd.ie	72	65.28%	47	58.33%	1.97	58.07
cao.ie	70	20.00%	14	61.43%	2.09	119.56
weebly.com	62	50.00%	31	48.39%	2.53	154.76
Total	2444	52.82%	1291	55.65%	2.42	121.61

5.3.2 Transition Blog / Forum

In June 2012 a blog was added to the Pathways website (<http://blogs.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/>), replacing the original discussion forum at Weebly. Over the period January 2011 to April 2012, the discussion forum was hosted on the original Weebly site (</transition-discussion-forum.html>) and had 626 page views (30.39% of total web page views for this site), with a bounce rate of 2.94%. This means that visitors landed on pages that were wholly appropriate to their search terms and interest. However, despite this interest, only two parents posted a query with respect to DARE places and points. After the launch of the Pathways to Trinity website on 4th April 2011, the forum was recreated as a Wordpress blog accessible from the main menu bar at <https://blogs.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/>, and a message posted on the Weebly site to re-direct visitors. However, as these sites are managed by in-house information services, it was not possible to add Google Analytics or a similar web tracking widget to these pages, and therefore no statistics are available for this period.

Information about the research programme is provided on the blog site, and four distinct areas were created: (a) disability specific advice, (b) DARE and College application queries, (c) course advice, and (d) Pathways transition workshops, with introductory text and advice added to each section (Appendix C4). The transition workshops area hosts five pages, one for each of the workshops, and contains a summary of activities and resources used in each workshop. Visitors may post comments or questions to any blog area, which are then approved by the site Administrator. No comments were submitted at any time to the blog.

This concludes the presentation of quantitative data describing user interaction with the Pathways to Trinity transition website - including the blog and forum - which represents a “third space” for students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and practitioners in post-primary education. A summary of findings is presented in section 5.3.5. The next section describes the findings from an investigation of user interaction with the Pathways Transition Planning Tool. This resource was designed and written following an exhaustive review of transition planning literature and checklists, as described in Chapter Three.

5.3.3 Transition Planning Tool

The Transition Planning Tool is accessed from the main menu bar of the Pathways website, and prospective users are permitted to download the resource after completion of an email registration form, the purpose of which is to capture user demographics (Tables 80, 81 and 82). Over the research period, a total of 49 registration forms were received from students, parents and professionals from schools and post LC environments, users in the “Other” category submitted the largest number of requests (21.5%) included individuals from disability support networks.

Table 80

Study Three Transition Planning Tool User Demographics

<u>Planning tool user group</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
Student	8	16.5
Parent	9	18.3
Practitioner	32	65.2
Total	48	100.0

Table 81

Study Three Transition Planning Tool Users School Year Attended

<u>School year</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
TY	7	14.2
5th	9	18.3
6th	24	49.2
Post LC	9	18.3
Total	49	100.0

Table 81 illustrates the school year attended by students themselves, or indicated by parents and practitioners supporting students with disabilities. The lowest number of downloads related to Transition Year (TY) and the highest related to 6th year, of note is the 18% of downloads by users in post-Leaving Certificate study. Finally, users were asked to indicate their disability, or the disability category of students supported by parents and practitioners (Table 82).

Table 82

Study Three Transition Planning Tool Users by Disability Category

<u>Response</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent %</u>
ASD	14	18.2
ADD/ADHD	11	14.3
B/VI	2	2.6
DCD	7	9.1
Df/HI	3	3.9
MHC	10	13.0
NC	4	5.2
PD	2	2.6
SOI	6	7.8
SpLD	19	38.7

The largest user group were SpLD followed by AS/ASD and ADD/ADHD, with particularly low rates of use by students with sensory and physical disabilities.

User comments. Most users submitted positive comments on the content of this resource, describing it as “terrific”, “fantastic”, “excellent” but also highlighted elements which were particularly useful, such as the video resources, Internet links, and the holistic and linear structure of the resource. Comments were submitted by parents and practitioners from a wide range of backgrounds, across the research period.

I'm not working directly with students at present, but would like to have a look at the PAT programme as we will be telling parents and young people about it. (Visiting Teacher of the Deaf, 23rd February 2012)

I have two profoundly deaf pupils (both have cochlear implants, both in fifth year most interested in the pathways-to-trinity. It really seems to offer that important supportive bridge during the time of transition. (Visiting Teacher of the Deaf, 22nd April 2013)

Also encouraging were the suggestions for improvements submitted by users, which indicates an enthusiasm and interest in further developing the planning tool.

Since there is so much content it is important that users of the tool know that not all areas will apply to their clients. It could be suggested at the outset that users read through the units in brief first and then decide which areas are relevant and which are not. Otherwise, a client may get bogged down and frustrated in trying to complete them all. A suggestion I would have is that you give a recommended timeframe for completing each unit and then an overall timeframe for completing the whole tool as well; this can help manage client expectations and encourage people to persevere/skip less important sections if they are finding it difficult to stay focused. Thanks for letting us use this tool!
(No profile submitted, 17th December 2011)

However, it is possible for web visitors to bypass the Transition Tool registration and proceed directly to download. Unique pageview statistics (the number of sessions during which each page was viewed one or more times) suggesting that significantly more visitors / users downloaded the tool than formal registration would indicate (Table 83). In order of popularity, users looked at Unit 1: Preparing myself for college, Unit 4: Applying to college, Unit 2: Independent living skills, Unit 3: Academic skills, and Unit 5: Using college supports.

Table 83

Study Three Transition Planning Tool Units Page Views

Page	Unique Pageviews	Avg. Time on Page
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/	962	51.24
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/about.php	194	60.70
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/unit1.php	78	105.07
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/unit2.php	55	63.83
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/unit3.php	47	89.57
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/unit4.php	66	123.32
/pathways-to-trinity/tap/unit5.php	39	238.11

This concludes the presentation of merged quantitative and qualitative data describing user interaction with the Pathways to Trinity Transition Planning Tool, which functions as a “transition road map” for students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and practitioners in post-secondary education. A summary of findings is presented in section 5.3.5. The next section describes the findings from an investigation of student and parent engagement with the Pathways Transition Workshops, provided to students with disabilities in the senior cycle of post-primary education.

5.3.4 Transition Planning Workshops Findings

Transition planning workshops were delivered in two phases. The first phase began in October 2011 with n = 11 students and n = 13 parents in attendance, and completed in April 2012; the second phase ran between September 2012 and January 2013, with n = 17 students and n = 4 parents in attendance. Quantitative and qualitative data for both cycles was gathered from a survey, examining parent and student perceptions of the usefulness of the programme, at the end of each cycle. This data was used to re-evaluate / adjust programme format and content, for the following phase. Parents in phase 1 expressed improved confidence and engagement by students with the transition process, however none of the student participants completed the survey or submitted comments. Three students and one parent from phase 2 completed the survey, in general responses indicated that whilst students were satisfied with the content of the workshops, logistics such as travel time, venue and breaks, caused some difficulties.

Only two of the 11 students in phase 1, and two of the 17 students participating in phase 2, intended to apply to the host HEI. This greatly affected the level of engagement in the programme, and the degree of interest in HEI-specific courses and student information.

Student feedback. In both phases, only three students completed the online survey (n = 1 VI; n = 2 Df/HI). Reasons for attending the workshops included gaining knowledge about how people with disabilities access college, to learn about DARE and how to maximise points for college places, and for advice on study skills and choosing college courses. Students were asked to rate their opinion on student speakers, workshop presenters, workshop content, materials, venue and timing.

Responses ranged from Excellent to Good, open-ended comments indicated areas of satisfaction with student speakers, and how to organize study or revision time. The workshops were organized for one Wednesday afternoon each month, as schools are closed and this period is generally taken up with extra-curricular activities. However, whilst this timeframe meant that students could attend without missing formal lessons, many students stated that they could not both attend the workshops, and engage with after school commitments. Timing was the main item of criticism from students, and in particular a long afternoon session with no break, coming after a morning of concentrated academic work in school.

The number of students who were actively planning to apply to the HEI, was negligible. For many of the participants, the points required to achieve an offer of a place was an unrealistic goal. This was particularly the case for students who were taking Ordinary level subjects in LC examinations, therefore input from undergraduate students about specific courses, societies and the HEI specific experience, was not entirely relevant to attendees.

One of the core benefits of the Pathways project identified by students, was experiencing the real environment of college, including first-hand experience of the different and negotiable environments such as libraries.

Parent / practitioner feedback. Across both phases, only four parents completed the online survey, supporting students with AS, VI, DCD, PD and SpLD. Parents stated that the primary reasons for attending the workshops was to receive further guidance and support, to encourage their students to consider a third level programme as a realistic option, to assist with improving confidence and direction, and to explore post-Leaving Certificate choices. Parents were asked to rate their opinion on student speakers, workshop presenters, workshop content, materials, venue and timing. Responses ranged from Excellent to Good, open-ended comments again indicated issues with the venue and timing of workshops, for similar reason identified by students. Parallel sessions for students and parents were valued however they also stated that feedback in relation to student engagement with sessions would be useful. With respect to further support in the future, parents suggested an update / refresher session in 6th year for both student and parents before the CAO and DARE deadlines, and the opportunity for students who did not reach their LC or transition goals, to discuss options and information sources.

During both phases, parents were enthusiastic attendees and welcomed the opportunity to ask questions, and experience the college environment themselves. They reported real benefits for their young adults, with respect to greater clarity when thinking about choices, and improved confidence and enthusiasm for progressing to third level. Across both phases, two Guidance Counsellors and two Support Workers connected with students were emailed with summaries of each workshop and materials used in the session. No communication was received in response.

This section concludes the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from: (a) website traffic to Pathways to Trinity using the Google Analytics tool embedded in each web page, (b) access to the Transition Planning Tool, and (c) participation in the Transition Planning Workshops. These findings will be discussed in Chapter Six, which provides an interpretation of merged data from Study One, Study Two and Study in comparison to the literature review provided in Chapter Three.

5.3.5 Study Three Summary of Merged Results

Pathways transition website. A statistical comparison with CAO and DARE applicant data indicated that visitors to the Pathways website represented approximately three times the potential number of students with disabilities applying to HE, and is therefore likely to include parent / carers and practitioners supporting those students. Across the research timeline there were 25,316 unique visitors to Pathways, of whom 63.8% were new visitors accumulating 78,668 page views. Between 2011 and 2013 Pathways visits increased from 3,000 per year to over 15,000 in 2013, which represents approximately three times the potential number of students with disabilities applying to HE, and suggests that this includes parent / carers and practitioners supporting those students. These are positive findings which indicate that the website is fit for purpose and of increasing relevance to its target market, year on year.

A cross-analysis of levels of engagement with the website and promotion events demonstrated that web traffic responds to publicity, but not always to a level of interest that might be anticipated. In April 2011 only $n = 17$ website visits were recorded in response to a mailshot to 463 Guidance Counsellors the previous week, representing only 8% of this target audience. This is significant, as Guidance Counsellors are ideally positioned to disseminate awareness of the resource to students and parents. Overall, visitor figures showed significant increases in 2012 and 2013

after the transition resources were promoted to students at Higher Options, and to parents/carers via community disability support groups. Noticeable along the timeline is a steady increase of visits between the launch date of 4 April 2011 and September 2013, from an average of 15 visits per day, to 70 visits per day. This can be accounted for by a growing familiarity with the existence of the Pathways website. Expectedly, the highest volume of traffic originated from English language visitors (96%) from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, representing potential applicants to Irish universities. For students with disabilities who may wish to study away from their home country, gathering appropriate information about supports and resources is crucial. In Ireland, 57% of visitors were located in the capital city of Dublin, followed by the three major university cities Cork, Limerick and Galway, which is not unexpected as this mirrors population densities.

Single page visits accounted for 64% of visits, which suggests that visitors are searching for specific information located on specific pages. An analysis of the top ten page views indicates that 25.8% of visits are made to pages containing study skills resources for Leaving Certificate students, and 23% are related to the process of applying to college - including the DARE programme, applying for a language waiver, downloadable application documents and the process of transition. Across an extended view of site content, 2,291 visitors accessed information on course choice, and 1,680 visitors accessed the Take My Advice contributions from students with a disability in HE.

An investigation of the flow of visitor traffic through the website enables a vision of how visitors engage with the content, and can inform an adaptation or modification of the order of content. The majority of traffic initiated through the study skills pages, flowed through to applying to college, and culminated in course choice. However, the study skills pages are not prominent in terms of the site map, and taken with the preceding data on page content, suggests that the study skills pages should be moved to a higher level in order to attract a greater flow through of the remainder of the site content. The top referring sites were the DARE website, HEI Disability Service Facebook account, HEI main website, and the Dyslexia Association of Ireland website. Google searches accounted for 55% of new referrals, followed by two Guidance Counselling sources such as Career News and Qualifax.

Prior to the Pathways launch, web traffic to the Weebly discussion forum was limited, with 626 page views (30.39% of pageviews) with a bounce rate of 2.94%. This means that visitors landed on pages that were wholly appropriate to their search terms and interest. Only two parents posted a query with respect to DARE places and points. No statistical data is available from April 2011 onwards with respect to the Wordpress blog, so it is not possible to gauge level of interest, however no comments were submitted to the blog across the research period, indicating that visitors did not wish to engage publicly with the site.

Transition Planning Tool. Over the research period the transition tool was downloaded by students, parents and professionals from schools, post LC environments, and disability support networks such as the National Learning Network (NLN), Central Remedial Clinic (CRC), and the Catholic Institute for Deaf People (CIDP), in addition to government departments such as the Health Service Executive (HSE). Of note is that 16.9% of downloads by users in post-Leaving Certificate study. The largest user group identified were students with SpLD (23.4%), which is not unexpected as the incidence of SpLD within the general population ranges from 4% to 18% (Nag & Snowling, 2012). However, of note is the high frequency of users with AS/ASD (18.2%), perhaps highlighting a need for specific transition planning for this group. Particularly low rates of use are seen within the sensory (6.5%) and physical disability categories (2.6%), With respect to overall access to the planning tool pages, 962 visitors looked at the planning tool pages but did not register for download. Users submitted positive comments regarding content, and provided suggestions for improvements such as a recommended completion timeframe to assist with expectations and focus.

Transition Planning Workshops. Students attended the workshops to learn about DARE and how to maximise points for college places, and for advice on study skills and choosing college courses. Students were asked to rate their opinion on student speakers, workshop presenters, workshop content, materials, venue and timing. Responses ranged from Excellent to Good, open-ended comments indicated areas of satisfaction with student speakers, and how to organize study or revision time. Timing was the main item of criticism from students, both in regard to the overlap of extra-curricular activities, and in particular the length of sessions coming after a morning of concentrated academic work in school. Participants were invited to engage with third

level students under-taking courses that had been identified as being of particular interest. The number of students who were actively planning to apply to Trinity, was small, and therefore not all of the student to student interaction was relevant. One of the core benefits of the Pathways project identified by students, was experiencing the real environment of the university, including first-hand experience of the different and negotiable environments, for example the Arts Building and Libraries. Although opening up the university campus to diverse groups, requires some planning, students were immersed in the typical changing environments of lecture and seminar spaces in college. However, it was encouraging to see that some of the students felt empowered to contact the Disability Service between sessions, to ask for specific information or advice.

Parents rated the workshops as Excellent to Good, open-ended comments again indicated issues with the venue and timing of workshops, for similar reason identified by the students. Parents appreciated the parallel sessions for students and parents but also stated that feedback on how their students are engaging with the sessions, any issues raised or interests, would be useful. With respect to further support in the future, parents suggested an update / refresher session in 6th year for both student and parents before the CAO and DARE deadlines, and the opportunity for students who did not reach their Leaving Certificate or progression to HE goals, to discuss options and information sources.

During both cycles, parents were enthusiastic attendees and welcomed the opportunity to ask questions, and experience the college environment themselves. All of them felt welcomed and involved. They reported real benefits for their young adults, with respect to greater clarity when thinking about choices, and improved confidence and enthusiasm for progressing to third level.

