



Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin



Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland.

## A NATIONAL RESPONSE

Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF)



Prepared by  
**Des Aston**  
Spring 2019





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# Foreword

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IT IS A PRIVILEGE TO WRITE THIS INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF THE INCLUSIVE NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM (INHEF) WHICH HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED TO PROMOTE AND DELIVER HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES.

For many years, children and young people who have intellectual disabilities attended segregated educational settings and were expected as young adults to move to day services for the rest of their lives. However, with increasing numbers of children with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream schools, it has become clear that offering one pathway for their futures was no longer appropriate or just. Like their mainstream peers these young people want to experience the ‘real world’ with opportunities to be challenged in postschool educational environments and employment.

The Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF) is developing viable postschool educational pathways for young people who have an intellectual disability. We are at the very early stages of this process and require allies within our institutions, the Department of Education and Skills and the educational community to ensure that these opportunities become available throughout Ireland. Higher education, by its’ very nature is diverse and encompasses many areas of knowledge. It is the ideal place to provide a welcome for one of the most marginalised communities in our society and offer educational opportunities not previously available. This project challenges the notion that higher education should be confined to elites within our society rather than being the place where innovation and bold ideas can flourish.

The script for this project has not been written and we are the script writers in collaboration with our colleagues, the young people and their families and our allies in the education community. Join us on this adventure and you may be sorely tried at times in encouraging system change but you will not be disappointed.

*Michael Shevlin*

**Michael Shevlin**

Professor in Inclusive Education

Director Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities

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# Summary

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Given the context that people with intellectual disabilities face significant barriers and limited postsecondary opportunities, a number of initiatives in Ireland and internationally have been established with the aim of addressing issues explicitly affecting this specific cohort of students.

We begin by explaining the rationale for developing specific educational/employment initiatives for people with intellectual disabilities. We continue by outlining the range of different initiatives available, including a broad spectrum of course contents and the necessary supports and structures in place to create meaningful experiences for the students enrolled in 10 Irish institutions. We conclude by offering insight into how these initiatives can become an established feature of the educational landscape for people with intellectual disabilities.

This report seeks to outline the process of establishing a national forum to support the sustainability and development of existing and future inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities offered by Irish higher education providers (HEPs). The report aims are:

- i. To document the current status of access routes and educational programmes offered by HEPs, specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, across the Republic of Ireland.
- ii. To record the different models of inclusive educational practice and approaches used by education providers.
- iii. To determine the various levels of awards, formal/informal accreditation, and certification of the inclusive educational initiatives available to students with intellectual disabilities.
- iv. To provide a view of progression routes through the Irish higher education system for students with intellectual disabilities.
- v. To capture the perspectives of the professionals coordinating the inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities across Ireland.

# Context

Traditionally, young people with an intellectual disability who completed compulsory second-level education were expected to make a transition to adult day services and sheltered workshops run by community-based disability support agencies under the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE). The National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD)<sup>1</sup> reported that 23,583 people with intellectual disabilities were attending full-time day service provision in 2017.

As jobs are becoming increasingly skills and knowledge based, people with intellectual disabilities face very limited choices when they complete compulsory schooling. Though increasing numbers have completed education in a mainstream school, many find themselves attending adult day centres or local vocational training centres, where they are often enrolled on courses in which they have little or no interest, but for which they meet the criteria for entry.

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*There aren't enough education opportunities for people with disabilities when we leave school. The training that we do doesn't lead to jobs. Sometimes we do training courses because there is nothing else to do (National Platform of Self Advocates, 2018)<sup>2</sup>.*

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As illustrated by Watson et al. (2017, p.57)<sup>3</sup>, education is a key influence on life chances, including employment opportunities, adequate income, and the risk of poverty:

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*... people with disabilities who have higher levels of education and who are younger are more likely to be employed. The level of education has a particularly strong effect ... since those affected by disability while in school – particularly by intellectual disability – face particular challenges in moving into the first job.*

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Both nationally and internationally, it is recognised that unemployment and underemployment are critical issues affecting the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. Such people experience many barriers in the pursuit of meaningful employment, including low levels of literacy and numeracy, lack of self-confidence, and difficulties in understanding workplace procedures (McGlinchey et al., 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Annual Tables and Figures of the National Intellectual Disability Database Committee 2017. (2019). [online] Dublin: Health Research Board, p.18. Available at: [https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2.\\_Plugin\\_related\\_files/Publications/2018\\_pubs/Disability/NIDD/NIDD\\_2017\\_Annual\\_Report\\_Tables\\_Figures.pdf](https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2._Plugin_related_files/Publications/2018_pubs/Disability/NIDD/NIDD_2017_Annual_Report_Tables_Figures.pdf) [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>2</sup> National Platform of Self-Advocates (2018). *Report on our pre-budget meeting*. [online] Dublin: National Platform of Self-Advocates. Available at: <http://thenationalplatform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Pre-Budget-Meeting-The-National-Platform-of-Self-Advocates.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Watson, D., Lawless, M. and Maître, B. (2017). Employment Transitions among People with Disabilities in Ireland An Analysis of the Quarterly National Household Survey, 2010–2015. *The Economic and Social Research Institute*, (58), p.57.

<sup>4</sup> McGlinchey, E., McCallion, P. Burke, E., Carroll, R. & McCarron, M. (2013) 'Exploring the issue of employment for adults with an intellectual disability in Ireland', *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 26(4), pp. 335-343.



The recent cross-departmental approach shown by Government is warmly welcomed, with the bringing together of three Joint Oireachtas Committees (Employment Affairs and Social Protection; Education and Skills; Health) on the *Review of Supports Available to People with Disabilities Transitioning from Education or Training into Employment* (July 2018). The report highlights the voices of people with disabilities, who have attempted to, or have successfully, navigated the Irish higher education system. It values the lived experience of people with disabilities but the underlying theme extracted from these voices was “luck”, with each of the speakers regarding themselves as the “lucky ones”.

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*I should not feel lucky. This should be an automatic human right for everyone (House of the Oireachtas. 2018, p.13)<sup>5</sup>*

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In recent years, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has initiated dedicated support services among HEPs, designed to support the specific needs of students with disabilities. Additionally, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was established with the aim of facilitating progression to higher education among students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Approximately 5.7% of the total student population for the 2016/2017 academic year was made up of students with disabilities (AHEAD, 2017)<sup>6</sup>.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for students who are deemed to have an intellectual disability. It is documented that people with intellectual disabilities have historically been absent from participation within the higher education system in Ireland. According to the National Intellectual Disability Database (2017), a total of 84 people with an intellectual disability were recorded in “Third Level Education”, out of a total of 57,872 people with an intellectual disability recorded in the study of day service provision. This equates to 0.145%. (NIDD, 2017).

Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018. Article 24 of the UNCRPD stipulates that:

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*States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning (United Nations, 2018)<sup>7</sup>.*

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<sup>5</sup> House of the Oireachtas (2019). *Review of Supports Available to People with Disabilities Transitioning from Education or Training into Employment*. [online] Dublin, p.13. Available at: [https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_employment\\_affairs\\_and\\_social\\_protection/reports/2018/2018-07-27\\_report-on-supports-available-to-people-with-disabilities-transitioning-from-education-or-training-into-employment\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_employment_affairs_and_social_protection/reports/2018/2018-07-27_report-on-supports-available-to-people-with-disabilities-transitioning-from-education-or-training-into-employment_en.pdf) [Accessed 27 May 2019].

