
Collaborating for Inclusion: A National Forum of Inclusive Higher Education Providers

Introduction

People with an intellectual disability (ID) have long been excluded from higher education. While the shift in national and international policy has seen an increase of students with ID attending mainstream primary and post-primary schools, research demonstrates that few transition to post-secondary education and/or employment opportunities in the Republic of Ireland.

Over the past decade, higher education providers in Ireland have attempted to address the lacunae in post-school provision for students with intellectual disabilities, through the provision of a number of inclusive pathways which aim to empower people with ID to acquire the skills and knowledge required to gain meaningful employment and progressive career opportunities.

In this article, we outline the creation of a national forum of inclusive higher education providers (INHEF) which seeks to collaboratively address the systematic barriers faced by people with ID in post-secondary education and articulate a shared vision of inclusive higher education provision informed by a rights-based perspective.

Policy change

There has been a shift in policy at a national ([EPSEN Act, 2004](#)) and international ([UNCRC, 2006](#)) level, spurring a significant increase in students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream primary and secondary-level education in the Republic of Ireland, though few successfully transition to further/higher education and/or employment opportunities ([Aston, Banks & Shevlin, 2021](#); [O'Brien, 2009](#)). In 2021, the [Economic and Social Research Institute \(ESRI\)](#) reported that just only 6 per cent of respondents with an intellectual disability had a third-level qualification in 2016, and only 14.7 per cent of those with an intellectual disability worked in 'some capacity' in the same year ([Kelly & Maitre, 2021](#)).

People with an intellectual disability, who have historically been restricted from accessing mainstream education and training ([WALK, 2015](#)), miss out on acquiring the skills and knowledge required to gain meaningful employment and progressive career opportunities and are deprived of the social and cultural capital that is associated with a further/higher education certificate or degree ([O'Donovan, 2021](#)).

[The Bologna Process \(1999\)](#) has sparked change across European post-secondary and higher education institutions, and the importance of equal access to higher education for all non-traditional students, such as those with disabilities has been brought to the forefront of higher education policy ([Kubiak, et al., 2021](#)). The establishment of the [Association for Higher Education Access and Disability \(AHEAD\)](#) and the introduction of the [Fund for Students with Disabilities \(FSD\)](#) by the Department of Education in 1994, sought to address issues of equity for students with disabilities. The FSD was the first official investment from government and a recognition that people with disabilities can succeed at higher level. The FSD supported the financial cost of providing reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities and was used to establish and resource the

disability/access offices across the sector.

Further initiatives such as the [Disability Access Route to Education \(DARE\)](#) and the [Higher Education Access Route \(HEAR\)](#) were established with the aim of further facilitating progression to higher education among students with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Approximately 6.2% of the total student population for the 2018/2019 academic year was made up of students with disabilities – an increase of 7% from the 2017/18 academic year ([AHEAD, 2020](#)). However, one cohort of students with disabilities, namely students with intellectual disabilities, have been excluded from these key policy initiatives. Yet, a minority of this cohort are attending higher education campuses as participants in bespoke programmes which seek to expand the principle of inclusion and action the right to education of people with intellectual disabilities. This article documents the emergence of these previously undocumented programmes and describes the development and ongoing work of the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum, a collaborative forum of educators who have pioneered inclusive education initiatives across a range of Irish higher education institutions.

Establishing the Inclusive National Higher Education Forum (INHEF)

Over the past decade, a number of educators in higher education institutions in Ireland have attempted to address the lacunae in post-school provision for students with intellectual disabilities through the development of pioneering education programmes. These atypical pathways to higher education aim to empower students with intellectual disabilities and support them to realise their full potential by providing them with a wide range of academic curricula and transferable skills to enable them to live a more independent life. ([Aston, 2021](#); [Corby, et al., 2019](#); [Maxwell & Leane, 2021](#); [Slattery, 2021](#)). Research has demonstrated how participation in post-secondary education increases self-esteem and confidence ([Myers, et al., 1998](#)); social skills and relationships ([Hughson, et al., 2006](#)); and self-determination ([Gibbons, et al., 2015](#)). It also helps to scaffold employment opportunities for graduates with intellectual disabilities ([Grigal, et al., 2010](#); [Kubiak, et al., 2019](#)).

Establishing, and successfully running an inclusive education programme for students with intellectual disabilities can be challenging, and course coordinators often go above and beyond to ensure their students receive a quality education and get to fully experience life as a college/university student. A significant challenge for many of the professionals running these programmes is that the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities has been built on a model of 'add-on' supports, meaning these programmes sit on the margins of the higher education system, rather than being fully embedded in the mainstream activities of these institutions.

Over the years in which these programmes have been running, attempts were made by individual course coordinators working with students with intellectual disabilities in third-level settings to connect with each other, however, there was no dedicated forum to meaningfully engage with one another to address the systematic barriers faced by this population. The [Inclusive National Higher Education Forum \(INHEF\)](#) was [launched in 2018](#) to provide a collaborative space for consultation between higher education providers with a view to driving strategic developments; informing policy debates, and building capacity within higher education institutions to establish, and deliver initiatives for students with intellectual disabilities across the Republic of Ireland.