This summary of merged quantitative and qualitative data concludes Section 5.3, which described the findings from Study Three, an investigation of engagement with dedicated transition planning resources for students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and practitioners working in the area of post-primary education. Specifically, it examined responses to the Pathways to Trinity transition website, the Pathways to College Transition Planning Tool, and the Pathways Transition Workshops.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reported the findings from a mixed methods research programme which used a concurrent-triangulation-convergent design, within which three separate studies were constructed in order to: (a) respond to each of the research questions simultaneously, (b) gather quantitative and qualitative data concurrently through surveys and interviews, (c) facilitate a triangulation of perspectives from each of the sample populations, and (d) converge these findings at each stage of data collection and analysis.

The objectives of this research programme were to investigate: (a) access to support, guidance and transition planning for students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and practitioners, (b) personal perceptions of transition in relation to enablers and barriers for students with a disability, (c) the transition experiences of students with disabilities at the conclusion of their first year of undergraduate education, and (d) to use an emancipatory methodology that permitted stakeholders to voice their experiences of transition.

Study One investigated the experiences and viewpoints of post-primary students with a disability, parents and carers, and practitioners associated with education and educational transitions. The small number of practitioners who completed both the survey and elected to be interviewed in Study One, means that whilst a comparison of their viewpoints with those of students and parents may not be meaningful within the scope of this study, they nonetheless provide a useful snapshot of attitudes and opinions within the post-primary environment. Similarly, the absence of personal comments in student surveys and the small number of student interviews in Study One, may limit the interpretation of personal viewpoints of post-primary students with disabilities in relation to their own transition opportunities, but does provide broad data in relation to access to transition resources. Importantly, this data originates not just from students who are reaching the apex of transition in the final year of post-primary school, but from students in all three years of the senior cycle of education.

The wealth of data from parents / carers of post-primary students with disabilities in Study One, and students with disabilities attending HE in Study Two, provided an excellent opportunity to contrast factors that have a greater or lesser impact for both groups. Participants in the parent cohort were in the midst of

grappling with the complexity of transition journeys encompassing TY, 5th and 6th years, and across a range of disabilities. In contrast, the opinions of students describing their transition experience at the conclusion of their first year in HE, arguably permits a more considered and less emotionally charged reflection on enablers and barriers to successful transition. Finally, findings from Study Three, which investigated engagement with concrete transition resources designed specifically for the research programme, provided robust evidence for the efficacy of providing tools to assist with planning the transition journey.

It is acknowledged that, intrinsically, each individual is an expert with respect to their own transition experience and transition expectations, and as such will have particular suggestions and solutions that are unique to their own context. However, it is anticipated that analysis and interpretation of the data in this chapter will facilitate a broader discussion of the findings in Chapter Six. Moreover, these transition “stories” add to the body of knowledge of transition experiences for disabled students and their families, and as such will increase awareness within HEIs and second level education settings, within the ROI.

The following chapter presents an interpretation of the findings from this research programme, which are discussed with reference to previous work identified in a review of the literature in Chapter Three. In response to the research questions, the material in Chapter Six identifies barriers and enablers within the bioecology of post-secondary transitions and personal geographies. Firstly, it addresses elements of the political terrain (Macrosystem) that relate to national policies and initiatives relating to widening participation and transition planning for students with disabilities. This is followed by a section which inspects the landscape of transition (Exosystem) encompassing the availability and format of transition planning in post-primary schools. A further section dissects the transition journeys of students with disabilities and their families (Mesosystem), capturing the enablers and barriers associated with sources and quality of transition guidance, awareness of and attitudes towards disability, and connections between schools, HEIs and parents. The penultimate section comments on the personal geographies of students with disabilities (Microsystem) as they relate to disability, self-concept and self-identity, socio-economic inequalities, social skills and “fitting in.” Finally, the efficacy of third

spaces and Communities of Practice are discussed in the light of the transition planning resources designed and delivered for this research programme.

CHAPTER SIX - DISCUSSION

A review of the literatures in Chapter Three established that there are systemic, contextual and environmental barriers to transition to HE for post-primary students with disabilities. In continuation, this chapter discusses the key findings from the research programme that support or extend existing knowledge about this research topic. This material is organized into five principle sections that address: (a) initiatives that address widening participation and access to HE, (b) formal transition planning policy and practice, (c) sources and quality of transition guidance, (d) personal geographies, and (e) the value of transition planning resources.

6.1 Widening Participation and Access to HE

National targets have not resulted in significant increases in participation of students with disabilities, particularly for students with sensory and physical disabilities (HEA, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013). However, without a central data collection point to monitor progression to HE, accuracy of targets and outcomes is difficult to establish. HEA action points have consistently identified the necessity for a national transition planning strategy including a dedicated website which has failed to materialize. Various pilot schemes have been initiated by HEIs but suffer from a lack of commitment and funding (HEA, 2004, 2006). Currently, the DARE scheme is the only national strategy that recognizes the relationship between disability and educational disadvantage.

Parents expressed frustration with application, admission and entry requirements, opinions shared equally across fee-paying, State and DEIS schools. Comments highlighted an inflexible education system that fails to recognize individual differences, and where restricted subject choices and points requirements can influence transition opportunities (Hyland, 2011; IUA, 2011). Parents called for additional DARE eligibility criteria to highlight educational disadvantage. Whilst acknowledging the importance of DARE as a transition pathway (Byrne et al., 2013; Hyland, 2011; IUA, 2011), practitioners perceived the scheme to be situated within a medical model. Practitioner viewpoints on the transparency of the scheme were contradictory, and despite the provision of extensive multimedia information provided by DARE and HEI websites, “lack of information” was frequently cited by parents and practitioners (Mc Guckin et al., 2013). Students lacked confidence in

DARE information provided by Guidance Counsellors (GC) and described DARE information sources as vague and sometimes contradictory. Whilst regional DARE clinics assist with application queries, however these were geographically restrictive for some potential applicants.

Students and parents criticised the intricacies of the application process including completing documentation and acquiring evidence of disability (Byrne et al., 2013). Parents were also critical of disseminating information directly to post-primary students without elaboration or guidance, representing a barrier for those who may not have parental support for post-secondary aspirations. Parents lack the confidence to determine acceptable documentation and rely on GCs for advice. GCs do not possess the expertise to assess disability evidence (Mc Guckin & Minton, 2014), and professionals providing diagnoses may not do so in a format that satisfies the requirements of DARE.

6.2 Access to Formal Transition Planning

At a school level serious discrepancies existed between the aspirations of students, and the expectations of practitioners, often affecting the level of encouragement and guidance provided (e.g. McCoy et al., 2014; McCoy & Smyth, 2013; Mc Guckin et al., 2013). There is a need for more focused whole school transition planning incorporating the IEP, closer collaboration between GC and HEIs (Mc Guckin et al., 2013) and outreach activities that engage students, parents and practitioners (Newman, 2013). Transition planning should be recognised and accepted as a longitudinal strategy which is implemented as early as possible (e.g. Fier & Brzezinski, 2010; NCCA, 1999; NCSE, 2006a; NDA, 2005; NIID, 2011; Sitlington et al., 2007). A lack of clarity around the meaning of “transition” (NIID, 2011) results in disparate approaches to transition planning and resourcing within and across sectors (Hibbert, 2010; Mc Guckin et al., 2013). The absence of a statutory IEP (EPSEN, 2004; 2004), or failure to regularly review progress against an existing IEP, reduces the efficacy of transition planning for post-school outcomes (e.g. Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; NCSE, 2006a, 2006b; NDA, 2005). Transition planning within the IEP or as an independent action plan must capture current and future transitional events and engage all stakeholders in the transition process (OECD, 2011; Redpath et al., 2013). This was identified as a barrier by parents and practitioners.

Student viewpoints on guidance with planning course choices, preparedness for HE and accurate and transparent information from HEIs, mirror findings from national surveys (ISSE, 2013). A mismatch between student expectations and the reality of HE means that transition planning should begin earlier in the senior cycle of education, and should include investigation of such differences and the cultivation of exploratory and investigative skills around interests, career pathways and qualifications routes. Importantly, students need to have acquired the self-knowledge and confidence to establish which post-secondary options are most appropriate to meet their long term goals and aspirations (e.g. Lefever & Currant, 2010; McGuinness et al., 2013; Redmond et al., 2011; Smyth et al., 2011b).

Students with significant needs depend upon delivery of identified supports within an IEP in consultation with SENOS and Principals (NCSE, 2006a, 2006b, 2013). It is a crucial document at principle transition points as a mechanism for recording strengths and challenges relating to current and future transitions, resulting in fluid plans that are adapted to individual need (Desforges & Lindsay, 2010). Parents indicated that IEP meetings were generally conducted with GCs or Resource Teachers, thus the reduction in provision of GC will have a significant effect on such opportunities (Cradden, 2024; DES, 2012; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014). Consultation with SENOs and Principals were infrequent or did not happen, and almost half of parents had never discussed transition planning with any practitioner. Parents described high levels of frustration where accommodations stipulated in the IEP for students with significant needs, were not implemented.

TY is an ideal starting point for planning for post-secondary pathways (IDEA, 2004, 2006) both parents and students believed that some form of transition planning should at least begin in TY, including support with choosing the right LC subjects, links to HEIs, orientation opportunities and advice on supports in college. Activities and curriculum structure were not perceived by either students or parents to inform transition planning, and practitioners generally described TY negatively in this respect. Most importantly, post-secondary options and transition planning for students with SEN and/or disabilities is not integrated into TY. There are additionally significant issues with equality of access and opportunity to participate in TY as a function of socio-economic factors for parents and schools (e.g. Clerkin,

2012, 2013; Jeffers, 2007, 2011; Houses of the Oireachtas, 26th February, 2013; McCoy et al., 2010; O'Connor & Kinsella, 2014; Smyth & Banks, 2012).

Parents identified the need for a detailed, individualised “map” of progress along the transition pathway to include actions and outcomes for the immediate post-Leaving Certificate period, in collaboration with a transition partner (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009). Consequently, a transition planning toolkit was identified by students, parents and practitioners as a useful starting point, and these are widely and successfully used in the United States (Cline, Halverson, Petersen, & Rohrbach, 2005; Conaboy, Nochajski, Schefkins, & Schoonover, 2008; Walker, Kortering, & Fowler, 2007).

6.3 Sources and Quality of Transition Guidance

Findings established that the quantity and quality of disability-specific transition advice and guidance available to post-primary students with disabilities and parents / carers, was variable and disparate (e.g. McCoy et al., 2014; McCoy & Smyth, 2013; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Scanlon et al., 2014). Parents, GCs and Resource Teachers were the main providers of transition information and guidance within the post-primary environment. The amount and quality of disability-specific transition advice and guidance was dependent upon the conscientiousness with which practitioners sourced information from HEIs and access programmes, and the level of accuracy and clarity of that information. Formal transition planning was not provided to students with disabilities, irrespective of whether they had access to an IEP. This was not intrinsically associated with disability type or school year, but was dependent upon the knowledge base, attitude, awareness of disability, and interest level of GCs.

6.3.1 Human Resources

Pre-entry students acknowledged that where one GC is responsible for large numbers of students, disseminating specific information relevant to individual circumstances, is an almost impossible task. Students felt that successful transition planning is dependent upon the approach adopted by GCs, and that whilst it is important to ensure that students are realistic in their aspirations (Tinklin & Hall, 1999), negative expectations were not encouraging to students if they were not accompanied by positive alternatives.

Students identified peers and family as making the transition to college easier providing guidance on options and disability-related support decisions, and that encouragement from key people was an important feature of the transition process. Students did not perceive that contact with HEIs directly represented a transition resource, a critical finding given that resources provided by HEIs are student-focused.

Class teachers were often the only post-primary providers of advice to parents, but consultation opportunities were not always easy to access, consequently, parents felt forced to take a confrontational stance affecting school/teacher perceptions of students and parents.

6.3.2 Knowledge Bases

Subject choices, college course requirements and differentiated knowledge of access routes means that for some students, particular choices cut off particular pathways early in the senior cycle (McCoy et al., 2014; Smyth, 2013). This aspect of transition featured strongly in survey comments interviews. A quarter of pre-entry students described this support as poor or non-existent, and yet post-entry students stated that this guidance was a major factor in ease of transition. Parents indicated high levels of dissatisfaction with guidance on selection of LC subjects, describing this as poor or non-existent. These findings reflect concerns expressed by HEIs (Byrne et al., 2013) in relation to poor and tardy advice on appropriate subject choices, which effectively closes off course options at third level.

Although many parents described transition support and guidance in positive terms, a significant proportion had received no advice with respect to transition tasks and skills. Parents were of the opinion that information from HEIs and DARE was received but not disseminated by the school, even in disadvantaged areas where parents might require additional support. None of the parents interviewed had been made aware of disability-specific events provided such as Better Options. This search for knowledge, in the absence of dissemination by schools, was dependent upon the research skills of parents (Bradley, 2012).

Practitioners indicated frustration with students and parents where they relied upon school staff to manage waiver and DARE applications. This confusion is caused in part by the requirement for schools to partially complete these on behalf of the student, thus blurring the line of responsibility. Practitioners commented on the

failure of students and parents to acquaint themselves with fundamental information in relation to applying to HE, not attending events that could provide them with that information, and insufficient input or involvement in general from some parents. Practitioners acknowledged that this was connected to historical and cultural expectations particularly where parents had not attended FE/HE themselves. However, there was little recognition of the need to work with parents to ensure that pertinent information is disseminated in a robust and timely fashion. Practitioners reiterated the need for more and better quality of information from HEIs (IUQB, 2011) and access schemes, despite the plethora of existing material and communication avenues.

Post-entry students emphasized the importance of researching course workload and content. Heavy timetables and workloads in specific courses represented a major stress factor for students (McCoy et al., 2014) particularly for students who experienced difficulties with fatigue and chronic conditions, or who had the added pressure of long commutes to HE. Thus research and guidance in relation to academic structure and expectations for HE courses, would be of great benefit (IUQB, 2011; Morgan, Kellaghan, & Flanagan, 2001; Redmond, Quinn, Devitt & Archbold, 2011). This investigative focus must be developed across senior cycle years and therefore initiatives such as Better Options play a crucial part in providing opportunities for students, parents and stakeholders to meet HEI personnel. Post-transition students reported high levels of satisfaction with support in HE indicating an overall improvement in terms of understanding needs, increased professionalism and helpfulness of staff, and more practical advice. Students identified that person-centred support for exploring options, decision-making, discussion of available supports and disability-related needs, contributed to a positive transition experience (Byrne et al., 2013).

National surveys indicate that across the wider student body, entrants to HE lack the skills and preparation for HE (ISSE, 2013), thus pre-entry advice to students with disabilities and parents or guardians is crucial to enable them to make an informed choice about college applications. More than half of the comments from post-entry students described the necessity of independence in relation to learning and academic skills, describing “huge” differences between the post-primary and HE skill requirements (Hyland, 2011; Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan, 2001).

6.3.3 Making Connections

Engagement between students, parents, practitioners, schools and HEIs can facilitate a more integrated approach to addressing promoters and inhibitors to HE. Viewpoints were largely focused on dissemination of information between HE and post-primary schools (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004), specifically the need for HEIs to be transparent when advising on physical access and availability of supports, given the environmental differences between school and HE (Thomas, Quinn, Slack & Casey, 2002). Parents felt that HEIs have a responsibility to forge these links in particular as a form of transition assistance (Redpath et al., 2013). Pre-transition students identified college application workshops, advice clinics, visits to / by disability services, a transition website, and curriculum time dedicated to transition planning, as essential pre-entry activities (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Felsing & Byford; Gough & Fleming, 2014). Suggestions included school visits and more comprehensive information within HEI websites.