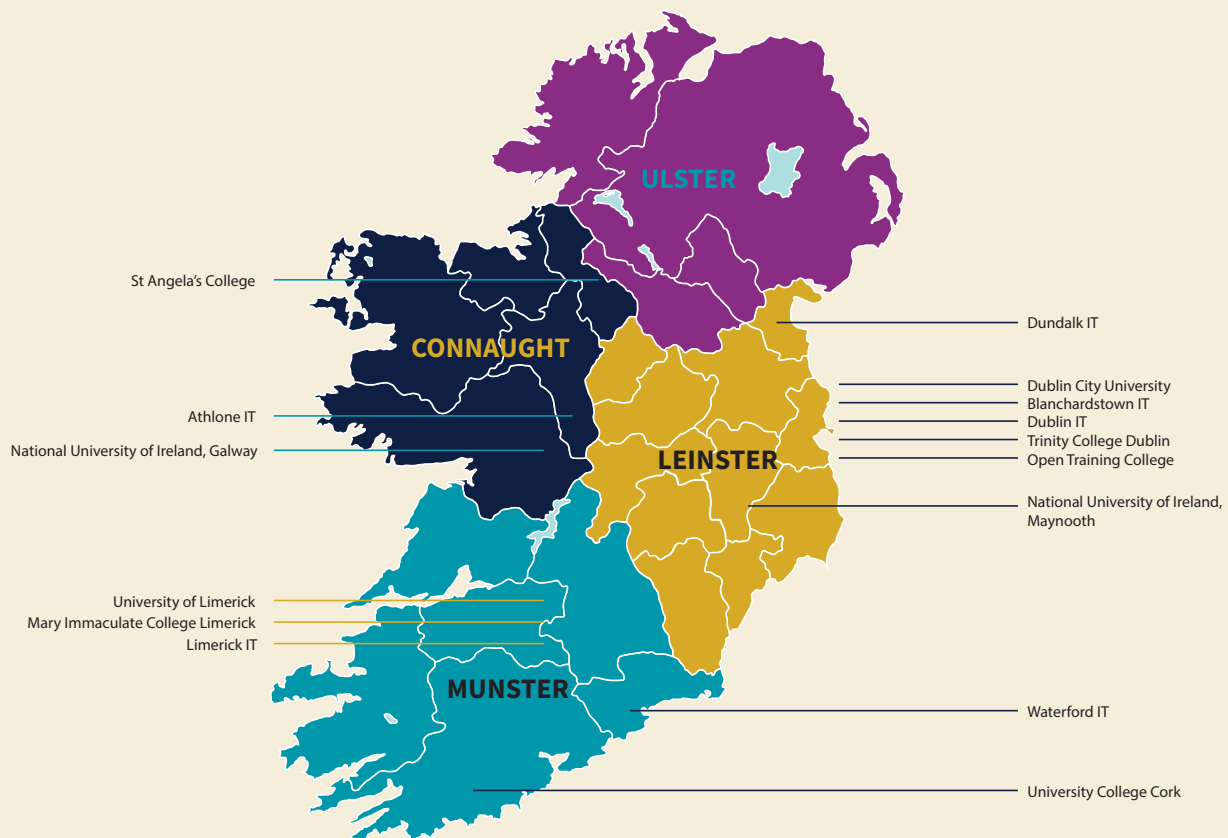
<sup>6</sup> Hynes, C. and Ryder, D. (2017). *Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2016/17*. [online] Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press. Available at: <https://ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/Rates%202016-17%20-%20ONLINE.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>7</sup> Un.org. (2019). *Article 24 - Education | United Nations Enable*. [online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-24-education.html> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

# Initiatives in Higher Education (2014)

Educational initiatives have been developed among Irish HEPs over the past decade, as documented in **Figure 1** by Magennis and Sheerin (2014). However, due to a lack of core funding, not all these initiatives have survived or become embedded within the higher education landscape. Since the introduction of the first initiatives in 2003/2004, it is estimated that 636 students with intellectual disabilities have successfully graduated from inclusive educational initiatives offered by HEPs across the Republic of Ireland. This figure includes the 10 current initiatives that remain in operation in 2018/2019 and three initiatives that are no longer in operation<sup>8</sup>.

In recognition of these initiatives, Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), formerly known as the National Institute for Intellectual Disability (NIID), at Trinity College Dublin, saw the need to create a national response, from the higher education sector, to the establishment of sustainable educational initiatives for this population. In 2018, TCPID was successful in securing funding from the Social Innovation Fund Ireland (SIFI), with the intent of appointing a National & Schools Coordinator to (i) establish a national forum designed to support existing and future HEPs for people with intellectual disabilities and (ii) enable the development of a pathway from secondary education to higher education for students with an intellectual disability.



**Figure 1:** Inclusive education initiatives in Republic of Ireland 2014. (Magennis and Sheerin, 2014)

<sup>8</sup>Data for three of the initiatives from Magennis and Sheerin (2014) could not be accessed.





A National & Schools Coordinator was appointed by TCPID in March 2018. This report seeks to outline the process of establishing the national forum. The aims of this report are:

i. To document the current status of access routes and educational programmes offered by HEPs, specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, across Ireland.

ii. To record the different models of inclusive educational practice and approaches within HEPs.

iii. To determine the various levels of awards, formal/informal accreditation, and certification of the inclusive educational initiatives available to students with intellectual disabilities.

iv. To provide a view of progression routes through the Irish higher education system for students with intellectual disabilities.

v. To capture the perspectives of the professionals coordinating the inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities across Ireland.



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Sustaining great ideas

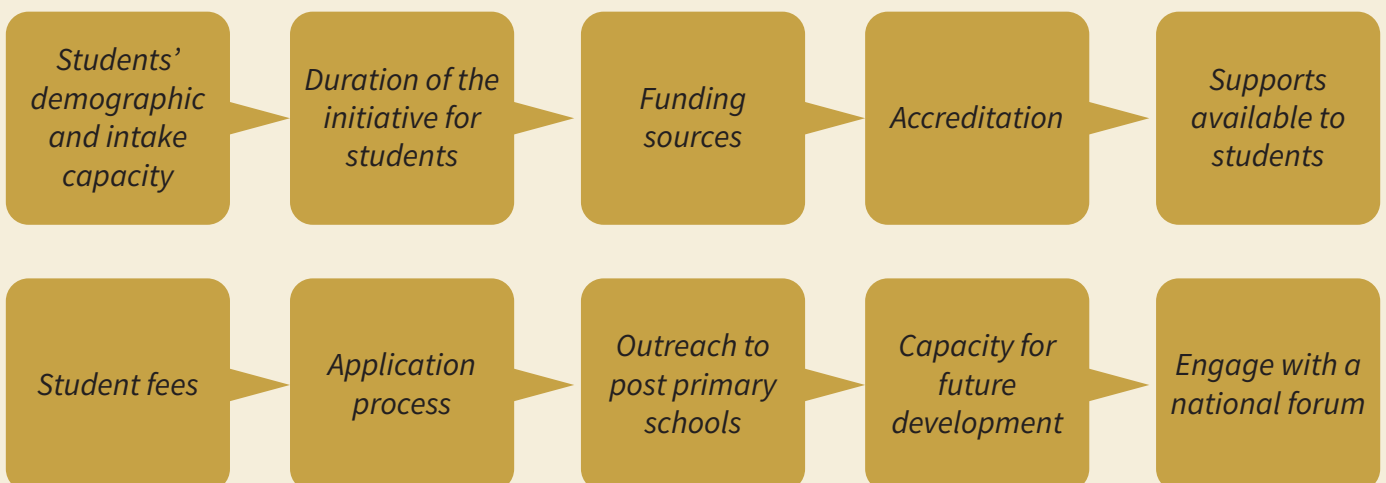
# 1.0 Documenting Educational Provision

## Site Visits

### 1.1 Collecting the Evidence

The study used two-phase/methods of data collection. First, a questionnaire was designed with questions to determine baseline quantitative and demographic information. Second, a face-to-face (phone interview on one occasion), unstructured interview approach was chosen to gain the perspectives of professionals responsible for coordinating each of the inclusive educational initiatives in higher educational providers across Ireland. Unstructured interviews were chosen in an attempt to gather the unique perspective of the individuals participating, and also, in recognition of the extreme variety in approaches, models of inclusion and diverse abilities of student cohorts in each respective, inclusive educational initiative.

Between March and August 2018, the National & Schools Coordinator conducted 13 interviews with representatives of various HEPs nationally. The 13 representatives were selected through earlier attempts to establish a similar network and through the officer's prior knowledge of active, inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities. In some cases (2), more than one interviewer was present due to logistics and time commitment to participate in the study. The majority (8) of interviews took place during a site visit, whereby the National and Schools Coordinator travelled to the particular institution. In some cases (3), participants preferred to travel to Trinity College Dublin and the interviews were facilitated in TCPID. One participant chose to engage with the study via a telephone interview and another chose to meet in a neutral meeting place. At the end of each interview, the self-completion questionnaire was distributed to participants, who were asked to complete a hard or soft copy in their own time and return it to the National and Schools Coordinator. While a total of 13 surveys were distributed, only seven were completed and returned (Spring 2019). However, participants provided sufficient relevant information during the interview process and follow-up sessions. The survey questions explored the areas presented in **Figure 2**, below.

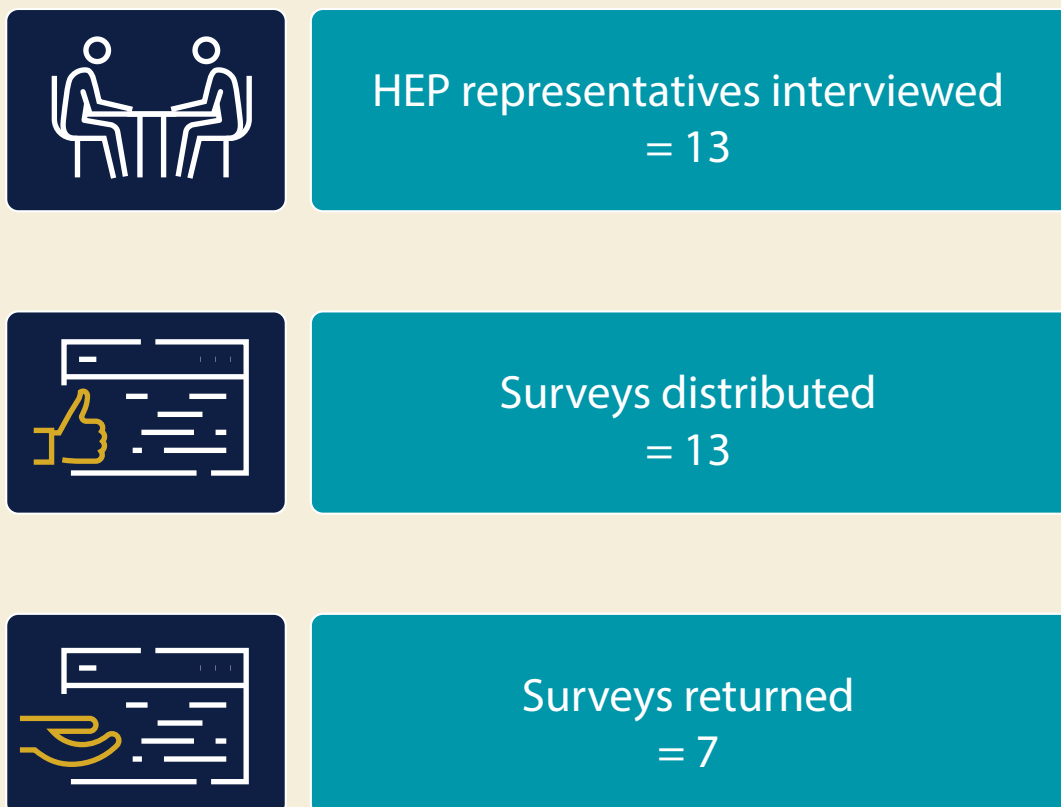


**Figure 2:** Survey themes



Out of the total number of participants interviewed (13), 10 were actively preparing to run their respective initiative(s) in September 2018. The remaining three participants expressed a willingness to participate in the study due to their own extensive knowledge in the area, through previous pilot projects that were never progressed, a desire to influence national policy for inclusive education, and/or a desire to establish a new and sustainable inclusive educational programme in their respective institution.

Individual and confidential site visit reports were prepared by the National & Schools Coordinator, who compiled information from the face-to-face and telephone interviews and surveys and returned them to the Director of TCPID, Professor Michael Shevlin. All data collected, including consent forms, surveys and site visit reports, were gathered and stored in compliance with GDPR requirements.



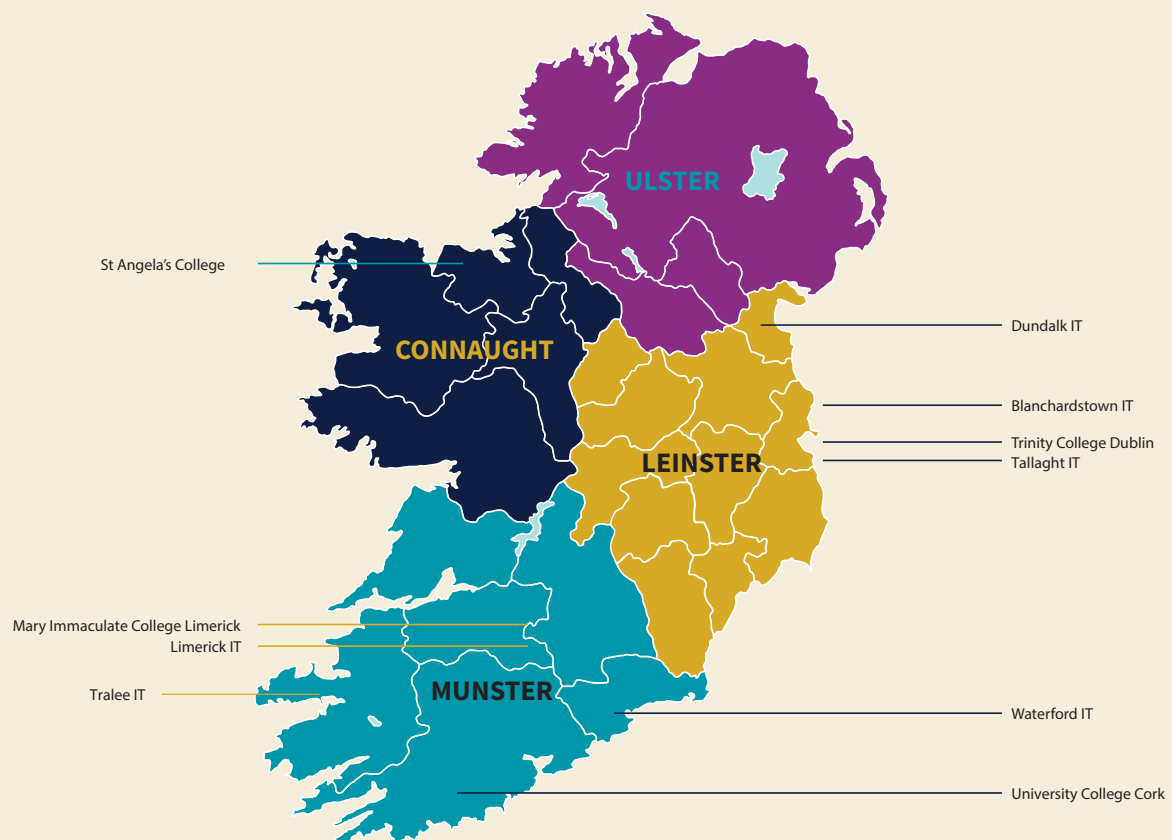
**Figure 3:** Survey response

# 1.0 Documenting Educational Provision

## Site Visits

### 1.2 Current Education Provision

It has been determined that in the academic year 2017-2018, there were a total of 12 active inclusive educational initiatives in operation within 11 HEPs. This was a decrease of four from the Magennis Sheerin (2014) study. The findings from the 2018/19 academic year show a further decrease of one initiative and a total of 11 programmes operational across 10 HEPs<sup>9</sup>.

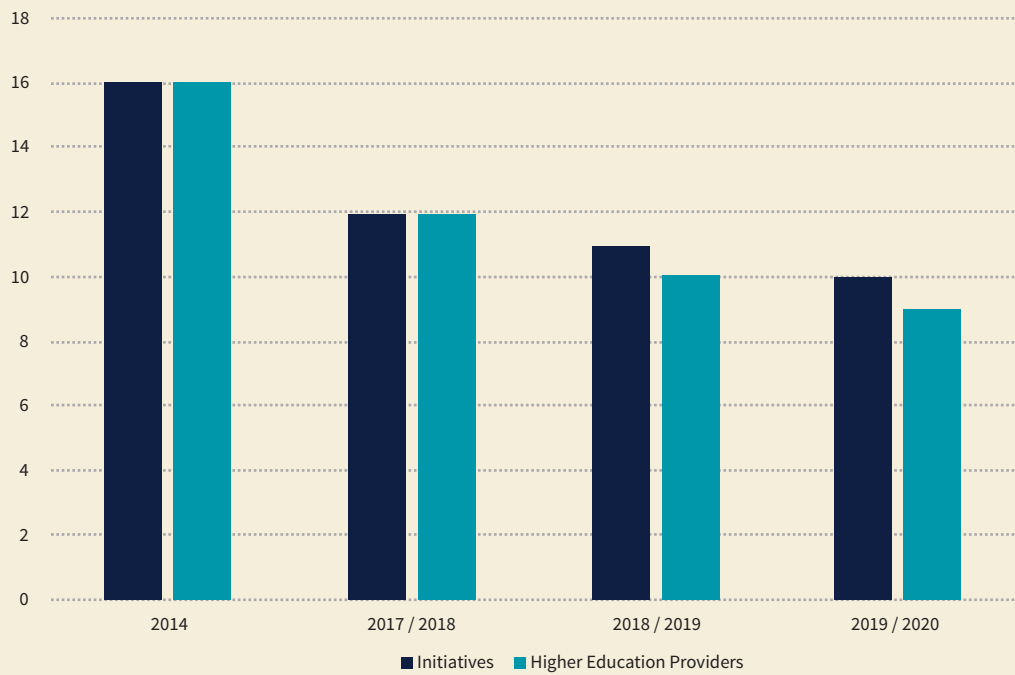


**Figure 4:** Inclusive higher education initiatives in Republic of Ireland 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Note that some HEPs are/were trialling more than one model/initiative in the same year, hence the number of initiatives and the number of institutions will not necessarily correlate.