Locating relevant transition resources was problematic and dependent upon the way in which individual HEIs make this available. This was expressed in relation to application for a waiver of Irish or the modern language matriculation requirement, which has a direct bearing on successful transition for students with sensory and communication disabilities, or specific learning difficulties. Despite provision of this information on Admissions and Disability Services web pages, parents highlighted the need to be independently proactive in sourcing information, and many expressed disappointment and disillusionment with the standard of guidance provided by post-primary schools. The clarity and structure of Disability Services websites is disparate, some were deemed to be overly complex and others provided no pre-entry information at all. There is a need for HE staff to recognize that for each new cohort of potential students and parents, the process is new and unfamiliar.

Post-entry students reiterated the importance of pre-entry contact, the transfer of support information from school to HE, aspirational role models, and a positive progression ethos in schools (Smyth, McCoy, & Darmody, 2004). Positive experiences of transition were principally attributed to orientation or induction programmes through Disability or Access Offices (Byrne et al, 2013), and acknowledged the greater transparency in locating support. However, the number of

entry tasks and layers of registration activities was perceived to be overwhelming, and some students preferred not to engage with disability-specific events. A phased approach to registration would be more appropriate and productive including a pre-entry / orientation session for students and their parents, to introduce college systems and structures.

6.4 Personal Geographies

Individual geographies encompass identity, self-concept, the support of the family, social context and socio-economic background, role models and educational expectations, and the variability of each of these factors significantly affects transition opportunities. Investigation of the experiential process of transition is relatively less explored (Craft & Maunder, 2012), findings from this research programme emphasise the prominent role they play in determining transition pathways.

6.4.1 The Role of the Family

The financial and personal resources at the disposal of parents and guardians, coupled with familial expectations and aspirations, are an important factor in transition pathways (Bradley, 2012; Shah, 2008; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Parents described high levels of commitment required to support students which was entirely dependent upon the skills, resources and circumstances of individual families, representing an uneven “playing field” in post-primary education. Parental input spanned diverse situations (diagnosis and intervention, supports in school, reasonable accommodations, the DARE scheme), and required considerable time and effort (Kenny, Shevlin, Noonan Walsh, & McNeela, 2005; Mc Guckin et al., 2013). The financial burden of sourcing interventions to compensate for an inaccessible curriculum or absences from school was an additional stressor (Bradley, 2012; Shah, 2008; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Findings touched on the significance of these costs but did not demonstrate intra family differences in cultural and social capital (McCoy et al., 2010; Smyth & Banks, 2012).

The decision to opt out of TY for socio-economic reasons (O’Connor & Kinsella, 2014) impacts on subject choices in senior cycle; it does not allow for changes in interests and future plans which are significant between the ages of 14 and 16 years, nor does it allow for reflection on differences in subject specific curriculum content between junior and senior levels. Students attending fee-paying

and “grinds schools” are five times more likely to apply to DARE and to have the resources to finance the documentation required by DARE (Byrne et al., 2013); this is reflected in DARE applications, where there are fewer applicants from DEIS and State schools (Byrne et al., 2013).

Self-doubt and anxiety were features of parental comments, particularly where they were working alone to source information and help on behalf of their students. Parents expressed this emotional burden in terms of “stress” and “fatigue”; high levels of distress were connected to a lack of understanding of the struggle that their student experienced, sometimes emanating from within the family unit. Post-entry students acknowledged the benefits and advantages of positive encouragement from parents, both in respect to aspirations, college application and as a support through the transition period (Byrne & Smyth, 2011; Mc Guckin et al., 2013). It was clear that in relation to DARE, parents took responsibility for completing the application and gathering documentation. Findings emphasise the role of peers and family especially where students might depend upon parental input for longer than their peers (Dovey-Pearce et al., 2012). Parents play an integral role in filling the support gap (Wyn, Cuervo, Smith, & Woodman, 2010) and there was recognition for the vulnerability of students who do not have access to such support (Weedon & Ridell, 2007). HEIs and access schemes design materials and resources for delivery to students which appear to bypass parents as stakeholders. Whilst it is imperative that young people take ownership of their own transition and the inherent tasks associated with that transition, there needs to be a greater recognition that students with complex needs might need more scaffolded approaches to independence (Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007).

6.4.2 Awareness and Attitudes towards Disability

Parents attributed emotional and behavioural issues for students with disabilities to the effects of school culture or ethos, and attitudes of school staff, compounded by the challenges of adolescence, resulting in a focus on those who were perceived to have the potential to transition successfully (Gallagher, 1992; Geldens & Bourke, 2008; Lerner, Brennan, Noh, & Wilson, 1998; Shah, 2008; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2002). Parents cited inadequate knowledge, awareness and understanding of the difficulties experienced by students with disabilities within a competitive environment, as having a significant effect on self-perception. This is

associated with the absence of an IEP, to what extent its contents are disseminated to school staff, and an understanding of functional difficulties associated with disability (Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014).

Parents provided specific examples of the consequences of lack of awareness of physical access issues, in particular for students with “hidden” disabilities such as visual impairment and mental health conditions (Elliott & Wilson, 2008), and described this as a particular barrier. This was attributed to post-primary staff attitudes and institutional cultures as a function of inadequate training within post-primary schools, affecting the quality of guidance provided to students and parents (Lucas, 2008; Mc Guckin et al., 2013).

6.4.3 Individual Differences

Findings describe differences at an individual and familial level which result in disparate experiences (Barnes-Holmes et al, 2013; Galton & Hargreaves, 2002), and highlight the importance providing opportunities for students with disabilities to describe their transition journey (Redpath et al., 2013; Shah, 2008). Parents reported a lack of recognition that difficulties and barriers are unique to the individual in terms of the range and impact of medical conditions, physical disabilities and mental health conditions, the scale of treatment, and the long term effects of interrupted schooling. In these circumstances, students and parents require the maximum amount of support and guidance from post-primary schools. Parents also alluded to the complexities of inclusivity and integration, and a failure to acknowledge students with disabilities as individuals with sometimes specific requirements in relation to the learning environment and curriculum (Dente & Coles, 2012). The language used by parents to describe the intensity of their student’s journey illustrated significant levels of longitudinal stress across the post-primary cycle, together with anxieties connected to the need for students to equip themselves with the skills to meet these challenges independently (Mill, Mayes, & McConnell, 2010). The additional impact of personal crises such as changes in diagnosis and prognosis cannot be underestimated.

6.4.4 Self-esteem and Self-perception

Parents provided many examples of the extent to which disability-specific factors, or issues as a result of emotional stress, affected students across the senior cycle of education (Browning, Osborne, & Reed, 2009; Crafter, & Maunder, 2012);

practitioners also referred to poor self-confidence, low self-esteem, and low or unrealistic expectations as significant factors in transition. The language used by parents to describe the self-perception of their students was extremely negative, exacerbated by lack of understanding from peers and school staff (Rose & Shevlin, 2015). Similarly, when teachers are unaware of how disability manifests itself within the learning environment, students may often be the target of unfair or unrealistic expectations.

Post-entry students described a reluctance to draw attention to themselves in relation to disclosure and individual needs, but expressed regret that they had not been more determined in seeking support. Access to dedicated disability services and reasonable accommodations promoted self-confidence and encouraged self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and reinforced the perception of HE as an environment that welcomes diversity, and endorses a “can do” attitude. However, for some students choosing to disclose in HE was a complex decision connected to attitudes experienced in post-primary school and fear of discrimination (Smith, 2006; Waters, Stevens, Holland, & Madriaga, 2012). This included reference to disassociation from DARE and the perception that they might be less able than their peers. Students recognised that a reluctance to seek support might represent a barrier to transition, with long term consequences for self-esteem and confidence.

6.4.5 Independence, Self-awareness and Self-determination

Self-confidence, self-belief, self-determination, self-advocacy and autonomy are critical factors in successful transition (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007; O’Sullivan, 2011). Pre-entry students identified positive transition experiences as a result of support in school, and development of high levels of self-awareness and self-determination and self-efficacy (Lewis, Parsons, & Robertson, 2007). Time spent researching options enabled students to make more informed decisions based on interests, strengths and weaknesses, with the support and guidance from post-primary staff and HEIs. These students were more likely to receive and accept an offer on first preference courses, and to be happier in their course of study.

Parents of male students referenced a lack of maturity at crucial stages in junior and senior cycle education and associated transitions, creating stress levels that placed an additional burden on parents who were the sole supporter of their

student (Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartman, 1997). Parents also described differing levels of motivation and confidence associated with adverse experiences of support in school, leading either to a strong sense of self-determination or conversely a degree of hopelessness / helplessness. Whilst parents empathized with the difficulties faced by students, they acknowledged the need for independence believing that development of self-knowledge and self-advocacy should be addressed in post-primary school. Reference was made to the link between self-awareness, self-determination and self-esteem and educational achievement (Getzel, 2008; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Practitioners identified lack of skills, awareness and maturity as transition inhibitors; only one practitioner felt that this was a function of inadequate guidance and importantly drew attention to the role of the IEP in developing ownership.

Post-entry students recognized self-awareness, self-efficacy and determination as important skills (Redmond, Quinn, Devitt, & Archbold, 2011) and whilst the first year had exposed them to challenging circumstances and for some represented a site of struggle, they had benefited from a rapid growth in independence, self-knowledge, organisation and time management. Students acknowledged that the onus or responsibility falls to the student to acquire these skills, but also felt that the post-primary school structure and environment did not necessarily promote or encourage development of independence.

6.4.6 Social Skills, Peer Groups and Acceptance

The move from school to college, from home to away, is a period of intense emotional, psychological and physical change (Wyn, Cuervo, Smith, & Woodman, 2010). The social side of HE and the importance of friendships were referred to frequently throughout the data, and plays an important part in the overall perception of transition to HE (Elliot, & Wilson, 2008; McCoy et al., 2014) with significant consequences for student retention and withdrawal rates (Felsing & Byford, 2010; McGuinness, Bergin, Kelly, McCoy, Smyth, & Timoney, 2013). Students with siblings or friends in HE experienced a gentler transition having access to immediate friendship groups, although there was recognition that such ready-made social networks might also restrict exploration of new friendships and opportunities; for “solo” entrants, pre-existing social groups sometimes created feelings of exclusion.

This contrast is also expressed between students living independently, and those still living at home. Students living independently expressed homesickness and the steep learning curve of acquiring living skills, but integrated more quickly. Students living at home expressed difficulty with participating in social events due to difficulties with commuting, in terms of expense, travel time and scheduling; they also described a feeling of being estranged from the group, where social activities amongst peer groups took place off campus in residential settings.

6.5 The Value of Transition Planning Resources

This section assesses the effectiveness of the Pathways to Trinity transition model, comprising of a dedicated transition website, transition planning tool and transition workshops.

6.5.1 Viewpoints on Access to Transition Planning

A significant number of respondents to surveys and access to transition tool were enrolled in Transition Year. This suggests that students of a similar age in Ireland are interested in exploring transition choices at the beginning of the cycle, as are parents of students within this age group. Provision of specific, targeted and individual transition planning similar to initiatives in the USA (NSTTAC, 2010), would therefore be of great benefit.

Transition strategies from TY onwards were recognised by parents as an integral part of making informed choices about post-secondary options (Skill, 2010), however not all students completed TY (Clerkin, 2012, 2013; Jeffers, 2007, 2011). Suggestions for the format and rationale for transition planning included an individual plan for each student supported by a transition partner (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2013), and that this should include the period after the Leaving Certificate, as a key point in transition. Critically, with the exception of those interviewed, practitioners did not acknowledge the necessity for transition planning. Interview comments placed the responsibility of providing transition resources with the State and HEIs (IUQB, 2011), although the practicality of providing school specific support on a national level, was not addressed. Many of the suggested activities and materials currently exist, thus there is a perceived gap between access to information at post-primary level and current provision by HEIs.

6.5.2 Using Virtual Communities of Practice as a Transition Resource

A cross-analysis of levels of engagement with the website and promotion events demonstrated that web traffic responds to publicity. Of note, negligible website visits were recorded after individual contact with Principals, GCs and Resource Teachers. This is significant, as these practitioners are ideally positioned to disseminate awareness of the resource to students and parents. Web traffic increased by 200% over the research period, the highest ranking pages being study skills resources, college / DARE application and documentation, course choice and advice from HE students with a disability. Parents felt that online information was most relevant to students but that the website should be promoted to parents by GCs.

6.5.3 Transition Planning Toolkit

Although printed post-secondary information and guidance is freely available (NCSE, 2014; Wall, 2013), currently there are no task or goal-orientated planning frameworks for students with disabilities similar to those used in the UK (Stobard, 2010) or the USA (Clark, 2003; McCarney & Anderson, 2000; Miller et al., 2007; NSTTAC, 2010; Walker, Kortering, & Fowler, 2007). Significant interest in the planning tool was registered from post-primary practitioners, disability support networks, State departments such as the HSE, and post-LC students / practitioners. This suggests a dearth of transition assessment tools available to individuals and agencies supporting students with disabilities in Ireland that can be adapted to individual need (Cosgrove, McKeown, Travers, Lysaght, Ní Bhroin, & Archer, 2014).

Of note was the high frequency usage for students with AS/ASD highlighting a need for specific transition planning for this group (Elliott & Wilson, 2008; Stobard, 2010). Particularly low rates of use were seen within the sensory and physical disability categories, which is reflective of other issues relating to access to education for these groups (Byrne et al., 2013; HEA, 2008, 2010, 2014). Positive user feedback was received in relation to content, together with suggestions for additions such as a recommended completion timeframe to assist with expectations and focus.

6.5.4 Transition Planning Workshops

A core value expressed by participants in the workshops was experiencing the HE environment. Students felt empowered to contact the HEI between sessions

to ask for specific information or advice. During both cycles, parents reported real benefits for their young adults, with respect to greater clarity when thinking about choices, and improved confidence and enthusiasm for progressing to third level. Such experiential opportunities could be added to existing TY programmes and initiatives such as College Awareness Week. Making an initial link with HEIs would improve the motivation and confidence of students, and provide a more personal link for practitioners.

6.5.5 Engagement, Participation and Feedback

The Pathways to Trinity transition website includes a blog which is accessed from the main menu. Workshop material and resources were posted here in addition to disability and DARE advice. Visitors were encouraged to post queries with the intent that it would grow as a knowledge base. However, SNSs are not viewed as information sources by post-primary students in Ireland Melrose (2012); Facebook has limited educational use (Gray, Annabell, & Kennedy, 2010;) as students prefer to use SNS for social purposes rather than as an informal learning resource (Foon Hew, 2011; Madge et al., 2009). No comments were submitted at any time to the blog, indicating that visitors did not wish to engage publicly with the site, thus findings support the argument that students are less likely to use SNS to investigate, collate or share information relating to school or study. Both the forum and blog were viewed but unused as third spaces within which to exchange information or viewpoints.

No engagement or feedback was received from any of the practitioners (care workers, support assistants, GCs and SENOs) from either cycle of the workshops, despite the fact that they were included in all communications concerning workshop content, feedback and distribution of resources. Similarly, across the research period, whilst over 600 people accessed the Contact page, only two feedback forms were completed.

6.6 Chapter Conclusion

Chapter Two presented a theoretical framework for researching education, person and disability which provided a structure for investigating factors that impede or promote transitional opportunities for students with disabilities. Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Children's Geographies (Jeffrey, 2010; Pyer et al., 2010; Speraw, 2009; Valentine, 2003) permitted a multi-dimensional view of the transition experience in

Ireland. The reporting of evidence in the literature within these frameworks, demonstrated the inter-section and interaction between, agents and agencies of change, the flow of information exchange to, from and between systems, and the fragility of transition succession where many interdependent variables are at play. Each of these can at any time represent a situational, institutional or dispositional barrier to transition (Gorard et al., 2006).