During the writing up of this report, a decision was made by one HEP to discontinue their inclusive educational initiative, due to funding issues. This will reduce to 10 the number of inclusive educational programmes in operation across nine HEPs entering into the 2019/2020 academic year.



**Figure 5:** Number of inclusive education initiatives and Higher Education Providers as per academic year

# 1.0 Documenting Educational Provision

## Site Visits

In the 2018/2019 academic year, it has been estimated that a total of 106 students with intellectual disabilities are registered and are undergoing studies within the eleven current inclusive educational initiatives. There is a broad range of student demographics accessing inclusive education programmes. Quite commonly, students applying to the programmes are school leavers from special education and mainstream secondary schools. A number of students applying have been out of formal education for some time, for example – attending adult day services or rehabilitative training and they have decided to come back to access the higher education system.



**Figure 6:** Student numbers as per 2018/2019 academic year <sup>10</sup>

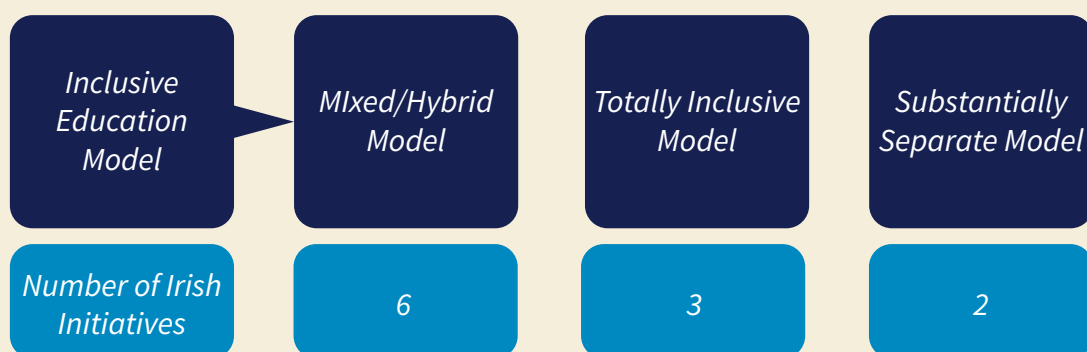
<sup>10</sup> The figures in the table relate directly to students with intellectual disabilities registered on, and graduates of, specific programmes/initiatives designed to support students with intellectual disabilities in HEPs. As a result, students deemed to have an intellectual disability who have accessed and graduated from mainstream higher education courses without the support of specific support initiatives have not been recorded.



## 2.0 Models of Inclusive Education

### 2.1 The Irish Context (2019)

As per Hart et al. (2006)<sup>11</sup>, there are three models of inclusive education programmes available to students with intellectual disabilities in the higher education setting<sup>12</sup>. However, this typology requires further consideration, given the range and depth of programmes that have been developed in recent years. The descriptions associated with these particular typologies are quite rigid and do not allow for overlap, as programmes naturally grow. We therefore use these typologies cautiously, as they do not necessarily constitute the level of authentic inclusion within an institution.



Out of the total number of active, inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities in operation for the academic term 2018/2019 (11), the preferred model is the mixed/hybrid model. Three totally inclusive programmes were running, and two substantially separate model programmes were in operation across ten HEPs.

**Figure 7:** Inclusive education models in Republic of Ireland

<sup>11</sup> Hart, D., Grigal, M., Sax, C., Martinez, D. and Will, M. (2006). Postsecondary education options for students with intellectual disabilities. *Institute for Community Inclusion*, [online] (45), p.1. Available at: [https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/224\\_pse%20options.pdf](https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/224_pse%20options.pdf) [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>12</sup> **Mixed/Hybrid:** students participate in academic classes, experience employment opportunities, and engage in social activities with students without disabilities, as well as participating in classes with other students with disabilities.

**Substantially Separate Model:** students only participate in classes with other students with intellectual disabilities.

**Totally Inclusive Model:** there is no specific programme base on campus: students receive individualised services in college courses, certificate programmes and/or degree programmes for audit or credit (Hart et al., 2006).

# 2.0 Models of Inclusive Education

## *How do they compare?*

### 2.2 Personal Development

While each initiative has a unique and bespoke curriculum and course content, there is a strong emphasis on personal development and autonomy across all 11 initiatives. Research shows that youth/adults with disabilities are less self-determined than their non-disabled peers, due to the fact that they have far fewer opportunities to make choices and express preferences across their daily lives (US Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.)<sup>13</sup>. For many students with intellectual disabilities entering these specific programmes, this might be their first opportunity to take control of their own learning and make informed decisions. School systems and curricula can be rigid and tend to be mapped out well in advance for students, whereas higher education offers opportunities for students to think critically, question normative narratives, and become self-directed learners. Modules like personal development, financial management, research skills, health and fitness, advocacy, and human rights all encourage increased levels of self-determination and independence.

### 2.3 Understanding the World Around Us

A number of initiatives deliver modules that could be described as understanding the world around us – through arts, social studies, science, and horticulture. The way we perceive ourselves in relation to the rest of the world influences our behaviours. Students who are supported in expressing themselves through alternative mediums gain a better understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Quite often, societal prejudices enforce fixed identities that negatively affect people with disabilities, as they focus on a deficit or impairment. It is essential for people with disabilities to be aware of these forced identities and understand that they can form a self-identity, while also accepting any impairments as a reality, without losing any sense of self (Wangui Murugami, 2009)<sup>14</sup>. It can be difficult for people with a disability to overcome limitations – both practical and emotional – caused by impairment, if they are not afforded the opportunity to gain experience of overcoming obstacles and developing problem-solving strategies. Yanchak (2005)<sup>15</sup> argues that people with disabilities often encounter difficulties in forming a secure vocational identity because of self-identity issues, rather than decision-making problems.

### 2.4 Work-Related Skills

Considerable focus on employability and work-related skills is being addressed through mathematics, communications, computer skills, technology skills, business and entrepreneurship, and work placement modules, throughout inclusive educational initiatives. The modern world of work is rapidly changing and very unpredictable: jobs are becoming increasingly more skills based and there is more of an emphasis on transferable skill sets and qualifications.

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<sup>13</sup> Aucd.org. (n.d.). *A National Gateway to Self-Determination*. [online] Available at: <http://www.aucd.org/docs/SD-WhatDoWeKnow.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>14</sup> Wangui Murugami, M. (2009). Disability and Identity. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, [online] 29(4). Available at: <http://www.ds-qds.org/article/view/979/1173> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>15</sup> Yanchak, K. (2005). *Relation of Disability Type and Career Thoughts to Vocational Identity* in *Rehabilitation Counseling Bulletin* 48, 3 (2005): 130-138.