Principally, this research programme has identified systemic issues related to the complexity of progression routes to college (Gough & Fleming, 2014; McGuckin et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2013), a lack of cohesion between sectors to facilitate a smoother transition (HEA, 2010; Redpath et al., 2013), inequity of access to support and guidance on the transition process (Morgan, Kellaghan, & Flanagan, 2001), awareness of and attitudes towards disability at post-primary level (Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004; Gorard et al., 2006; Thomas, Qinn, Slack & Casey, 2002; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2002; Tinklin & Hall, 1999). Interactions with peer groups and social networks (Lerner, 1986, 1991), family dynamics and aspirations (Dunst, Trivett and Cross, 1986), and personal assets and liabilities (Sontag, 1996) add a complexity to life transitions and disability (Blalock and Patton, 1996). Transition barriers identified in the findings of this research programme reflect oppositional aspects of factors identified as enablers, and vice versa, which constrict the range of viable choices for students with disabilities (Klocker, 2007).

In conclusion, each cohort of senior cycle students with parents who are new to post-primary to HE transitions, are dependent upon a continuous, cyclical and fluid knowledge base (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007) for access schemes and transition resources for students with disabilities. Evidence from this research programme suggests that this is rarely the case, and that there is both a perceived and existing disconnect between advice seekers and advice providers.

Chapter Seven that follows is the final chapter in this thesis, and presents the empirical, practical and theoretical recommendations for policy makers, state agencies and departments, post-primary and FE/HE institutions and staff, with respect to improving transition experiences and opportunities for students with disabilities. Additionally, it provides recommendations with respect to the provision

of transition planning tools which would make a significant difference to improving post-secondary opportunities in HE.

CHAPTER SEVEN - CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research programme examined the transition arc of students with disabilities as they move from post-primary to Higher Education (HE) settings, from the perspective of students, parents or carers, and practitioners working with students and their families. Its purpose was to establish the web of interactions between students, parents, practitioners, schools and Higher Education institutions (HEIs), and to identify junctures within the bioecology of the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and aspects of personal geographies (e.g. Gough & Fleming, 2014; Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013; Shah, 2008) that function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transitions for young people with disabilities.

The purpose of this final chapter is to: (a) respond to the research questions that were extracted from the research hypotheses, (b) present the empirical, theoretical and practical implications, (c) provide recommendations for future policy and practice in Ireland, (d) suggest modifications or extensions to the research process for further investigation and recommendations from this study, and (e) provide a reflexive analysis of the research journey. In continuation, this chapter begins with a discussion of the relationship between the research questions and principal findings of the research programme.

7.1 Responding to the Research Questions

Chapter One explored factors associated with transition from post-primary to post-secondary opportunities for students with disabilities, which may function as promoters or inhibitors to successful transition outcomes. The emerging hypotheses were that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, which are determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors which may effectively act as an enabler or barrier, and (b) a dedicated, targeted transition planning strategy for post-primary students with a disability, built on a framework that considers the circumstances, experiences, competencies, opinions and needs of stakeholders, can promote, encourage and assist disabled students in their transition journey. In order to test these hypotheses, five research questions were extracted from a conceptualization of the research problem, and are revisited in this section.

7.1.1 Are students with disabilities, their parents, and other stakeholders in the transition process, provided with access to disability-specific transition advice and guidance?

At the level of the micro- and mesosystems, the quantity and quality of disability-specific transition advice and guidance available to post-primary students with disabilities, parents and carers, is variable and impaired. Theoretically, transition planning is incorporated into the IEP, which is reviewed annually by the student, parents or guardians, SENO and school principal. Findings from the research programme did not evidence this practice for students with IEPs. GCs and teachers are the main providers of transition information and guidance where students with disabilities do not have an IEP, however, the level and quality of disability-specific advice is dependent upon the efforts of practitioners in sourcing information, and the efficiency in disseminating same to students and parents. Therefore, personalised guidance for students with disabilities is dependent upon the human and physical resources at the disposal of the school, including access to a GC and the knowledge and experience of individual practitioners.

Poor understandings of individual strength and challenges, means that person-centred guidance is rarely provided. Within specific disability groups, students appear to be considered as a homogenous group, with little recognition that, for example, anxiety and depression are experienced and manifest themselves in different ways for different young people. In the absence of such, parents bridge the gap in sourcing knowledge and providing support for future plans, but this is dependent upon personal and financial resources at an individual, and family level.

Within the exosystem, whilst regional DARE clinics provide bespoke assistance with application queries, these are geographically restrictive for some potential applicants. Many HEIs provide additional DARE events, however the decision to do so is dependent upon the availability of staff, and the existence of a Disability Service or Access Office within the institution. The lack of institutional commonality and transparency of DARE points reduction and allocation of places, requires students, parents and practitioners to traverse multiple HEI websites or to repeatedly engage with HEI staff, with differing levels of success. Many parents and practitioners referred to a “lack of information” - and sometimes no knowledge at all - about the DARE scheme.

At a macro level, formal transition planning for students with disabilities is not recognised as a fundamental part of preparation for life after school. An absence of statutory obligation means that there is no requirement to develop specific curriculum content, or to provide dedicated curriculum time – particularly within TY - in this area. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that within a transitional context, disability is a social construct within which students and parents who experience impoverished transition advice and guidance, are at a greater disadvantage.

7.1.2 Do all stakeholders have equal access to the same quality and quantity of transition support?

Inadequate knowledge, awareness and understanding of the difficulties experienced by students with disabilities within a competitive environment, means that individual differences are rarely considered other than within the boundaries of what students are *unable* to do. As a result, students, parents and one practitioner were of the opinion that attention is focused on those students who are perceived to have the potential to transition successfully with minimal input. Parents provided many examples of the impact of negative attitudes in school, which result in the reluctance of young people to disclose the impact of their disability or draw attention to individual needs. Consequently, many young people are systemically excluded from exploring and experiencing the same opportunities as their peers.

Findings also evidence that transition planning meetings are at best infrequent, but more usually do not take place. This is perhaps accounted for by a lack of clarity around the constituent elements of transition planning, which entails more than simply focusing on the Leaving Certificate examination. Limited opportunities to access teacher time means that only parents with the confidence and wherewithal to take a stand, have access to this support. Similarly, parents who identified themselves as competent and knowledgeable researchers, were more successful at sourcing, organising and digesting transition information. However, there was no evidence that this knowledge and expertise was shared within school communities or support groups, even though this would provide greater equity of access to transition guidance.

Disparities in the testimonies of pre and post-entry students point to inequities of access to transition support. Post-entry students represent young people with disabilities who have transitioned successfully to HE, and who consequently

described high levels of assistance with course choice and application processes. Post-primary students spoke of restricted levels of guidance due to diminished school resources, a lack of confidence in the information provided by both GCs and DARE personnel, and a reliance on peers and parents to inform future planning. Most critically, an independent review of the DARE scheme evidences that students from fee paying schools are more advantaged in their ability to meet DARE eligibility criteria. Findings emphasise the connection between access to high quality guidance counselling in school, and positive post-transition outcomes, but that this is entirely dependent upon the skill and interest level of individual GCs.

Whilst parents, students and practitioners believed that transition planning should begin in TY, aside from the fact that the current content and structure of the programme do not acknowledge or provide space for this to happen, there are core issues with equality of access and opportunity to participate in TY as a function of socio-economic factors for parents and schools.

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that disability is a social construct within which students and parents who experience impoverished transition advice and guidance, are at a greater disadvantage.

7.1.3 How useful / effective is this advice and guidance, what form does it take, and who provides it?

Findings from student and parent statements evidence a variable quality of advice, and this is confirmed in postings found within social media communities. Transition guidance for students with disabilities must take into account a range of intersecting factors, for example, potential access routes, reasonable accommodations, realistic continuing education or career options, disclosure, future support requirements, and geographically situated determinants. The two principle sources of advice relating to these factors are schools and HEIs including constituent access, admissions and disability offices.

GCs expressed frustration with the necessity to manage language waiver and DARE applications on behalf of students and parents, particularly in schools with high numbers of students with disabilities. This frustration was centred around a perceived lack of student and parent effort and an over-reliance on schools. From a parental perspective, a lack of confidence in their ability to manage complex processes – particularly in the absence of personal experience of transition to HE - is

manifested in a greater dependency on professional guidance. This is problematic, as effectively there are opposing viewpoints on the perceived roles and responsibilities of parents and GCs, adding a further layer of confusion. There is no evidence of parents and school staff working collaboratively to pool resources, and in particular, to make this available to future transition partners.

The language and nuances of admissions processes is a fundamental problem for many parents, particularly those who are experiencing transition to FE / HE scenarios for the first time. Understanding the meaning of concepts such as ‘matriculation’, and the differing admissions and course specific requirements between universities, colleges and IoTs, causes immense difficulty. Where GCs are not equipped with the knowledge or expertise to advise students and parents on these matters, it is necessary to reach out to HEIs to source answers and solutions. In effect, whilst HEIs provide information on admissions policy, course structure, reasonable accommodations, and student supports, parents and GCs must consult multiple websites each of whom have a unique structure and method of populating content. Thus, this is a time-consuming occupation requiring a sophisticated knowledge of terminology and practices, and as a consequence, personal interaction with HEI personnel is perceived to be the only method of receiving accurate guidance. This is exemplified in the DARE application process, for which not only is there a lack of clarity of information in printed materials, but the procedure requires a ‘mix’ of online and paper application, and a ‘mix’ of parent, school and medical input. Consequently, attending a DARE clinic and speaking to an ‘expert’ are perceived to be the only way of obtaining reliable information.

7.1.4 What are the enablers / barriers to transition identified by students with disabilities, their parents and practitioners?

The financial resources of families represent a significant enabler / barrier in terms of the cost of sourcing DARE documentation, additional tuition, and professional support services, as a function of absence from school or ill health. This is noted in the profile of applicants to the DARE scheme, who are five times more likely to attend fee-paying or “grinds schools”, and to submit documentation that satisfies DARE eligibility criteria, thus the scheme is unintentionally favouring applicants with greater financial resources. Across the lifespan of the DARE scheme, whilst increases in applications are noted, the number of HE admissions

under this route has not risen by a similar rate, suggesting that DARE has become and inherently competitive route. Consequently, an emerging barrier to transition is situated within the very construct that set out to widen access and participation for student with disabilities.

Collating transition guidance principally involves consulting information from the Internet, travel to and from transition events such as DARE clinics and Better Options, and seeking out advice from GCs and HEIs. Application and admissions processes and paperwork are complex, particularly as there are separate processes within different institutions that must be completed simultaneously. This results in a hierarchy of dependence where students and parents rely upon the the knowledge and experience of GCs, who need the specialist knowledge and experience of HEIs and access schemes. Disseminating this information directly to students and by-passing parents, inadvertently creates a barrier to transition. By extension, the under-resourcing of guidance counselling in schools, is a significant barrier to transition.

The emotional and personal resources required to support young people with disabilities are significant in terms of the time, knowledge and skills associated with seeking diagnoses, interventions, school supports, and accommodations in State examinations. Parents are the key providers of support to young people with disabilities, and students who do not have access to skilled and confident supporters, experience a distinct disadvantage.

Post-entry students identified parents as the key supporter of transition, and acknowledged the benefits of positive encouragement and practical assistance, including accessing and completing application documents. Therefore, access to knowledgeable and well-resourced family support is an enabler of transition to HE.

Lack of awareness of the nature and impact of disabilities within the post-primary environment, in tandem with low expectations for future outcomes, is a reoccurring feature within the data. Students who are considered to be “not able” for continuing education, are less likely to receive the same level of input as their peers, resulting in poor self-confidence, low self-esteem and a fragmented disability identity. This transmutes into a reluctance to disclose on entry to HE, where students see this transition as an opportunity for a “fresh start”, and to move away from the negative experiences of post-primary school. This approach is only

successful where students have developed coping strategies, resilience and support networks. Consequently, the acquisition of self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy skills are enablers of successful transitions to HE. The lack of attention to building self-belief, encouraging aspirations, understanding and managing difference, and learning to be independent, is a critical barrier that needs to be addressed early in the senior cycle of education.

Transition also encompasses early post-entry experiences, and listening to the student voice can inform crucial practices at the pre-entry stage. Changes in the social infrastructure between school and college, from living within the family unit to living independently, and coping with greater fluidity in social relationships, need to be addressed prior to transition. These factors were identified frequently in the data from post-entry students, and emphasise the need for this aspect to be incorporated into preparation for transition at post-primary level, as an enabler of successful transitions to HE.

7.1.5 Is there a need for dedicated, transition-specific resources, for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland?

Across the research period, an increase of 200% in web visitors from 60 countries indicates a growing need for transition-focused support. Arguably, as the web repository was hosted by and focused on information, advice and guidance within one HEI, this represents only a fraction of potential interest across Ireland. Research participants spanned the entire senior cycle of education from TY to post-Leaving Certificate, suggesting a broad pool of interest in exploring transition choices and pathways. This was recognised by parents as an integral part of making informed choices for which an individual transition plan was essential.

Significant interest in the transition planning tool was registered from post-primary practitioners, disability support networks, State departments such as the HSE, and post-LC students / practitioners. Currently there are no transition planning frameworks for students with disabilities similar to those used in the UK or the USA, therefore findings suggest a need for a transition planning tool for use by families and agencies supporting students with disabilities in Ireland. This is particularly the case for young people with AS/ASD as indicated by the high frequency of download requests for this cohort.

Experiential opportunities are a vital part of transition planning. Whilst there are a wide range of access programmes and activities targeting disadvantaged young people in post-primary schools, for example the Take Five programme, a similar strategy is required for students with disabilities. Experiencing the HE environment, feeling empowered to ask questions about courses, supports and physical access, is an essential part of developing self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy. Students experienced increased confidence and motivation for progression to HE, principally as a function of engaging with student ambassadors. Forging a link between post-primary and third level students, using the power of ‘I can and I will’ role models, is a transition strategy that is currently not explored in Ireland.

Across the data, parents and practitioners reiterated that State departments and HEIs have a responsibility to provide and disseminate transition information to the public. There are two State-owned web vehicles with the potential for development: the HEA maintains www.transition.ie a holding area for conference papers and information bulletins relating to changes in the Leaving Certificate and admissions procedures, and <http://www.yourfuture.ie> which is currently unpopulated. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop both of these resources which are currently under-utilised.

This concludes discussion of the relationship between research questions extracted from the hypotheses, and the principal findings of the research programme. The following section presents the empirical, practical and theoretical implications that can be explicated from this discussion.

7.2. Empirical, Practical and Theoretical Implications

This research provided a framework for the exploration of the existence of transition planning mechanisms and their effectiveness. The current findings add to a growing body of literature on transition from post-primary settings in Ireland, which have established that there is a critical need for formal post-primary to HE transition planning processes, for all students with disabilities.

7.2.1 Empirical Implications

This research has added to the literature by confirming the inherent value of providing a central repository of transition resources expressly designed and created for students with disabilities within an Irish context. Furthermore, findings from this research have contributed new knowledge through the creation and implementation

of web-based transition-specific resources for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland, which were accessed on a global scale and in significant numbers. Importantly, transition stakeholders valued the voices and viewpoints of current undergraduate students with disabilities, and HE staff. Critical enablers and barriers to transition were identified as the development of self-awareness, self-determination, self-advocacy and independence, notably recognized by undergraduate students in post-entry reflections on the transition experience.

Development of these skills is addressed in the Transition Planning Tool, which was accessed by students, parents and practitioners across TY and senior cycle years, and significantly, in connection to post-Leaving Certificate contexts and students with AS/ASD. The dearth of IEP provision for students with high needs coupled with an inadequacy of continuous review of the IEP in the light of transitional events, emphasizes the need for a transition planning resource that is equally available to all post-primary students with disabilities.

Each year brings a new cohort of students and parents to the transition process, and there is a lack of recognition from HEIs and practitioners that they do not share familiarity with and historical knowledge of access schemes and application processes. The poor response from practitioners in every aspect of this research programme evidences significant failures in engagement between post-primary schools and HEIs. A greater effort is required by HEIs to connect with schools on an individual level, but it was also noted that dysfunctional channels of communication within schools, sometimes means that information bypasses key stakeholders. Consequently, parents source much of their information from interactions with HE staff in connection with the DARE scheme.

Finally, awareness and understanding in schools and amongst practitioners of the unique difficulties and stresses experienced by students with disabilities, fundamentally affects transitional aspirations and potential possibilities. Also significantly, awareness and attitudes impact on the self-perception, self-identity, confidence and mental health of students, representing an additional stressor for parents and families.

7.2.2 Practical Implications

Findings are consistent with prior research which draw attention to the need for HEIs to make greater efforts to clarify “point of entry” tasks and pre-identify

students who may find these challenging, and to provide assistance through a mentoring or peer partnership scheme. Future pre-entry work must focus on providing accurate and in-depth knowledge about HE access schemes and support systems. There is a need to revise the focus of disability-related events such as Better Options to encompass key aspects of the first year experience, course specific requirements and expectations, advice on reasonable accommodations, and viewpoints of disabled students that address the reality of the HE experience. There are opportunities for HEIs to smooth the transitional arc and bridge the gaps, both real and perceived, between schools and HEIs through initiatives such as the National College Awareness Week scheme, and to embed a disability focus within HEI access-link schools.

Locating disability-specific information is not always an intrinsic part of the work of practitioners engaged in supporting the transitions of young adults with disabilities, and is exacerbated by lack of awareness of the unique circumstances of disability, attitudes and expectations. Therefore, person-centred transition planning is required that focuses on developing self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy, which will equip students with the skills to make good choices, have the confidence to disclose, and to become confident young adults who can participate fully in all aspects of student life in HE.

7.2.3 Theoretical Implications

A bioecological framework was adopted for this research programme (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1979, 1989; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and re-worked from the perspective of disability and educational transitions in Ireland for students with disabilities. Additionally, the perspective of Children's Geographies (e.g. Jeffrey, 2010; Pyer et al., 2010; Speraw, 2009; Valentine, 2003) was incorporated to capture the impact of individual experiences within transition journeys. This research programme has demonstrated that these are complementary approaches for documenting the interplay between personal contexts and extrinsic systems, and can foster an understanding of the complex relationship between agents and agencies of change.

The research examined a specific instance in the Chronosystem of the individual - the transition from school to HE, and the proximal processes connected with this transition. Whilst there are limitations in the generalizability of findings

given the size of the sample populations, they provide examples of competing variables within nested systems which are changeable and unpredictable. These include the unique assets and liabilities of students, parents, families and schools, and adoption of national policies that are based on a theoretical notion of widening participation. This is notable in two areas: (a) setting targets and outcomes for participation rates that have no scientific basis other than to “double the numbers”, and (b) implementation of a supplementary admissions scheme that is based on a medical model, and which advantages applicants from advantaged backgrounds.

Building on the empirical, practical and theoretical implications of this research programme, the following section sets out recommendations for future policy and practice that could impact on management of transition planning for students with disabilities, their parents or carers, and educational practitioners who support them in this journey.

7.3 Recommendations for Future Policy and Practice

The findings of this research programme can be summarized in five distinct recommendations. These findings are of interest to policy makers, practitioners in post-primary and tertiary education, parents and students.

7.3.1 Improving Communication between Stakeholders

In 2008, the HEA made a commitment to streamlining information and resource for applicants to HE. In the interim, the student section of the HEA website has disappeared and the web domain www.yourfuture.ie is still unpopulated. As a matter of urgency, there is a requirement for a national repository for transition information and guidance that can be accessed freely by students with disabilities, parents and practitioners. This should encompass all post-secondary pathways and opportunities including PLC options, FE and HE and thus will dispense with the need for stakeholders to transverse multiple information providers. It should include first-hand advice from students as positive role models and contributions from Disability Services and academic staff in FE/HE providers. Additionally, it should map the post-secondary options and choices within the National Qualifications Framework in a way that makes clear the connections between different pathways

The HEA has repeatedly identified action plans for collaboration between HEIs to provide dedicated outreach to schools, which takes into account the demographics of the local community and the concomitant challenges associated

with particular environments. Initiatives such as National College Awareness Week in tandem with disability specific events such as Better Options are useful platforms for embedding such activities. Furthermore, it is clear that despite the plethora of print and on-line information, students, parents and practitioners want and need personal interaction with HEIs and support providers. This is a logistical challenge given the number of post-primary schools juxtaposed with the number of HE providers, therefore it makes sense to maximise opportunities for first-hand information in the most efficient means possible. An intra-HEI Student Ambassador Programme would provide positive role models for students with disabilities, encouraging aspirations and promoting a “can do” attitude. Furthermore, such altruism needs to be encouraged as part of developing self-aware, self-determined and self-advocating young adults.

7.3.2 Person-centred Transition Planning

Whilst transition planning should be built into the IEP and revisited on a regular basis, it should equally be provided to all students with SEN/disabilities. In the USA, person-centred transition assessment and planning models for students with disabilities are statutory and highly structured, and involve collaboration between the student and a transition partner. The Transition Planning Tool created for this research programme acknowledges fundamental elements of such models relating to development of personal skills, and draws together the key tasks associated with post-primary transitions specific to Ireland. It is a flexible tool which can easily be adapted to individual needs and contexts, and would be ideally suited for use as a highly-structured, modular portfolio that spans the senior cycle years. It is recommended that this be further developed and embedded in the TY programme and as an aspect of the IEP, for collaborative use between students, parents and teachers. Furthermore, it should be made widely available to all students and parents through a national transition planning repository.

7.3.3 Improving Knowledge, Understanding and Awareness in Schools

Findings pointed a lack of awareness in post-primary schools associated with notions of disability at a conceptual and individual level, which contaminate attitudes and expectations. The recent increase in provision of resource teachers to work at an individual level with students with SEN and disabilities, is an ideal opportunity to address this lack of awareness, and to foster new understandings to support

successful transitions. The reluctance of students, parents and practitioners to engage in online forums indicates a lack of confidence in disclosing and discussing disability related worries and concerns. Currently, the PDST provides resources for JC and LC subjects, TY, Literacy and Numeracy, SSE, ICT and Anti-Bullying. Therefore, it is recommended that, as a matter of urgency, similar provision is made through the PDST website, associates and local facilitators, for disability awareness training to all school staff.

Further research will provide an opportunity to investigate and determine the efficacy and sustainability of each of these recommendations, and is discussed in the following section.

7.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The Pathways to Trinity website and Transition Planning Tool continue to have a web presence and are fully available to the public. Although an end date for data collection was set, the surveys have remained open and the number of participants continues to grow. There are possibilities to extend this research programme as a longitudinal study by adapting these instruments and embedding them within a centralized transition planning repository that is not HEI specific. The programme would also benefit from the addition of data collection that captures the viewpoints of HEIs and policy makers. Moreover, the parameters of Google Analytics have been extended since the beginning of this research programme, and addition of modified code to web pages would permit more detailed analysis of visitor demographics such as age, gender and interests.

There is an increasing push towards use of online and interactive tools to create accessible and portable e-portfolios that capture strengths and challenges, and the acquisition of hard and soft skills. There are possibilities to engage these solutions to create Individual Transition Plans for every disabled student that fulfil the same function as an IEP. These represent continuously evolving documents that are transferable to post-secondary settings. However, robust research is required to determine uptake, retention and abandonment rates for such resources, before significant financial commitment is made by State agencies and schools. A focused study investigating the efficacy of the Transition Planning Tool should be undertaken with students attending mainstream and special education settings, their

parents, and practitioners engaged in supporting those students and families, to track transition journeys from junior cycle (TY) to post-transition outcomes.

Having set out useful pathways for future exploration and monitoring of enablers and barriers to transition for disabled students and their families, this final section sets out researcher observations collated over the period of this research programme.

7.5 Reflexive Analysis

This research programme was conducted within the HEI where I have worked as a Disability Officer since 2007. My role involves liaising with prospective students, parents and practitioners to provide DARE and HEI information, and individual consultations which touch upon physical and curriculum access concerns. I manage the supports of students with disabilities across all years of HE, which hinge upon an individual needs assessment, an organic document which may include input from parents or external professionals. As such, I have many professional associations with the research population and work from an insider perspective. The advantages of insider viewpoints encompass knowledge of the research context and research population, facilitating a more meaningful engagement with the material. It was imperative, therefore, to be completely transparent with participants about my professional role, to provide reassurance about confidentiality, and to emphasise my perspective as an advocate for transformative research. Whilst I did not “know” participants in Study One or Study Three, there was a potential relationship with participants in Study Two, and consequently every effort was made to ensure that I did not engage in data collection with students with whom I was working.

The disadvantages of an insider viewpoint include the dangers of subjectivity and bias. Based on my experiences of supporting students with disabilities and SEN over the last thirty years, I was conscious of the relationship between “knowing what I know” and determining the answers to the research questions. I acknowledged this possibility from the beginning of the research programme, and regular supervision was useful in taking a step back from the findings and analysis, to discuss outcomes from a purely objective perspective. Other measures taken to ensure objectivity within the research framework were: (a) maintaining a research journal, (b) collating

an audit trail of communication and data collection processes, (c) debriefing and discussion with colleagues, and (d) ensuring a triangulation of the data.

There were two aspects of this research journey in particular that I would pinpoint as representing an enabler / barrier. The most prominent of these was inadequate or lack of communication from post-primary schools and practitioners. I was dismayed by the failure to respond to invitations to use transition resources, participate in surveys, engage in workshops, or indeed participate any form of communication. Secondly, it became clear that it is not necessarily the medium, design or delivery of information that constitutes a barrier. There is a wealth of knowledge bases available to transition stakeholders, but lack of adequate signposting means some travellers are misdirected down pathways that are unsuitable and irrelevant. Seemingly, parents and practitioners generally mistrust, misread, misunderstand or lack confidence in materials that explain choices, options and processes. Essentially, people prefer talking to people.

Finally, shortly after I began this research programme, my youngest daughter acquired a life-changing visual impairment. It became clearer to me that there are many more factors at play than policies, regulations, requirements and entitlements. There are mountains to climb and terrains to traverse that can be treacherous and unforgiving. The decision to take particular routes and pathways are based on trusting the advice and expertise of other people; the journey to the top of the mountain requires considerable personal resources.

7.6 Chapter Conclusion

Returning to the hypothesis and questions posed at the beginning of this research programme, it is now possible to state that: (a) students with disabilities encounter complex transitions from post-primary settings to HE, which are determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors that function as enablers or barriers, and (b) a dedicated, targeted transition planning strategy built on a framework that considers the circumstances, experiences, competencies, opinions and needs of stakeholders, can promote, encourage and assist disabled students in their transition journey.

Findings confirm that availability and access to information, support and guidance is disparate, and is a function of the quality of resources available to schools and parents. They contribute to what is currently known about transition

expectations and opportunities by providing evidence that there is an appetite for centralized transition resources that are freely available in a structured and transparent format. Furthermore, they challenge the commitment within national policy to provide: (a) person-centred transition planning for students with disabilities, and (b) a centralized repository of resources to lend clarity and transparency to transition tasks, and to ensure equity of access to HE.

A dearth of literature was identified at the commencement of this research programme in 2010, associated with the concept of transition for post-primary students with disabilities in Ireland. Specifically, the use of the term “transition” was infrequently used and only in relation to: (a) the transition from primary to post-primary education, and (b) in reference to Transition Year. Growing concerns were expressed internationally and nationally about the preparedness of young people for entry to FE, HE and employment. By November 2011, the HEA had identified transition from post-primary settings as in need of critical review. In 2013, NCSE-commissioned research examined the transition experiences of students with SEN, two publications from the DES investigated school completers and early leavers from post-primary schools were published, and significant literatures have emerged that examine post-primary transitions and destinations.

This thesis has presented a holistic view of the transition experiences of post-primary students with disabilities, parents or carers, and other stakeholders in the transition process including educational practitioners. This research has taken a step in the direction of justifying that the inclusion of dedicated post-secondary transition planning is crucial for students with disabilities in post-primary education. In conclusion, it has established that provision of equal access to transition planning supports and resources during the senior cycle of education, will contribute towards increased participation rates in HE. This is particularly the case for students who present with the double disadvantage of disability and poor socio-economic background, for whom current policy and practices represent a significant barrier to post-secondary options.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Study One

Appendix A1 Student Survey

My name is Alison Doyle and I am a Disability Officer in Trinity College. I am conducting a study into the experiences of secondary students with a disability as they move from school to college.

This study is important for other students like you who hope to move to college next year, and the year after, and so on.....

There are only 10 questions and it should take you no longer than 5 minutes.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Alison Doyle, Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin, alison.doyle@tcd.ie

Hello and thank you.

Why is this study being done?

The aim of the study is:

1. To find out what disabled students think about the services / information available to help with applying to college.
2. To understand what strategies schools and colleges need to adopt to improve the transition from school to college.

Who is being invited to participate?

Second level students over 16 years of age who have a disability, their parents, resource teachers and guidance counsellors, and practitioners such as psychologist and consultants.

What does the study involve?

If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to complete this online questionnaire. There are 10 questions and it will take about 5 minutes. I can arrange for a paper based version to be sent to you or you may complete the questionnaire over the phone if you would prefer.

Once you have completed this survey, if you are willing, you may be invited to an interview. The interview will take about 30 minutes and will be arranged at a time/ place to suit you. The purpose of this second stage is to gain a more detailed understanding about any difficulties you have or opinions you expressed.

I will also be collecting some of the comments from the discussion forum to find out what kinds of things are important to students with disabilities.

How will my information be used?

This study and its methods have been approved by an Ethics Committee. Only I will be able to see your survey answers, and any results that are published will be anonymized, so no-one will be able to identify you. At the end of the study we will send you a report on the results.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please click 'next' to continue the survey.

About this survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the website research.

I am working to a Code of Ethics which guarantees the anonymity of individuals participating and the safeguarding of data. A copy of this Code of Ethics is available at the end of this survey.

We may also be interested in using the results of this research in other projects, and the same ethical principles will apply.

In order for you to participate in this research we need your consent on the form below.

Question 1. Consent to participate

- I have been fully informed as to the nature of the research.
- I understand my role in this research.
- I understand that no names (individual or school) will be used in the final report.
- I understand that the findings may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences.
- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this research project at any time without adverse consequences.

Consent form

- Yes
- No

About you

Question 2. What type of school do you attend?

- Fee paying
- Non fee paying
- Disadvantaged / DEIS
- Don't know

Question 3. Which school year are you in at the moment?

- TY
- 5th
- 6th

Question 4. Please indicate the disability categories that apply to you (you may select more than on).

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Medical condition
- Specific Learning Difficulty (Dyslexia / Dyscalculia)

Transition data

Question 5. Who has provided you with advice about going to college?

Advice type: College advice, Disability advice, Being a student with a disability in college

- DARE website / clinic /open day,
- SENO,
- Guidance Counsellor,
- Resource teacher
- College website,
- Principal,
- Class / form teacher,
- Parents,
- College Disability Service,
- Friends,
- Nobody,
- Other (please specify)

Question 6. What kind of help have you been given and how useful was it?

Advice quality: Excellent, Very good, Good, Fairly good, Poor, None

- Knowing your strengths and challenges,
- Choosing the right subjects for LC,
- Choosing the right college course,
- Choosing the right college,
- Getting support / help in college,
- Applying to CAO,
- Applying to DARE,

- Applying for language waiver,
- Living skills,
- Finding accommodation,
- Social skills,
- Being independent.
- Comment

Question 7. Who helped you with these tasks? You may choose more than one answer.

Parents, Teacher, Guidance counsellor, Friend, Nobody, Other (please specify).

- Knowing your strengths and challenges,
- Choosing the right subjects for LC,
- Choosing the right college course,
- Choosing the right college,
- Getting support / help in college,
- Applying to CAO,
- Applying to DARE,
- Applying for language waiver,
- Living skills,
- Finding accommodation,
- Social skills,
- Being independent.