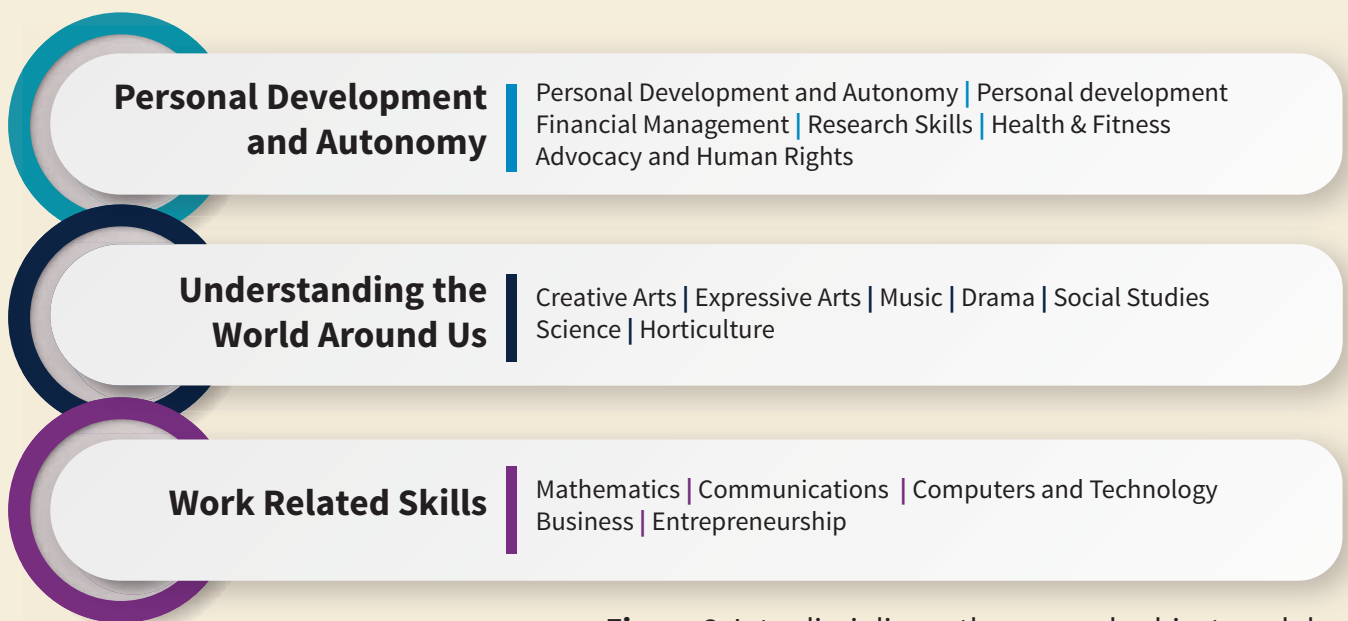


Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), Danny McCoy, suggests the need to prioritise an inclusive and lifelong approach to skills development:

*Flexibility, resilience and an appetite for learning must be ingrained in what we teach and how we teach it throughout the education system (McCoy, 2018)<sup>16</sup>.*

IBEC's philosophy promotes the idea that individuals need to be equipped with well-rounded transferable skills for an ever-changing and unpredictable working landscape. Educating and training individuals for one specific role or task is now a thing of the past and a holistic approach is needed to ensure that graduates are appropriately prepared not only the modern day world of work, but for the unprecedented workforce of tomorrow.

A challenge for individuals with intellectual disabilities is a lack of work experience prior to leaving school (NACBHDD, 2018)<sup>17</sup>. Five initiatives include a work placement module in their curriculum and one other programme offers work placement as an elective module. Work placement opportunities are beneficial for students to gain invaluable experience that may not otherwise have been available to them in the past. Students learn about CV preparation, interview skills and techniques, professional conduct, and workplace procedures. They are supported to make informed choices about their work and career options and equipped with resources to seek, obtain and be successful in employment.



**Figure 8:** Interdisciplinary themes and subject modules

<sup>16</sup> McCoy, D. (2018). *Skills and Employability | Investment in skills and employability*. [online] Smarter World, Smarter Work. Available at: [https://www.ibec.ie/ibec/SWSW.nsf/vPages/Cards~Investment\\_in\\_skills\\_and\\_employability~skills-and-employability?OpenDocument](https://www.ibec.ie/ibec/SWSW.nsf/vPages/Cards~Investment_in_skills_and_employability~skills-and-employability?OpenDocument) [Accessed 27 May 2019].

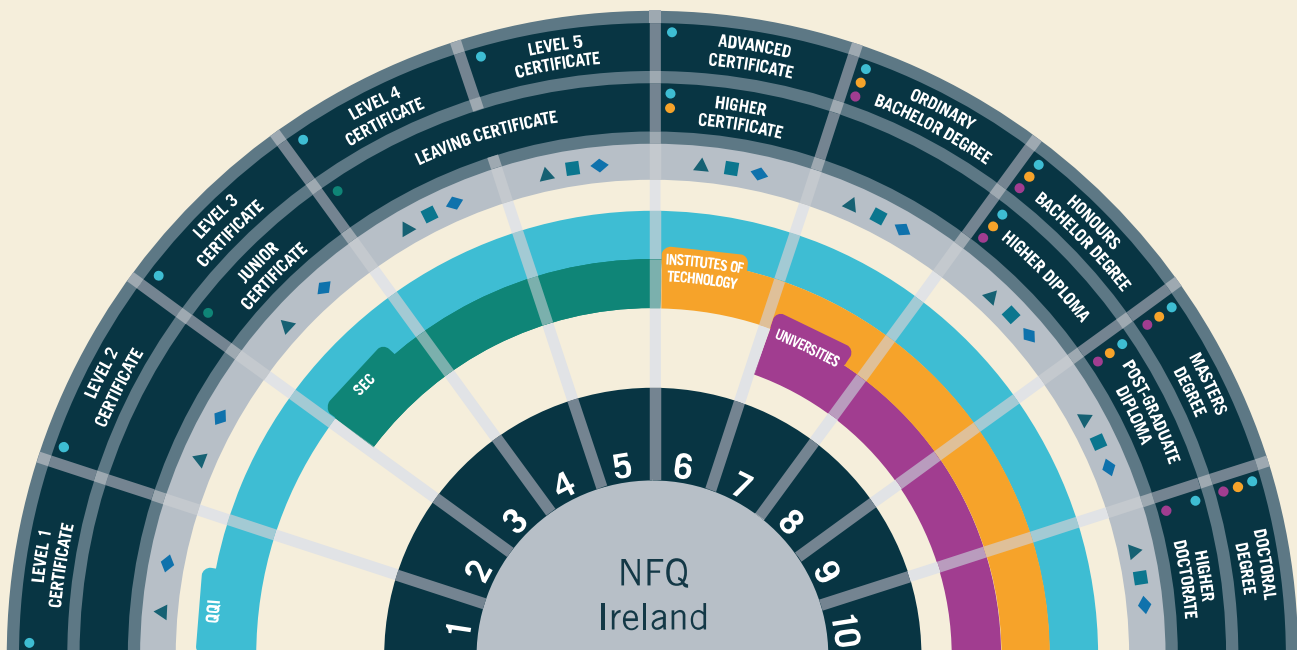
<sup>17</sup> Manderscheid, R. (2018). The importance of work for individuals with intellectual/ developmental disabilities. National Association of County Behavioural Health and Developmental Disability Directors. [online] Available at: <https://www.autism-society.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/IDD-BRIEFING-Employment-importance-Final-2.22.18.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

# 2.0 Models of Inclusive Education

## How do they compare?

### 2.5 Accreditation

Bearing in mind the importance of accreditation and recognition of learning, the vast majority of programmes have formal accreditation and certification, as demonstrated in **Figure 9**<sup>18</sup>, below. There is a wide variety of levels (Quality and Qualifications Ireland [QQI] and equivalent) of accreditation being awarded across the different initiatives, from Level 1 all the way up to minor awards at Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This reflects the diverse range of abilities of the students enrolled in inclusive educational initiatives, nationally. Two initiatives award a certificate of completion of the course, which is an institutional certification and does not constitute formal accreditation, as it is not mapped to a specific level on the NFQ. One initiative has developed a special purpose award, which is higher than a minor award but significantly lower than a major one.



**Figure 9:** National Framework of Qualifications [NFQ]. Quality & Qualifications Ireland

<sup>18</sup> National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). (2003). [online] Available at: [https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](https://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx) [Accessed 27 May 2019].

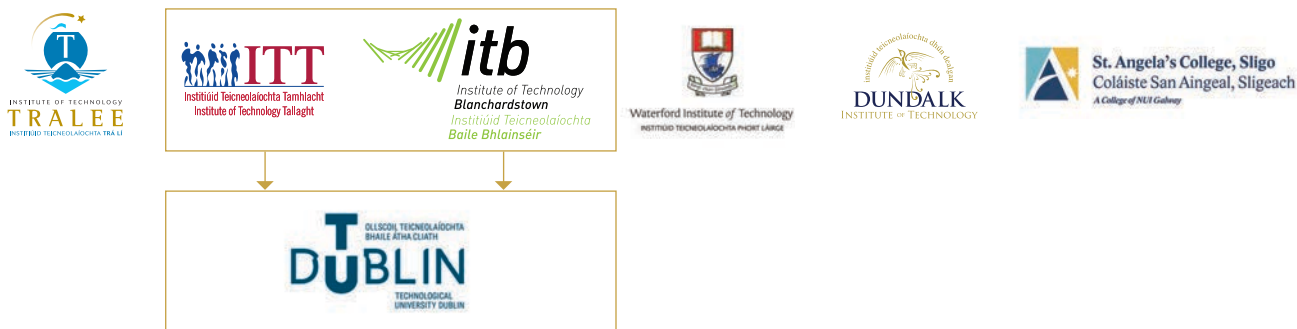


## 2.6 Partnerships

A proportion of the current inclusive educational initiatives have formal partnerships between external organisations and the HEP. Approximately half (6) of these initiatives are paired with external supports and, in some cases (4), facilitators/coordinators are seconded from HSE-funded disability support agencies to work within the higher education setting. In two particular initiatives, informal arrangements are agreed annually, so that classroom assistants will be seconded from disability support agencies for the duration of the course, to support students within the classroom setting, much like the role of a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in primary and post-primary schools.

There are four inclusive educational initiatives that do not have any partnership with external organisations. These initiatives have staff employed directly by the HEPs. This includes, but is not limited to, facilitators, coordinators and teaching staff from across different departments of the college/university. One programme has established a formal partnership with a local Education Training Board (ETB), which offers quality assurance for the course accreditation, while another (1) programme was established through a partnership between a local advocacy group, the local county council and the HEP.

### Partnerships with HSE funded agencies



### Independent initiatives



**Figure 10: Agency partnerships Vs Independent initiatives**

## 2.0 Models of Inclusive Education

Internal levels of support from disability/access offices<sup>19</sup> within HEPs appear to be erratic. In one case, students were fully registered with the disability/access office and were able to avail of funding to pay for a personal assistant per student with particular support needs. In at least three other cases, limited support was available from disability/access offices, due to policy constraints that do not allow students with intellectual disabilities on these particular inclusive educational initiatives full access to the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD)<sup>20</sup>. In the three cases where limited support was made available from the disability/access office, it was recognised that individual relationships between department personnel were an essential factor and if certain people were to change/leave particular roles, the level of additional support might change and/or cease overnight. Within the remaining initiatives, support from the college disability/access office was not further sought, as support was adequate from the previously mentioned external partnerships.

Many students studying on inclusive educational initiatives (8) are registered as part-time or occasional students. Their registration status is based solely on the total number of hours they spend attending lectures and tutorials each week. However, this does not take into account the amount of additional time and support that students with intellectual disabilities often require in order to keep up with coursework and study. Often, students on these programmes are attending college four and five days per week to compensate for the additional support needs of living and studying with an intellectual disability. Students attending three of the inclusive educational initiatives are registered within their respective institutions on a full-time basis.

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<sup>19</sup> Disability support services within HEPs, which are funded by the Fund for Students with Disabilities.

<sup>20</sup> Part-time students could not previously access the FSD, but this policy changed in 2018. However, there still remains issues with students in “Higher Education” accessing FSD, while studying on lower-level courses, i.e. below level 6 on the NFQ.






## 3.0 Progression Routes

### *Navigating the System*

Students with intellectual disability pathways into higher education opportunities tend to vary, depending on the entry criteria of specific education providers and whether or not the initiative is a partnership with external agencies. Five of the initiatives that have formal partnerships with HSE-funded agencies require incoming students to be registered with that service prior to being offered a place on the education programme. In such cases, the disability agency will receive HSE-allocated funding to support the individual, which will typically contribute towards the cost of the staff secondment.

Six initiatives have individual application criteria and procedures and student places are not limited to service users from particular disability support agencies. These programmes share common application criteria, which include:

-  18 years of age
-  Diagnosis of an intellectual disability
-  Committed to ongoing learning and personal development

**Figure 11:** Common application criteria

Many of the initiatives do not have formal academic prerequisites, though one programme requires students to have achieved three or more Level 3 FETAC minor awards or more, while another initiative suggests a capability benchmark of Level 3 on the NFQ as desirable, but no formal achievement of such is required.

All six programmes offer online information and resources, including a downloadable application form, which needs to be completed and submitted to the relevant departments. Additionally, optional open evenings/days or informal opportunities for students to engage with the programme staff and ask questions are available within three of the initiatives. One programme also runs an optional summer school for potential students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year of post-primary school (or mature applicants) to attend and gain insight into what life as a college student is like.

All students applying for college places in these institutions are called for interview and, in some cases (2), they take a basic literacy and numeracy test and those who show realistic ability to be challenged by the course material, but with a potential to succeed, are offered a place. In some cases, students have previously been refused a place on a programme, as the coordinator of the programme felt they would not be challenged by the content of the course and it was not the right fit for them. In other examples, students may be advised on areas to work on before applying for the programme again.

## 3.0 Progression Routes

### ***Navigating the System***

Empirical evidence would suggest that students with intellectual disabilities who complete inclusive education programmes within HEPs quite often regress to attending adult day services for people with intellectual disabilities or a similar service within the disability support agency they were registered with prior to their studies. Unfortunately, many of the HEPs do not, for one reason or another, formally track the progression routes of their graduate students. There is anecdotal evidence which coordinators keep track of personally, whereby some students have progressed to other education opportunities, internships and employment. However, there is no evidence to associate the progression and success of these individuals with their experience and learning on a particular educational programme.

One of the inclusive educational initiatives is currently developing a formal employment transition pathway out of the education programme. Students will have the option of an added year of support in a paid graduate internship programme. The establishment of this structured internship programme will also act as a formal graduate-tracking system, to maximise the graduate students' progress and employment opportunities after they graduate. This additional element of the programme requires intensive support from other dedicated professionals.

One other inclusive educational initiative stated that the next phase of their programme development was to establish a structured employment pathway. However, this had not been established at the time of writing. At least two other coordinators expressed a need and want to develop similarly structured pathways and formal links into employment for their graduating students, although the resources needed for this element of their programme seemed, at the time, unimaginable.

Two of the programmes are currently trialling an individualised model of inclusive education alongside their respective core programme, as a form of progression route for *some* graduates who may wish to continue their formal education<sup>21</sup>. One other initiative has initiated the process of supporting a student to engage with a separate access programme within their institution, whereby the student will audit a mainstream module of interest at Level 6 on the NFQ, while also completing their core programme.

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<sup>21</sup> A graduate of a "Mixed/Hybrid" programme may continue their formal education on a "Totally Inclusive" programme studying mainstream modules at level 6, 7 or 8 on the NFQ



The cost of student fees is inconsistent across different HEPs. This mirrors the range and variety across different initiatives. In most cases (8), students were required to pay full student fees, although the cost of these fees varied from anywhere between €350 per module and €3,000 per academic year. This vast chasm mirrors the characteristics of each programme. The least expensive courses are shorter in length. For example, one course is run over 14 weeks on a part-time basis, with no formal accreditation upon completion, whereas a more expensive course would tend to be a full-time, formally accredited course run over two academic years. For example, see **Figure 12** below.

Student Fees			Course Duration
Per Module	Per Year	Total cost	
€450	-	€450	14 weeks
€450	-	€1,200 (Up front) €1,800 (Installments)	3 years
-	€1,500	€3,000	2 years
€450	-	€1,800	2 years
-	€2,000	€4,000	2 years
-	€3,000	€6,000	2 years + potential graduate internships)
Waived by HEP			2 years
Waived by HEP			1 year
(HSE) Agency Funded			2 years
(HSE) Agency Funded			3 years + optional transition year
Waived by HEP			4 years (Individualised)

**Figure 12:** Table of student fees & course duration



# 4.0 Professional Perspective

## *Facilitators and Challenges of Coordinating an Inclusive Educational Initiative*

### **4.1 Student Inclusion**

Coordinators stressed the importance of full registration within the college as one of the most important aspects of a student's transition into the higher education system. The opportunity to self-identify as a college-going student and being able to affirm this with a personal student identification card gives students a huge sense of pride and purpose. As students on inclusive education programmes are registered within an institution, the process of registration requires engagement and interactions with the wider college community in different departments such as academic registry and the library. By being encouraged and supported to independently engage with these types of administrative systems, students are gaining non-academic related life skills that are transferable into adult life. The processes of booking an appointment online; finding their way across campus to a particular department; taking a ticket and waiting in line to be called up to the counter; and communicating with the administrative staff the purpose of their visit are all familiar steps involved in many public services which students will be prepared for in their adult lives.