Question 8. A Transition Assessment and Planning Toolkit would help you with these things from TY onwards. Do you think this would be useful?

- Yes,
- No,
- Don't know,
- Not sure,
- Comment.

Question 9. What things worry / concern you about going to college? You can choose more than one answer.

- Choosing the right course
- Living with other people I don't know
- Choosing the right college
- Finding a job after college
- Making friends
- Managing money
- Finding somewhere to live
- Getting supports in college
- Telling lecturers about my disability
- Studying on my own
- Writing essays
- Passing exams
- Finding a part time job
- Telling other students about my disability

- Living on my own
- Other (please specify)

Thank you for completing this survey.

Question 10. Invitation to participate in further research.

If you would be willing to participate in a focus group or short interview, please provide your email address below.

- I would like to take part in a discussion about moving from school to college and / or to be interviewed about my experiences.
- I understand that I will not be identified in any research report. My email address is:

This Code of Ethics is informed by the principles established in the following documents:

- Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) issued by the British Educational Research Association
- Research with children with disabilities: A Checklist for Good Practice (2005) issued by the National Disability Authority
- Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) issued by the British Psychological Society
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Code of Ethics

14. The researcher asserts the right to participate in any publication of the research findings in academic journals or other media, which may ensue from the research.
15. This ethical code will be continually reviewed in order to take full account of any changes in procedure or legislation which may impact upon the conduct of the study.

Appendix A2 Parent Survey

My name is Alison Doyle and I am a Disability Officer in Trinity College. I am conducting a study into the experiences of secondary students with a disability as they move from school to college.

This study is important for other students like you who hope to move to college next year, and the year after, and so on.....

There are only 10 questions and it should take you no longer than 5 minutes.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Alison Doyle, Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin, alison.doyle@tcd.ie

Introduction.

Why is this study being done?

The aim of the study is:

1. To find out what disabled students think about the services / information available to help with applying to college.
2. To understand what strategies schools and colleges need to adopt to improve the transition from school to college.

Who is being invited to participate?

Second level students over 16 years of age who have a disability, their parents, resource teachers and guidance counsellors, and practitioners such as psychologist and consultants.

What does the study involve?

If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to complete this online questionnaire. There are 10 questions and it will take about 5 minutes. I can arrange for a paper based version to be sent to you or you may complete the questionnaire over the phone if you would prefer.

Once you have completed this survey, if you are willing, you may be invited to an interview. The interview will take about 30 minutes and will be arranged at a time/ place to suit you. The purpose of this second stage is to gain a more detailed understanding about any difficulties you have or opinions you expressed.

I will also be collecting some of the comments from the discussion forum to find out what kinds of things are important to students with disabilities.

How will my information be used?

This study and its methods have been approved by an Ethics Committee. Only I will be able to see your survey answers, and any results that are published will be

anonymized, so no-one will be able to identify you. At the end of the study we will send you a report on the results.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please click 'next' to continue the survey.

About this survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the website research.

I am working to a Code of Ethics which guarantees the anonymity of individuals participating and the safeguarding of data. A copy of this Code of Ethics is available at the end of this survey.

We may also be interested in using the results of this research in other projects, and the same ethical principles will apply.

In order for you to participate in this research we need your consent on the form below.

- I have been fully informed as to the nature of the research.
- I understand my role in this research.
- I understand that no names (individual or school) will be used in the final report.
- I understand that the findings may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences.
- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this research project at any time without adverse consequences.

Consent form

Question 1

- Yes
- No

About you

Question 2. What type of school does your son or daughter attend?

- Fee paying
- Non fee paying
- Disadvantaged / DEIS

Question 3. Which school year are they in at the moment?

- TY

- 5th
- 6th

Question 4. Please indicate the disability categories that apply to your son or daughter (you may select more than on).

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Medical condition
- Specific Learning Difficulty (Dyslexia / Dyscalculia)

Transition data

Question 5. Who has provided you with advice about going to college?

Advice type: College advice, Disability advice, Being a student with a disability in college.

- DARE website / clinic /open day,
- SENO,
- Guidance Counsellor,
- Resource teacher
- College website,
- Principal,
- Class / form teacher,
- Parents,
- College Disability Service,
- Friends,
- Nobody,
- Other (please specify)

Question 6. If your child has an IEP (Individual Education Plan) how often have you met with the following people to talk about their needs with regard to the transition process?

Frequency: Frequently Often Fairly Often Rarely Never

- SENO,
- Guidance Counsellor,
- Resource teacher
- Principal,
- Other
- Comment

Question 7. Describe the quality of advice you been given and how useful was it?
Advice quality: Excellent, Very good, Good, Fairly good, Poor, None

- Identifying strengths and challenges,
- Choosing the right subjects for LC,
- Choosing the right college course,
- Choosing the right college,
- Getting support / help in college,
- Applying to CAO,
- Applying to DARE,
- Applying for language waiver,

Question 8. A Transition Assessment and Planning Toolkit would help you with these things from TY onwards. Do you think this would be useful?

- Yes,
- No,
- Don't know,
- Not sure,
- Comment.

Question 9. What do you consider to be the most important factors for successful transition from school to college for students with disabilities?

Comment box

Question 10. What do you consider to be barriers to successful transition from school to college for students with disabilities?

Comment box

Thank you for completing this survey.

Invitation to participate in further research.

If you would be willing to participate in a focus group or short interview, please provide your email address below.

- I would like to take part in a discussion about moving from school to college and / or to be interviewed about my experiences.
- I understand that I will not be identified in any research report. My email address is:

This Code of Ethics is informed by the principles established in the following documents:

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- Research with children with disabilities: A Checklist for Good Practice (2005) issued by the National Disability Authority
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13. The researcher is obliged to communicate the findings of their research to other members of the educational research community through research seminars, conference presentation and proceedings and publication taking account of all issues of confidentiality and protection of research participants.

Code of Ethics

14. The researcher asserts the right to participate in any publication of the research findings in academic journals or other media, which may ensue from the research.

15. This ethical code will be continually reviewed in order to take full account of any changes in procedure or legislation which may impact upon the conduct of the study.

Appendix A3 Practitioner Survey

Dear Colleagues

My name is Alison Doyle and I am a Disability Officer in Trinity College. I am conducting a study into the experiences of secondary students with a disability as they move from school to college.

This study is important for other students like you who hope to move to college next year, and the year after, and so on.....

There are only 10 questions and it should take you no longer than 5 minutes.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Alison Doyle, Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin, alison.doyle@tcd.ie

Introduction

Why is this study being done?

The aim of the study is:

1. To find out what disabled students think about the services / information available to help with applying to college.
2. To understand what strategies schools and colleges need to adopt to improve the transition from school to college.

Who is being invited to participate?

Second level students over 16 years of age who have a disability, their parents, resource teachers and guidance counsellors, and practitioners such as psychologist and consultants.

What does the study involve?

If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to complete this online questionnaire. There are 10 questions and it will take about 5 minutes. I can arrange for a paper based version to be sent to you or you may complete the questionnaire over the phone if you would prefer.

Once you have completed this survey, if you are willing, you may be invited to an interview. The interview will take about 30 minutes and will be arranged at a time/ place to suit you. The purpose of this second stage is to gain a more detailed understanding about any difficulties you have or opinions you expressed.

I will also be collecting some of the comments from the discussion forum to find out what kinds of things are important to students with disabilities.

How will my information be used?

This study and its methods have been approved by an Ethics Committee. Only I will be able to see your survey answers, and any results that are published will be anonymized, so no-one will be able to identify you. At the end of the study we will send you a report on the results.

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons.

If you are willing to participate in the study, please click 'next' to continue the survey.

About this survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the website research.

I am working to a Code of Ethics which guarantees the anonymity of individuals participating and the safeguarding of data. A copy of this Code of Ethics is available at the end of this survey.

We may also be interested in using the results of this research in other projects, and the same ethical principles will apply.

In order for you to participate in this research we need your consent on the form below.

- I have been fully informed as to the nature of the research.
- I understand my role in this research.
- I understand that no names (individual or school) will be used in the final report.
- I understand that the findings may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences.
- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this research project at any time without adverse consequences.

Consent form

Question 1.

- Yes
- No

About you

Question 2. Gender

- Male
- Female

Question 3. Years of professional experience

None, 1 – 5, 5 – 10, 10 – 15, 15 – 20, 20+

- Education
- Special education

Question 4. In which of the following are you formally qualified?

Qualifications: Certificate Diploma Degree Masters Doctorate

Area:

- Education
- Psychology
- Assessment / psychometrics
- Special needs
- Career Guidance
- Other (please specify)

Transition data

Question 5. Have you provided disability specific transition support / guidance to students in the following groups (you may select more than one.)

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Medical condition
- Specific Learning Difficulty (Dyslexia / Dyscalculia)

Question 6. Roughly on average how many students with disabilities have you supported in any one academic year?

Frequency: 1 – 5, 5 – 10, 10 – 15, 15+, n/a

Question 7. What is your experience of resources / information on applying and transitioning to college for disabled students?

Advice quality: Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Inadequate

- DARE website
- DARE clinic
- HEA website
- TY activities
- College prospectus
- CAO website
- Comment

Question 8. In your experience, what are the main difficulties faced by schools in supporting disabled students through the transition process?

Comment box

Question 9. What do you consider to be the most important factors for successful transition from school to college for students with disabilities?

Comment box

Question 10. What do you consider to be barriers to successful transition from school to college for students with disabilities?

Comment box

Thank you for completing this survey.

Invitation to participate in further research.

If you would be willing to participate in a focus group or short interview, please provide your email address below.

- I would like to take part in a discussion about moving from school to college and / or to be interviewed about my experiences.
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Appendix A4: Invitation to Participate

Hello

I would like to introduce you to a research project that I am undertaking as the basis of a doctoral thesis, and to ask if you would be willing to participate in this research.

Introduction.

The period of transition from secondary to third level can be complex and highly stressful. Many of the objectives connected with transition should ideally begin in Transition Year and continue throughout the senior cycle of education. However more often than not the activities, tasks and strategies required for successful application to college take place during the Leaving Certificate year. This can make life very stressful for students and their parents.

For students with disabilities, this experience has additional challenges with regard to identifying access routes, supports and information specific to their needs. This can have a significant effect on successful application to and participation at college. The National Access Plan has set a number of targets relating to participation rates for people with disabilities in Higher Education, and plan to double the numbers of people with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in HE by 2013. Despite the introduction of the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme, these groups remain under-represented.

What am I researching?

In 2005 the National Disability Authority recommended that:

* Careful and systematic transition planning is crucial between educational settings and levels – considerations include establishing links between the sending and receiving settings, facilitating access to the new environment, and ensuring participation in the new environment.

* Transition planning is especially important for post-school outcomes, and as such transition planning should be established at least by the end of compulsory school age, and preferably sooner.

The objective is to identify issues related to transition for students with disabilities in order to inform future practices within second and third level education providers. By identifying the main issues and examining the frequency of co-occurring experiences it may be determined whether such experiences are generalisable to all students with disabilities. The principal aims therefore are:

1. To investigate personal perceptions of the impact of disability during second level education by examining personal statements submitted to DARE.
2. To investigate the transition experiences of students with disabilities at the conclusion of their first year of undergraduate education, through a thematic analysis of in depth interviews.

3. To document access to initiatives, advice, support and guidance associated with the transition experience from the perspective of stakeholders, via a web based survey and discussion forum.
4. To examine individual perspectives of disability and to determine how these affect academic aspiration and achievement.
5. To use a methodology that ensures that students with a disability are provided with a voice that contributes to an understanding of difficulties in transitioning from second to third level education.

Key research questions include:

- Are transition initiatives / practices working for students with disabilities?
- Is there a need for a dedicated 'transition' web site?
- Is there a need for a dedicated transition assessment and planning tool?
- Is there equity of access between disability groups?
- What lessons can be learned from listening to the student voice?
- What difference does the DARE scheme make?

As you can see, this is an important piece of research and one that has real potential to change approaches to the transition process.

I would like to ask for your help in the research.

How.

I will be inviting second level students with disabilities who are applying to college, parents and carers, community groups and other stakeholders in the transition process, to complete an online survey. This survey will explore your experiences of exploring options at third level and completing your college application. In addition, you are invited to participate in the discussion forum.

How much time will it involve?

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes.

Ethics.

Your input is absolutely vital to this research project. Above all, I hope that you will see this as an opportunity to 'tell it as it is'. To ensure that everything that I do is ethical, there are specific ethical guidelines that govern this research. A copy of the Code of Ethics is available as a separate document.

What do I do now?

If you would like to take part in this research, then please complete the surveys on the welcome page. If you would like to participate in interviews or focus groups, please contact me at pathways@tcd.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read through this.

Alison Doyle
School of Education
Trinity College Dublin

Appendix A5 Code of Ethics

This Code of Ethics is informed by the principles established in the following documents:

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 - Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) issued by the British Psychological Society
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15. This ethical code will be continually reviewed in order to take full account of any changes in procedure or legislation which may impact upon the conduct of the study.

Appendix A6 Introduction to Pathways

-----Original Message-----

From: Alison Doyle

Sent: 04 April 2011 14:33

To: Pathways to Trinity

Subject: Transition website for second level pupils with disabilities

Hello

For students with disabilities pre-entry activities are a key factor in successfully gaining a place in college.

We believe that a web-based strategy to assist second level students, parents and other stakeholders with transition planning is critical as it provides:

- * Pre-entry contact between service providers in College, incoming students, parents and schools.
- * Positive role models in the form of student 'stories' and realistic advice on specific courses and expectations.
- * Advice and guidance to ensure successful student progress through the first year of college.

The Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin would like to invite you to visit a new website for Leaving Certificate and post-Leaving Certificate students:

www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

We have gathered pre-entry information to assist with admissions, access routes, course choices, advice from students and lecturers, and college supports relevant to students with a disability. Whilst some of the information is relevant to Trinity, much of the advice is generic to any student applying to any college.

We are also making our online academic resources available for help with study skills and exam revision, and have provided some useful suggestions for assistive technology solutions. Visitors are also invited to participate in the discussion forum at <http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com>

We would welcome any comments or suggestions for additions to the website.

Best regards
Alison Doyle,
Disability Officer,
Trinity College Dublin
pathways@tcd.ie

11th April 2011

Dear Guidance Counsellor,

The Disability Service in TCD would like to draw your attention to the pathways-to-trinity website for secondary school students with disabilities.

www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

The site has been set up to support second level students with disabilities in their transition to higher education. It provides assistance to applicants on topics such as admissions, course choices, and college supports. It also contains advice from current students and lecturing staff.

We hope that the information will be a source of guidance for anyone interested in the successful transition from secondary school to 3rd level education. We ask that you keep it in mind when advising students with disabilities. Students can avail of our academic resources to help with their Leaving Certificate studies and exam revision and have a look at our assistive technology solutions.

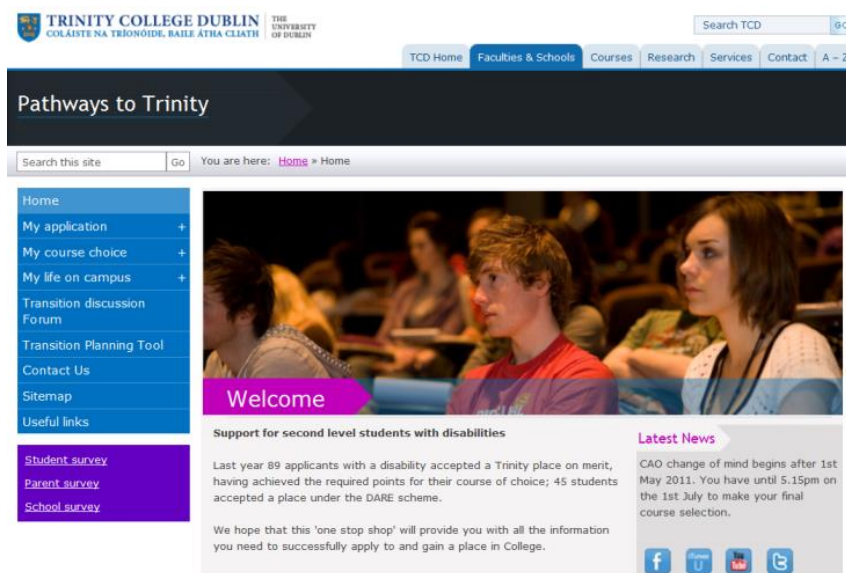
I also enclose a copy of the Disability Service 10th anniversary booklet which was launched in 2010. It documents the inspirational stories of students and recent graduates with disabilities who have achieved academic success at third level. It may prove a useful addition to your school library and as a source of referral for when you are working with students with disabilities in your school. Trinity College now has the highest number of students with disabilities (over 800) of all third level colleges in Ireland. Additional copies of this booklet are available upon request.