Coordinators also acknowledged that engaging with the mainstream administrative systems within institutions encourages administrative personnel to think more inclusively about all students. In some instances, processes and procedures have been identified as being not easily accessible to some students and in need of reform. This, in turn, improves accessibility for the wider college community, as well as the overall service. These incidental knock-on benefits of inclusion and diversity have also been recognised in businesses and organisations where students from inclusive educational initiatives have participated in work placements from one particular HEP.

When students are fully registered as students of an HEP, they then have access to the full range of resources, systems and supports to which all other students are entitled. Attending a Clubs and Society Fair for incoming first-year students has been highlighted as an essential component of welcoming students to college life. Students across various initiatives have expressed to coordinators their excitement when picking and choosing between such a vast number of obscure and niche clubs and societies operating within the college community. In this, students yet again get to experience a sense of self by exploring new and exciting areas of interest and meeting like-minded peers with shared interests.

Similarly, students relayed to coordinators the significance of the informal conversations over a cup of tea or coffee with their peers in the college canteen or surrounding areas. Quite often, as students became familiar with the college campuses, they tended to find their favourite coffee hut to relax and unwind before/after class, where they became familiar with other students and staff who greet them along their way. In this manner, students begin to build up an informal network of natural supports within the college community. Students become familiar with various receptionists, security staff, administrative staff, etc., and develop confidence and self-assurance, when navigating the college campus, that they can rely on these natural supports to point them in the right direction.





## 4.2 Formal Accreditation and Graduation

It is important to note that throughout the development of inclusive educational initiatives over the past decade, formal accreditation has not always been aligned with these types of initiatives. Formerly, many of the initial initiatives offered certificates of completion and were not mapped to any specific level on the NFQ. The dilemma with this is that while many students with intellectual disabilities were completing different education and training programmes, the absence of formal accreditation made it difficult for an employer to understand the level of achievement associated with these achievements. Significant progress has been made in this respect and the majority of the initiatives on offer nationally have mapped their programme to an appropriate level on the NFQ, as outlined in section (2.5). This has been a very important development for students, who will now have a solid indicator of levels achieved, which they can use to map their individual pathway through the education system. Additionally, employers can now see the standard of work each graduate is capable of. Rightly so, students with intellectual disabilities are now being formally acknowledged for their learning.

An issue that has been questioned in relation to accreditation of inclusive educational initiatives is HEPs awarding lower than level 6 on the NFQ. As universities are awarding bodies themselves, they have the ability to award at a lower level. However, institutes of technology (IoTs) are currently accredited by QQI, which can restrict an IoT's flexibility to award students at lower levels.

In most cases, students from inclusive educational initiatives graduate from their respective institutions with their peers from mainstream programmes and courses on offer within the institution. Inclusion within the formal graduation ceremony is one of the most significant moments for students and their families, which gives an authentic acknowledgment from the college/university of the hard work and achievements of each of the graduating students.

## 4.3 Fostering Relationships

Some of the inclusive education programmes have support workers from the disability support service partnerships to assist students within the higher education setting. While this has benefits, it also has its drawbacks, as at times the process can cause friction between academic staff and support staff from external partnering services. A difference in ethos, working culture, and approaches from differing professional backgrounds was proved to be challenging, with the coordinator in one case having to take a gap year from the programme to re-evaluate and review the programme.

Highlighted by one particular coordinator was the “unwritten” responsibility of the coordinator to “nourish relationships” between academic staff, college personnel, college management and the social care practitioners from the partnering agencies.

## 4.0 Professional Perspective

### *Facilitators and Challenges of Coordinating an Inclusive Educational Initiative*

In other cases, the partnerships between the disability support agency and the HEP have proved to be essential to the success of the programme, especially where the coordinator is seconded from the disability support agency to facilitate the programme. In these particular cases, coordinators pointed out the importance of the HEP in providing staff credentials and privileges to the coordinator. However, this was not always enough for seconded staff to feel like they had “real influence”, when it came to decision making for the advancement of their programme within the institution.

As previously touched upon, relationships within and among different college departments were essential to the successful implementation and running of a programme. However, it was acknowledged that these relationships can be very individualised and a change in staff role and/or position could drastically affect the supports available to students on the course, with immediate effect. This is due to the nature of these informal, local arrangements and personalised relationships. In most cases, administrative staff and other college personnel were more than willing to work with coordinators and students alike, to ensure that students were included within the different college systems.

#### **4.4 Applicants and Progression Routes**

Increasingly, more and more students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other disabilities (other than an intellectual disability) appear to be applying for places on inclusive educational initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities. This has forced coordinators to rethink the student profiles for which the courses are designed and to specify that evidentiary documentation of intellectual disability as a primary diagnosis may be required for acceptance on a course. This causes concern about the number of students with ASD or other disabilities being denied a place on the course, and about where to direct them.

Likewise, coordinators have experienced situations where applicants to their course do qualify on grounds of intellectual disability diagnosis, but their capability level may be higher than the standard of the course, which means they would not be challenged by the content. In such situations, coordinators felt they had limited information or advice to point these students in the right direction. Typically, these students would be very capable of achieving high academic standards, but their main challenge is meeting entry criteria to mainstream courses.

As highlighted in section **3.0**, the issue of progression routes for students with intellectual disabilities is a major concern for the coordinators of inclusive educational initiatives. Many coordinators shared a common apprehension that, without structured progression routes for their students, there is a strong chance that many would regress, despite flourishing during their course of study. Coordinators mentioned occasions where parents/guardians of potential students asked, “What happens after the course? Where do they go then?”. The benefits of attending an inclusive education programme are tenfold and have been identified throughout the report. Nonetheless, coordinators are cautious about promising too much with regard to outcomes and about supporting students in their transition, on completion of the programme. This is simply a repercussion of a lack of resources and sustainability for each of the initiatives. Coordinators expressed a want and need to develop various models of structured progression pathways for their graduating students, although they currently have no funding or resources to even consider establishing this additional, yet essential, support.



#### 4.5 Student Fees and Grants

There is an inconsistency in student fees across all the initiatives, which is a reflection of the diversity of different programmes, the different levels of courses, and individual course lengths. It is also a collective issue for coordinators that there is no consistency for students and families when selecting a suitable inclusive education programme. In some cases, students are expected to pay full student fees and in other cases, depending on the local arrangements within the institutions, student fees are being waived or subsidised by the partnering disability support agency. This causes major confusion for students and their families. Depending on where they are geographically situated, students may or may not be able to afford to attend an inclusive education programme.

Students enrolled on inclusive education programmes currently do not have access to grants available to their peers who are enrolled on other higher education programmes (degree programmes, etc.). “Intellectual Disability” is not a named disability on the criteria for the FSD (HEA, 2018). This is a systematic oversight, which suggests a lack of expectation for students with intellectual disabilities to progress to higher-level education. As highlighted in WALK’s (2015) report<sup>22</sup>, one of the main barriers for people with intellectual disabilities to access mainstream education and training is low expectation and blanket assumptions. As we move towards a more diverse and inclusive education system with opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to thrive within the higher education sector, these students on their individual journeys are challenging the historical expectations and raising the bar in terms of academic achievement and personal developmental success despite not having full access to the mainstream grants and funding support systems.

#### 4.6 Sustainability and Funding Models

Without a national response to widening access to higher education for this specific cohort, the most prominent and worrying challenge for coordinators is guaranteeing that their respective programme(s) would be running again the following year. Some coordinators are reluctant to promote their programme or to actively recruit students for the programme, as they are uncertain if the funding allocations will be in place for the following academic year. Many of the programmes are funded primarily through philanthropic and charitable donations which means the funding, by its very nature, is sporadic and indefinite. Sustainability is a burning issue for many of the initiatives nationally, as reflected earlier in this report – the decrease in operational programmes across Irish HEPs since 2014, due to a lack of core funding, is very worrying. It is important to recognise that the discontinuation of these initiatives is in no way associated with any form of failure of the particular initiative, but solely a failure of the existing infrastructure to support these types of initiatives, both financially and systemically. Inclusive educational initiatives that have been discontinued since 2014 have all run into the same issue of sustainability and a lack of formal funding stream. This meant that any development was down to the goodwill of the individuals involved in the running of the programme. It has been stated that, in some of these cases, “the goodwill has run out” and that programmes are no longer viable without access to a formal funding stream.

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<sup>22</sup> WALK (2015). *Accessing Mainstream Training: Barriers for People with Intellectual Disabilities*. [online] Dublin: Equality Mainstreaming Unit. Available at: <http://www.walk.ie/perch/resources/walk-accessing-mainstream-training-report-2015.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

## 4.0 Professional Perspective

### *Facilitators and Challenges of Coordinating an Inclusive Educational Initiative*

#### 4.7 Onus on Higher Education Providers

It was expressed that there does not appear to be any onus on the institutions to take responsibility for “these types of programmes”, so the programmes are underfunded and under-resourced. A number of coordinators stated they “were keeping their head above water” in relation to the sustainability of their particular inclusive educational initiative. A common consensus among coordinators was the value that inclusive educational initiatives bring to the wider college/university community, though this value is not always reflected when it comes down to funding and much-needed resources. Although efforts within the policy remit have made advancements toward widening participation within higher education for a diverse student body (HEA, 2015)<sup>23</sup>, little focus has been directed towards students with an intellectual disability who wish to access the higher education system.

In the United States of America (USA), the introduction of the Higher Education Opportunities Act in 2008 has meant that access to higher-education opportunities has drastically increased for students with intellectual disabilities. In 2015, Think College had identified 242 inclusive programmes across the USA<sup>24</sup>. This figure has more recently been reported to have increased to 264 post-secondary education programmes that are specifically designed to serve college students with intellectual disabilities (Oakes, Miller and Milroy, 2018)<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019. (2015). [online] Dublin: Higher Education Authority. Available at: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/National-Plan-for-Equity-of-Access-to-Higher-Education-2015-2019.pdf> [Accessed 27 May 2019].

<sup>24</sup> College options for people with intellectual disabilities. (2017). [online]: Think College. Available at: <http://www.thinkcollege.net/databases/programs-database?view=programsdatabase>

<sup>25</sup> Postsecondary Education Programs A New Employment Opportunity for Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists. (2018). *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 3.



## 4.8 Professional Burnout

A vivid concern among many of the coordinators participating in the study is professional burnout, due to the fact that much of the day-to-day work they do for the inclusive education programmes to remain operational can be in isolation and on top of their existing role/workload within the institution. Some coordinators stated they put in the extra effort and supports needed, due to the fact that they personally care about the programme, but they do not receive anything in return. It is clear from the participants that the success achieved within institutions continues due to the goodwill of particular individuals.

Stress and burnout can impact on the wellbeing of the worker and the quality of the service or production within organisations (Seaward, 2004)<sup>26</sup>. Research linking work stress theories to professionals working with people with intellectual disabilities has identified the “Demand-Control-Support” model, which suggests that jobs that are high in demands, low in control, and low in social support are those that carry the highest risk of stress for workers (Karasek and Theorell 1990; Theorell 2001)<sup>27</sup>.

As many of the coordinators of the inclusive educational initiatives suggested a feeling of working in isolation and minimal supports – i.e. institutional support and resource supports – according to the demand-control-support model, it could be assumed that a degree of stress correlates with the nature of the role of coordinators who go above and beyond to ensure that the programmes are operational each year.

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<sup>26</sup> Devereux, J., Hastings, R. and Noone, S. (2009). Staff Stress and Burnout in Intellectual Disability Services: Work Stress Theory and its Application. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 22(6), pp.561-573.

<sup>27</sup> Rodríguez, I., Bravo, M., Peiró, J. and Schaufeli, W. (2001). The Demands-Control-Support model, locus of control and job dissatisfaction: A longitudinal study. *Work & Stress*, 15(2), pp.97-114.

## 5.0 Discussion and Recommendations

### *Where to Go from Here?*

The range and depth of programmes on offer indicate a strong commitment from HEPs to addressing the educational and social inequalities experienced by people with intellectual disabilities. While course content varies across institutions, there is a core of discernible priorities, including personal development, work-readiness skills; accessing arts, science, and business; and developing advocacy skills. There is clear evidence that people with intellectual disabilities benefit from engagement with these programmes and it is regularly reported that these participants gain a stronger understanding of themselves and the world they live in.

It is evident that these programmes have been designed as a response to the lack of post-school options for young people who have an intellectual disability. However, it is equally evident that transition pathways to post-secondary provision for these students are often ad-hoc, and that making the progression to post-school educational provision relies heavily on the capacity of families. The predominance of HEP partnerships with service providers is indicative of the traditional government focus on health-related spending to support this population. Focused government spending on developing viable transition pathways for this populace into post-school educational provision is currently lacking. It is apparent that these young people and their families wish to avail of a range of post-school options, rather than taking the traditional route into day service provision. Students attending inclusive educational initiatives are currently (Spring 2019) unable to access SUSI grants and higher education institutions are unable to avail of the FSD for this cohort.

Despite these systemic limitations, these 13 programmes have demonstrated what is possible in developing authentic educational opportunities for this population. These programmes have the additional advantage of clearly addressing government commitments to the sustainable development goals and the obligations incurred as a result of the ratification of the UNCRPD. All 13 inclusive educational initiatives are in line with, and complement with, the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals 2030<sup>28</sup>. In particular, these initiatives address two crucial goals directly:



**Figure 13:** Sustainable development goals. (United Nations, 2015)

<sup>28</sup> Sustainabledevelopment.un.org. (2015). *Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform*. [online] Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300> [Accessed 27 May 2019].





In November 2018, the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF)<sup>29</sup> met for the first time in Trinity College Dublin. INHEF is a national interest group comprising representatives of HEPs who offer, or have an interest in offering, programmes of inclusive education to learners with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. INHEF's mission is to provide a forum for consultation between providers, with a view to driving strategic developments, informing policy, building capacity within HEPs to deliver inclusive educational initiatives for people with intellectual disabilities, and facilitating the sustainability of existing and future programmes of inclusive higher education in Ireland.

With the aim of supporting the existing inclusive education programmes across Ireland, INHEF seeks to take the following initial steps:

### **1. Organisational:**

- a) Establish itself as an Unincorporated Association
- b) Create national visibility for inclusive educational initiatives across Ireland via online presence (independent website, social media, etc.) with a strategic awareness campaign and an official launch.

### **2. Collaboration:**

- a) Create a space for higher education representatives to collaborate and share best practice at any stage of development or growth for inclusive educational initiatives, nationally.

### **3. Ensure Sustainability:**

- a) Advise and work with government bodies and representatives towards campaigning for coherent policy and long-term sustainable funding streams for inclusive higher educational initiatives across Ireland.
- b) Engage with the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the HEA to secure core funding and access to SUSI grants and FSD.

### **4. Develop a Support Infrastructure:**

- a) Engage with the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) to bring prominence to the barriers and issues at institutional and sectoral levels.
- b) Network with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Disability Advisory Working Network (DAWN) to gain wider support with addressing inequalities experienced by students with intellectual disabilities.

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<sup>29</sup> Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF), [www.inhef.ie](http://www.inhef.ie)

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## 5.0 Discussion and Recommendations

### *Where to Go from Here?*

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#### **5. Create a national network of employers:**

- a) Forge links with employer groups nationally, to support employment transition post-graduation for students studying on inclusive education programmes and to foster a culture of inclusive practice within the workplace, by supporting and encouraging employers with regard to the role they can play.

For far too long, young people with intellectual disabilities have been excluded from the benefits within society readily available to their peers. Young people with intellectual disabilities and their families wish to avail of the educational and employment opportunities that will enable them to lead independent lives. Higher education institutions have the potential to establish lifelong learning programmes designed to provide for such people meaningful employment and participation in society.

Already, across Ireland, we have exemplars of how higher education can engage in enabling people with intellectual disabilities to achieve their lifelong goals. The vision, the passion to succeed, and the commitment to improving the lives of these young people is very evident in the INHEF. We need partners in Government, higher and further education, and the employers' community to help us to achieve our goals. We believe that with the ratification of the UNCRPD, Ireland is ready to take the lead in establishing sustainable, inclusive educational programmes designed to transform the lives of young people with intellectual disabilities, their families, our education institutions, and our workplaces.













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