Alison Doyle
Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin
pathways@tcd.ie

17th October 2011

Dear Resource Teacher

The Disability Service in TCD would like to draw your attention to a website for secondary school students with disabilities.



www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

The site has been set up to support second level students with disabilities in their transition to higher education. It is not Trinity specific as most of the advice and information is generic to any college application. It provides assistance to applicants on topics such as admissions, course choices, and college supports. It also contains advice from current students and lecturing staff.

We hope that the information will be a source of guidance for anyone interested in the successful transition from secondary school to 3rd level education. We ask that you keep it in mind when advising students with disabilities. Students can avail of our academic resources to help with their Leaving Certificate studies and exam revision and have a look at our assistive technology solutions. We provide some examples overleaf. Please do contact me if you have any questions.

Alison Doyle
Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin
pathways@tcd.ie

Appendix A7 Invitation to Interview

-----Original Message-----

From: Alison Doyle
Sent: 11 November 2011 16:10
Subject: Pathways web survey

Dear student

You very kindly completed the Pathways survey on our website, and indicated that you would be willing to participate in an interview about your transition experiences. If you are still interested in doing so could you let me know whether you would prefer to do this over the web (chat room), by email, by phone, or in person in Trinity, and when you would be available to do this?

Many thanks for your time.

Alison Doyle
Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin
www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

-----Original Message-----

From: Alison Doyle
Sent: 11 November 2011 16:10
To: Parent or Practitioner
Subject: Pathways web survey

Dear Parent

Thank you very much for agreeing to meet / talk with me on XXXXX. The interview will take place in my office and will be completely confidential; no other attendees will be present.

The interviews will be recorded using a Dictaphone, but no reference will be made to your name. In the dissertation transcript all names and references that might identify you will be changed. After each interview I will transcribe the session and send it to you to read. I will not use the material until I have received your agreement.

In order to start you thinking about your experiences of college education, I enclose some trigger questions. There is no need to answer these questions before we meet, but I hope that they might direct your thinking and set the scene for the discussion.

You are free to withdraw from this project at any time, without prejudice.

Thank you very much for your time and contribution, it really is appreciated.
Best regards

Appendix A8 Interview Trigger Questions

Parent interview questions

The term ‘transition’ as it applies to this interview means the planning required during the LC year, and the period that spans LC results, offers and transfer to college.

Reflection on choices

Think about your son or daughter’s journey to higher education and any experiences which might relate to their transition.

What got in the way?

What helped?

What influenced their choice of course?

What concerns did you have about higher education before they went to college?

Did you believe it was possible for hi, or her to go to College?

Did you know about available supports?

Do you think the right information was available to make a good course choice?

Transition help

What sources of information were available to you as a family for planning to go to College?

How well did access events such as DARE clinics, Better Options, Higher Options etc. assist with choices and the transition process? Were they useful?

Did you find it easy to obtain information about DARE, college admissions, course choices, preferences, specific requirements etc.?

Was there any link between your son or daughter’s school and any of the Colleges in terms of planning their move from school to College?

Was there any support available to from school in terms of planning the move from school to College?

Were you involved? Who gave you help?

What changes do you think are required from colleges to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

What changes do you think are required from schools to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

What specific issues are there for parents?

Transition tools

Did you visit the Pathways website <http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/>

What, if any, resources did you use from the website?

Did you check back for updates?

How useful do you think the website is?

Have you looked at the discussion forum? <http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com/transition-discussion-forum.html#/>

How useful do you think it is?

Did you look at the transition planning tool for students, parents and schools? <http://pathways-transition-tool.weebly.com/> (access password PATpilot2011)

How useful do you think this is?

Is there anything these three initiatives have not included?

Do you think a dedicated transition planning programme including the transition tool, the website, and pre-college face to face workshops for students (located in a college), would be useful?

Practitioner interview questions

The term 'transition' as it applies to this interview means the planning required during the LC year, and the period that spans LC results, offers and transfer to college.

Reflection on choices

Think about the journey to higher education and any experiences which might relate to transition.

What things get in the way?

What strategies help?

What influences choice of course, in your opinion?

What concerns do young people have about higher education before going to college?

Are they aware of available supports before moving to college?

Transition help

What sources of information are available for planning to go to College?

How well do access events such as DARE clinics, Better Options, Higher Options etc. assist with choices and the transition process? Are they useful?

Did you find it easy to get information about DARE, course choices, preferences, specific requirements?

Was there any link between your school and any of the Colleges in terms of transition planning from school to College for particular students?

Are parents involved?

What changes are required from colleges to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

What changes are required from schools to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

Transition tools

Did you visit the Pathways website <http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/>

What, if any, resources did you use from the website?

Did you check back for updates?

How useful do you think the website is?

Have you looked at the discussion forum? <http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com/transition-discussion-forum.html#/>

How useful do you think it is?

Did you look at the transition planning tool for students, parents and schools? <http://pathways-transition-tool.weebly.com/> (access password is PATpilot2011)

How useful do you think this is?

What do you think should be included?

Is there anything these three initiatives have not included?

Do you think a dedicated transition planning programme including the transition tool, the website, and pre-college face to face workshops for students (to take place in a college), would be useful?

Student interview questions

The term 'transition' as it applies to this interview means the planning required during the LC year, and the period between LC results, offers and transfer to college.

Reflection on choices

Think about your journey to higher education and any experiences which might relate to your transition.

What got in the way?

What helped?

What influenced your choice of course?

What concerns did you have about higher education before you went to college?

Did you believe it was possible for you to go to College?

Did you know about available supports before you went?

Are you glad that you decided to go to college?

Do you think you had the right information to make a good course choice?

Transition help

What sources of information did you have for planning to go to College?

How well did access events such as DARE clinics, Better Options, Higher Options etc. assist with your choices and the transition process? Were they useful?

Did you find it easy to get information about DARE, course choices, preferences, specific requirements?

Was there any link between your school and any of the Colleges in terms of planning your move from school to College?

Was there any support available to you at school in terms of planning your move from school to College?

Were your parents involved? Who gave them help?

What changes are required from colleges to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

What changes are required from schools to help with transition in LC year or during the transfer from school to college?

Transition tools

Did you visit the Pathways website <http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/>

What, if any, resources did you use from the website?

Did you check back for updates?

How useful do you think the website is?

Have you looked at the discussion forum? <http://pathways-to-trinity.weebly.com/transition-discussion-forum.html#/>

How useful do you think it is?

Did you look at the transition planning tool for students, parents and schools?

<http://pathways-transition-tool.weebly.com/>

How useful do you think this is?

Do you think a dedicated transition planning programme including the transition tool, the website and face to face workshops in colleges, would be useful?

Appendix A9 Study One Survey Factors and Variables Surveys

Study One: Student Survey Factors and Variables

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Variables</u>
Demographics	Current school year, Year of diagnosis Disability type, School type
Source of Transition information	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Quality of Information about the Transition process	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Transition assistance	Knowing your strengths and challenges Choosing the right subjects for LC Choosing the right college course Choosing the right college Getting support / help in college Applying to CAO Applying to DARE Applying for language waiver Living skills Finding accommodation Social skills Being independent
<u>Factors</u>	<u>Variables</u>
Transition worries / concerns	Choosing the right course Living with other people I don't know Choosing the right college Finding a job after college Making friends Managing money Finding somewhere to live Getting supports in college Telling lecturers about my disability Studying on my own Writing essays Passing exams Finding a part time job Telling other students about my disability Living on my own

Study One: Parent Survey Factors and Variables

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Variables</u>
Demographics	Current school year, Year of diagnosis Disability type, School type
Source of Transition information	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Quality of Information about the Transition process	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Transition assistance	Knowing your strengths and challenges Choosing the right subjects for LC Choosing the right college course Choosing the right college Getting support / help in college Applying to CAO Applying to DARE Applying for language waiver Living skills Finding accommodation Social skills Being independent
Transition worries / concerns	Choosing the right course Living with other people I don't know Choosing the right college Finding a job after college Making friends Managing money Finding somewhere to live Getting supports in college Telling lecturers about my disability Studying on my own Writing essays Passing exams Finding a part time job Telling other students about my disability Living on my own

Study One: Practitioner Survey Factors and Variables

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Variables</u>
Demographics	Current school year, Year of diagnosis Disability type, School type
Source of Transition information	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Quality of Information about the Transition process	DARE, Disability Service, SENO Guidance Counsellor, Resource teacher Principal, Class / form teacher Parents, Friends, Nobody, Other
Transition assistance	Knowing your strengths and challenges Choosing the right subjects for LC Choosing the right college course Choosing the right college Getting support / help in college Applying to CAO Applying to DARE Applying for language waiver Living skills Finding accommodation Social skills Being independent
Transition worries / concerns	Choosing the right course Living with other people I don't know Choosing the right college Finding a job after college Making friends Managing money Finding somewhere to live Getting supports in college Telling lecturers about my disability Studying on my own Writing essays Passing exams Finding a part time job Telling other students about my disability Living on my own

Appendix B Study Two

Appendix B1 Invitation to Participate

-----Original Message-----

From: Alison Doyle

Sent: 06 March 2012 11:39

To:

Subject: Your first year at Trinity

Dear

The Disability Service would like to hear from you about your first year experience and the transition from school to college. Your participation is part of a doctoral study that I am conducting. The aim of the study is:

1. To find out what disabled students think about the services / information available to help with applying to college.
2. To understand what strategies schools and colleges need to adopt to improve the transition from school to college.

There are two things we are asking you to do.

1) Complete a short survey at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/JFDARESurvey>
The survey is completely anonymous and should take no longer than 15 minutes.

2) We would also like to meet you during week 11 or 12 of this term (March 26th to April 6th) for a short interview about your first year experience. Could you let us know a day and time that week that suits you to meet?

All data collected from the survey will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiably linked to any individual. I enclose a copy of the Code of Ethics that applies to this study.

We may contact you by phone to follow up in finalising arrangements.

The Disability Service would like to thank you in advance for your cooperation with this feedback.

Best regards

Alison Doyle
Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin
Room 3029
Arts Building
Trinity College
Dublin 2
Tel: 00353 1 8963014
Email: alison.doyle@tcd.ie

Appendix B2 Post-transition Student Survey

Dear student

We are now in near the end of term two of College year 13-14 and you have nearly completed your first year in University. The Disability Service would like to hear from you about your first year in college, and your transition from secondary school to university.

The survey is completely anonymous and should take no longer than 15 minutes. However, if you would like to be entered in the €50 prize draw please leave your mobile number at the end of this survey.

All data collected from this questionnaire will be treated with full confidentiality and, if published, the data will not be identifiable linked to any individual.

We are working to a Code of Ethics which guarantees the anonymity of individuals participating and the safeguarding of data. We may also be interested in using the results of this research in other projects, and the same ethical principles will apply. A copy of this Code of Ethics was sent to you with the invitation to participate. We may also be interested in using the results of this research in other projects, and the same ethical principles will apply.

By completing this survey, you are consenting to participate

- I have been fully informed as to the nature of the research.
- I understand my role in this research.
- I understand that no names (individual or school) will be used in the final report.
- I understand that the findings may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences.
- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I understand that I can withdraw from this research project at any time without adverse consequences

Demographics

Question 1. Which disability categories apply to you?

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Speech & Language Disabilities
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness

- Specific Learning Difficulty (incl. Dyslexia and Dyscalculia)

Question 2. In which Faculty are you studying?

- Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
- Engineering, Maths and Science
- Health Sciences
- Multi-faculty

Transition data.

Question 3. How easy did you find the transition from post-primary school to college?

- Very easy
- Fairly easy
- Manageable
- Difficult
- Very difficult

Why do you think this was the case?

Comment box

Question 4. Thinking about registration at the beginning of the year, describe your experience:

Extremely easy, Straightforward, Complicated, Problematic

- Registering on your course
- Sorting out your student card
- Activating your email
- Registering with Disability Service
- Organising accommodation
- Using online registration
- What was difficult?

Comment box

Question 5. Which of these people made transition to college easier? You can choose more than one answer.

- Unilink Service
- Parents
- Family support
- College friends
- School friends
- Knowing someone in college
- College Tutor
- Disability Service
- College Lecturers

- Nobody
- Other

Question 6. Why were these people helpful? You can choose more than one answer.

- Provided information
- Explained options available
- Helped with decisions
- Discussed supports and advised me
- Understood my disability
- Gave encouragement
- Don't know/can't remember
- I didn't get any help

Any other comment?

Supports in college

Question 7. How do you feel you have been supported over the last year in college?

Agree Disagree Don't know

- I have been well supported
- I know where to go for help, advice or support
- I have had opportunities to discuss any problems
- I have a key person who I can rely on for help, advice and support

Comment

Question 8. How does this support compare with your experience in school?

- My needs are understood better
- More support is available
- Easier to find where to go for support
- More professional
- People are more helpful
- Better advice
- Advice is more practical
- Information is easier to find

Improving the transition process

Question 9. How useful / necessary do you think it is to include the following in 5th / 6th year at school? (matrix of choices, Likert scale):

Essential Useful Not particularly Not useful Don't know

- Workshops on applying to college
- Advice clinics for students with disabilities
- A transition website / phone app
- Visits to college Disability Services
- Disability specific information
- Make transition planning part of the curriculum / timetable

Question 10. What was your experience of the DARE process?

- Very easy
- Simple enough
- Confusing
- Very complicated

Question 11. What advice would you give other LC students with a disability on the following:

- Course choice
- CAO / DARE application
- Getting help in college
- College life
- Contact

Thank you for sharing your first year experience.

Appendix B3 Code of Ethics

This Code of Ethics is informed by the principles established in the following documents:

- Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) issued by the British Educational Research Association
- Research with children with disabilities: A Checklist for Good Practice (2005) issued by the National Disability Authority
- Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) issued by the British Psychological Society
- Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants issued by the British Psychological Society
- Guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online (2007) issued by the British Psychological Society
- Code of Professional Ethics (2008) issued by the PSI
- Guidelines for minimum standards of ethical approval in psychological research (2004) issued by the British Psychological Society

1. As a researcher I have signed a declaration of agreement to abide fully by this ethical code.
2. The researcher recognises the rights of all students and other individuals / institutions who participate or are referred to in this research to have their confidentiality protected at all times.
3. Voluntary informed consent will be sought before any interviews are conducted with any respondent as part of the research process.
4. Participants in the research have a right to withdraw from the process at any time and will be informed of this right.
5. The researcher is under an obligation to describe accurately, truthfully and fairly any information obtained during the course of the research.
6. There is an obligation to incorporate accurately data collected during the course of this research into the text of any report or other publication related to the research, and to ensure that individual opinions and perceptions are not misrepresented.
7. The researcher will protect the sources of information gathered from interviews, document scrutiny, observations and other data collection methods.
8. Data collected as part of the research process will be securely maintained and will be accessible only to the researcher engaged in this project.
9. The researcher will report the procedures, results and analysis of the research accurately, and in sufficient detail to allow all interested parties to understand and interpret them.
10. The researcher will inform participants of any intention to publish findings from the research through journals, books, or any other publication, and will discuss the proposed content of any such publication before proceeding.
11. The researcher will make themselves available to discuss the procedures, conduct, or findings of the research with any party involved in the research process.
12. Data collected during the course of the research project which names individuals or institutions will be available only to the researcher and will be made secure both during and after the term of the project.

13. The researcher is obliged to communicate the findings of their research to other members of the educational research community through research seminars, conference presentation and proceedings and publication taking account of all issues of confidentiality and protection of research participants.

Code of Ethics

14. The researcher asserts the right to participate in any publication of the research findings in academic journals or other media, which may ensue from the research.

15. This ethical code will be continually reviewed in order to take full account of any changes in procedure or legislation which may impact upon the conduct of the study.

Appendix B4 Invitation to Interview

-----Original Message-----

From: Alison Doyle

Sent: 04 April 2012 11:33

To:

Subject: First Year Experience Interview

Hello

Thank you for completing the survey. I am contacting you to arrange an appointment for interview. Please let me know which days / times are convenient for us to meet. In the meantime, I attach a set of trigger questions which will form the basis of the interview. It might be helpful for you to think about these before we meet.

Best regards

Alison Doyle
Disability Officer
Trinity College Dublin
Room 3029
Arts Building
Trinity College
Dublin 2

Tel: 00353 1 8963014

Email: alison.doyle@tcd.ie

www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

Appendix B4 First Year Experience Trigger Questions

- 1) Organization: Do you understand how college is organized so that you know where to go if you have an administrative or academic question?
- 2) Pre-registration: What kind of activities or programmes would help with the transition process before registering in college?
- 3) Registration & Orientation: how would you describe your experience of the early days of your transition into college?
- 4) Connections: As a new student, to what degree has this college connected you with other new students / academic supports?
- 5) Advice: To what degree have admin / academic / services staff explained the requirements for your course, or helped you manage your course?
- 6) Campus environment: How effective is College at helping students to feel safe, welcome and that their needs are met?
- 7) Skills: how well do you think you were prepared in terms of the academic skills required for your course? How well has college helped you to improve these skills?
- 8) Transition & Support: what kind of support should College provide to help students manage first year?
- 9) Diversity: how open is College to acknowledging and accepting a diverse student body? (disability, background, culture).
- 10) First Year Experience: what is your overall satisfaction with College: social aspects, your course, services? Would you recommend this college to anyone?

Appendix C Study Three

Appendix C1 Google Analytics Dashboard

Google Analytics

Home Reporting Customization Admin

Find reports & more

My Dashboard

Apr 4, 2011 - Feb 4, 2015

Customize Dashboard

+ Add Widget | Email | Export

All Sessions 100.00%

+ Add Segment

New Users

New Users

Users

Users

Audience Overview Demographics Interests

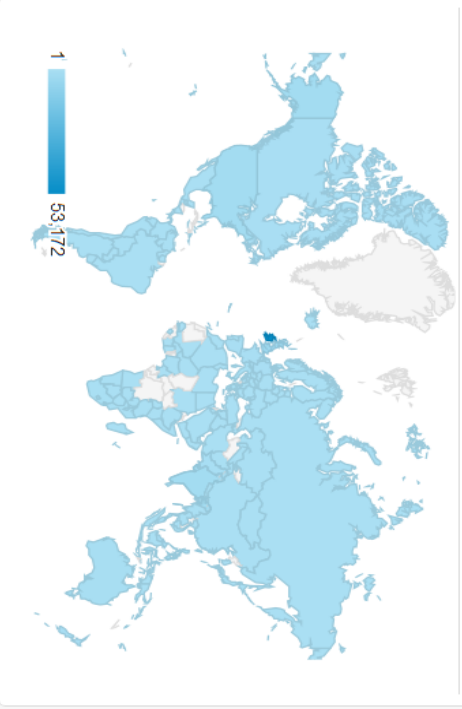
Real-Time Intelligence Events Shortcuts Dashboards

aisontdoyie@gmail.com
http://www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity - ...
www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

Find reports & more

- Dashboards
- Shortcuts
- Intelligence Events
- Real-Time
- Audience
- Overview
- Demographics
- Interests
- Geo

Sessions



Avg. Session Duration and Pages / Session

- Avg. Session Duration: 00:15
- Pages / Session: 1.1

Sessions by Browser

Browser	Sessions
Chrome	27,156
Safari	15,422
Internet Explorer	15,045
Firefox	8,829
Android Browser	2,179
Opera Mini	1,354

Bounce Rate



Appendix C2 Pathways Feedback Contact Form

Hello visitor!

Thank you for visiting our website.

Please let us know what you think.

Are you: *

- A student
- A parent
- An educational professional
- A researcher
- None of these

How would you rate our website? *

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- OK
- Disappointing

Please tell us more. What are we doing right? What needs more work! Is there anything else we should include? *

Appendix C3 Pathways to Trinity site map

- [Home](#)
 - [Home](#)
 - [My application](#)
 - [How can I transition successfully?](#)
 - [How do I apply to college](#)
 - [Matriculation](#)
 - [Admissions information](#)
 - [What is a Language Waiver](#)
 - [What is DARE?](#)
 - [Who can I talk to?](#)
 - [Download documents](#)
 - [Leaving Certificate study skills](#)
 - [Essays and exams](#)
 - [Organising study and revision](#)
 - [Computers and Software](#)
 - [My course choice](#)
 - [How do I choose a course?](#)
 - [Course preferences](#)
 - [Course information](#)
 - [Advice from lecturers](#)
 - [Arts courses](#)
 - [Engineering, Maths and science](#)
 - [Health Sciences](#)
 - [Advice from students](#)
 - [Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#)
 - [Maths, Sciences and Engineering](#)
 - [Health Sciences](#)
 - [My life on campus](#)
 - [Take my advice](#)
 - [What supports could I have?](#)
 - [Academic support](#)
 - [Assistive Technology](#)
 - [Unilink](#)
 - [Respite space](#)
 - [Exam accommodations](#)
 - [How do I register with DS](#)
 - [Needs assessment](#)
 - [Reasonable accommodation](#)
 - [What is an Erasmus year](#)
 - [Year abroad](#)
 - [Erasmus student blog](#)
 - [What is a college tutor](#)
 - [Students like me say...](#)
 - [DS3](#)
 - [Student profiles](#)
 - [Blogs and videos](#)
 - [Student statistics](#)
 - [Pathways Blogspot](#)
 - [Transition Planning Tool](#)
 - [Contact Us](#)
 - [Useful links](#)

Appendix C4 Pathways Transition Blog

[Pathways to Trinity](#)

Take the first step on your student journey...www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

[Disability specific advice](#)

June 26th, 2012 by doylea6

Feel free to post your question here. Maybe you need advice on applying for a particular course, college supports or managing your disability in college. Alternatively you can email us on disab@tcd.ie

Tags: [advice](#), [college](#), [disability](#), [support](#)

Posted in [College supports](#), [Disability advice](#), [Disability specific advice](#) | [No Comments](#) »

[DARE and College application queries](#)

June 26th, 2012 by doylea6

If you have a question or are looking for advice about applying to DARE (Disability Access Route to Education), or applying to college, please post here.

DARE clinics are taking place all over the country on Saturday 12th January, for a list of venues please consult the [DARE website](#).

Trinity College are hosting a DARE clinic for students with ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome, and sensory and physical disabilities, on Wednesday 23rd January at 6.30pm. To reserve a place please call 8963111.

Tags: [College application](#), [DARE](#)

Posted in [College application](#), [DARE queries](#), [Public events](#) | [3 Comments](#) »
[Want to know what a course / college is really like?](#)

June 20th, 2012 by doylea6

CourseHub (<http://www.coursehub.ie>) is free-to-use website developed by students, for students. It will help you make the right course and college choice.

Current students anonymously review and rank their course, and comment on other people's reviews. If you are 5th or 6th year second level student you can read an honest description of any course you may be interested in. You can create a profile and save your course and college choices, which will help you compare them throughout the year.

CourseHub can help you decide which course is right for you based on your personality, academic skills, budget, geographical area, and future profession.

Why not give it a try?

<http://www.coursehub.ie/>

Tags: [application](#), [CAO](#), [college](#), [DARE](#)

Posted in [College application](#), [Pre-entry activities](#) | [1 Comment](#) »

[Pathways Workshops for students with disabilities in 6th year LC cycle](#)

June 20th, 2012 by doylea6

The Disability Service is providing a series of support workshops to students in 6th year of second level, and in particular for students with sensory and physical disabilities, ADHD or Asperger's Syndrome, who are traditionally under-represented in Higher Education.

Beginning in September 2012 workshops take place one Wednesday afternoon each month, 2.30 to 4.30pm in Trinity. Topics covered will include:

- study skills

- assistive technology
- transition to college assessment and planning
- applying to the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme
- reasonable accommodations in state examinations
- managing stress

For more information contact Alison Doyle

doylea6@tcd.ie

Telephone: 8963014

[Visit workshops](#)

Tags: [disability](#), [help](#), [LC](#), [Leaving Cert](#), [study skills](#)


Posted in [Pre-entry activities](#) | [2 Comments](#) »

Appendix C5 Pathways Transition Planning Tool

- Home
- My application +
- My course choice +
- My life on campus +
- Pathways Blogspot
- Transition Planning Tool
- Contact Us
- Sitemap
- Useful links

- [Student survey](#)
- [Parent survey](#)
- [Practitioner survey](#)

About Pathways Transition Planning




An Introduction

There are five Units to complete:

- [Unit 1: Preparing myself for college](#)
- [Unit 2: Independent living skills](#)
- [Unit 3: Academic skills](#)
- [Unit 4: Applying to college](#)
- [Unit 5: Using college supports](#)

Units are provided as pdf files in separate units, or you can download the complete tool below.



PLANNING YOUR PATHWAY TO TRINITY COLLEGE

Appendix C6 Transition Planning Tool User Registration

Register to use the Pathways Transition Assessment Tool

I am a.....

- Student
- Parent
- Practitioner
- Researcher
- Other professional

In which school year do you intend to use this planning tool

- TY
- 5th
- 6th
- Post Leaving Cert

Please indicate relevant disability categories

- AS / ASD
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind / visual impairment
- Deaf / hearing impairment
- DCD / Dyspraxia
- Mental Health
- Neurological
- Physical
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- SpLD (e.g. Dyslexia)

Email:

Confirm:

The Pathways Transition Assessment Tool is copyrighted to Alison Doyle 2011 - 2014. Please indicate that you agree to personal use of these materials only, and that they will not be re-sold or re-distributed under any other name or authorship

- Yes I agree to these terms.

Copyright Alison Doyle 2011 - 2014

Start the Pathways Transition Assessment Tool ([hyperlink](#))

Find out more about Pathways and the Student Journey ([hyperlink](#))

Appendix C7 Transition Workshop Invitations to HEI Staff

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Alison Doyle** <DOYLEA6@tcd.ie>

Date: 3rd August 11:10

Subject: FW: Transition workshops for Leaving Certificate students with disabilities

Students with disabilities in 5th and 6th year Leaving Certificate cycle



The Disability Service is providing a series of support workshops to senior cycle students beginning in October 2011. Topics covered will include:

- study skills
- assistive technology
- transition to college assessment and planning
- applying to the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme
- reasonable accommodations in state examinations
- managing stress
- sleep hygiene

We would like to invite parents to an open information session on:

Wednesday 3rd August at 10am, room AP.03 in the Áras an Phiarsaigh Building.

If you are interested in attending please contact Alison Doyle in the Disability Service alison.doyle@tcd.ie or Louise Power in Staff Office lpower@tcd.ie



Disability Service

Seirbhís do dhaoine faoi mhíchumas

Trinity College Dublin

www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

Appendix C8 Transition Workshop Invitations to Practitioners

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Alison Doyle** <DOYLEA6@tcd.ie>

Date: 26 June 2012 14:49

Subject: FW: For the Attention of School Principals: Support for Leaving Certificate students with disabilities

The Disability Service Trinity College Dublin are providing a series of support workshops to Leaving Certificate students with disabilities, beginning in September 2012, and would like to invite students with disabilities in your school to participate.

These interactive workshops will provide students with opportunities to:

- Explore the nature of **their own learning style**,
- Develop **effective study skills**,
- Actively partake in **planning their own transition** to college,
- Navigate through the **Disability Access Route to Education (DARE)** process,
- Succeed during the exam period including effective use of reasonable accommodations, exam technique and stress management techniques.

This programme was very successful last year:

“The staff had a great understanding of the students and interacted very well. I have never experienced such an atmosphere of inclusivity. The presenters were amazing. The information in relation to the application system available was so helpful”.

“Overall the majority of our students found the sessions to be very beneficial and the topics covered were extremely relevant.”

“I liked the opportunity for the school students to engage with College students.”

Workshops take place in Trinity from 2.30pm to 4.30pm one Wednesday afternoon each month.

We will be hosting an information morning for School Principals on **Wednesday, 20th June 2012, at 11 am.** Venue: the Henry Jones room, Old Library, Trinity College Dublin. RSVP, Alison Doyle, doylea6@tcd.ie telephone 8963014
We very much look forward to working with students from your school.

Best regards.

Alison Doyle

www.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity

Appendix C9 Transition Workshops Surveys

Dear students

Sadly we have come to the end of our programme, and we would like to wish you every success in your forthcoming exams. For those of you who will begin your Leaving Certificate cycle next year, if you would like to participate in Pathways again next year as an ambassador, please do let us know.

Going forward it is very important that we have a clear idea about the parts of the programme that worked, and the elements that you did not find so useful. Please feel free to be completely open, you will not hurt our feelings!

1. Which disability categories apply to you?

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Speech & Language Disabilities
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Medical
- Specific Learning Difficulty (incl. Dyslexia and Dyscalculia)

2. Why did you join the Pathways workshops?

3. Describe your overall experience of the workshops between October and April:
Excellent, Good, Average, Fair, Poor

- Day and Time
- Venue
- Materials provided
- Content of workshop
- Workshop presenters
- Student speakers

4. If you rated anything as 'Fair' or 'Poor', tell us why you were disappointed?

5. What did you like best about the workshops?

6. What did you like least about the workshops?

7. What could we do to improve the workshops for next year?

We wish all of you every success in your examinations. If you need help or advice or have a question about starting college, please do get in touch.

Thank you!

Appendix C10 Transition Workshop Parent / Practitioner Feedback

Dear parents and professional practitioners

Sadly we have come to the end of our programme, and we would like to wish your students every success in their Leaving Certificate exams.

Going forward it is very important that we have a clear idea about the parts of the programme that worked, and the elements that you did not find so useful. Please feel free to be completely open, you will not hurt our feelings!

1. Which disability categories apply to your student?

- Asperger's Syndrome
- ADD / ADHD
- Blind/Vision Impaired
- Deaf/Hearing Impaired
- Dyspraxia
- Mental Health Condition
- Neurological Conditions
- Speech & Language Disabilities
- Physical Disability
- Significant Ongoing Illness
- Medical
- Specific Learning Difficulty (incl. Dyslexia and Dyscalculia)

2. Why did you think it would be useful for your student(s) to join the Pathways workshops?

3. Describe your overall experience of the workshops between October and April: Excellent, Good, Average, Fair, Poor

- Day and Time
- Venue
- Materials provided
- Content of workshop
- Workshop presenters
- Student speakers

4. How do you think your student engaged with the workshops between October and April? Excellent, Good, Average, Fair, Poor

- Relationship with other students
- Relationship with presenters
- Materials provided
- Content of workshop
- Student speakers

5. Thinking about the things you rated as 'Fair' or 'Poor', tell us why you were disappointed?

6. What did you like best about the workshops?

7. What did you like least about the workshops?

8. What could we do to improve the workshops for next year?

9. As a parent or practitioner, what kind of support from colleges would you benefit from, going forward?