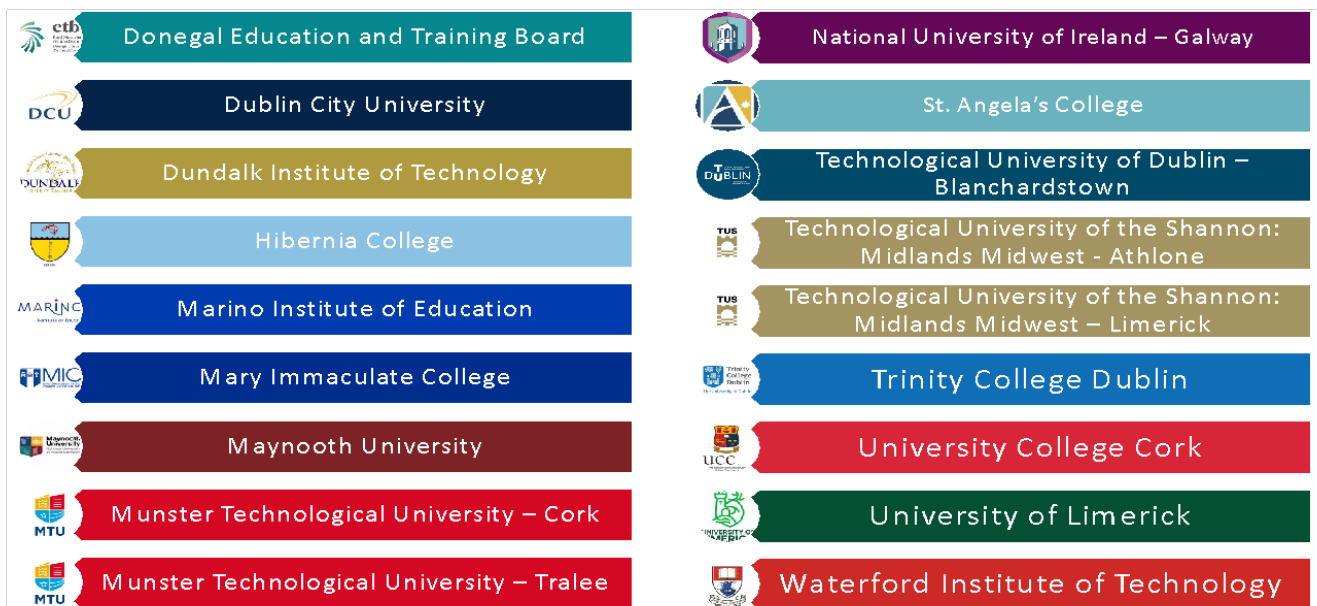


Fig 1 INHEF Member Representative Institutions, 2021

Target Group for Higher Education Inclusive Education Programmes

As each INHEF member runs their education programmes independently, the target groupings differ slightly from one provider to the next. INHEF member programmes tend to be located between levels 1–5 on the [National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#), with most programmes offering a level 3 qualification. Some providers have not been able to award a formal qualification at lower levels than is traditionally offered by their institution.

The target group for these inclusive education initiatives tends to be young people with a mild to moderate intellectual disability, using the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) definition of intellectual disability:

Definition: intellectual disability



Intellectual disability means a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This results in a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), and begins before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development.

Disability depends not only on a child's health conditions or impairments but also and crucially on the extent to which environmental factors support the child's full participation and inclusion in society.

The use of the term intellectual disability in the context of the WHO initiative "Better health, better lives" includes children with autism who have intellectual impairments. It also encompasses children who have been placed in institutions because of perceived disabilities or family rejection and who consequently acquire developmental delays and psychological problems.

Fig 2 WHO definition of intellectual disability

Increasing Demand

INHEF members have been offering inclusive education programmes to learners with intellectual disabilities for more than a decade in one form or another. The number of students on programmes ranges from 5-15 pupils, with some exceptions of providers with larger intakes of up to 22 students offering short courses online. Some providers recruit a new cohort annually, others recruit one cohort per cycle (every 2-3 years). Despite the consistent intake of new cohorts, INHEF members have been reluctant to publicly promote their programmes for fears of limited resources and funding to continue running the programme in the following academic year. However, these programmes have successfully recruited full cohorts by word of mouth and quality reputation for over a decade.

The number of young people with an intellectual disability is increasing in line with the 'baby boom', as highlighted in the [Disability Capacity Review to 2032](#) published in 2021. An ever-increasing number of this cohort are attending mainstream primary and post-primary education settings. The [National Ability Support System \(NASS\)](#) figures for 2019 highlight the increase in students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream primary (n=1891, 29.3%) and post-primary (n=859, 10.5%) education.

The [NASS](#) figures also highlight the stark absence of educational progression for those with an intellectual disability post second level. In 2019 a tiny minority (n=95, 0.6%) engaged in third level education with somewhat higher though still very small numbers involved in rehabilitative training (n=988, 6.2%). Day service provision has become the largest programme of support for young people with intellectual disabilities upon leaving school. Currently, many participants with intellectual disabilities transfer to day services on completing traditional rehabilitative training with very few sustaining meaningful career trajectories. As such people with intellectual disabilities are offered little choice in terms of meaningful opportunity for engagement with, and progression through, further/higher education and training ([Aston, Banks and Shevlin, 2021](#); [ESRI, 2021](#)).

Appendix C

Table C Day services; use, enhancement required and unmet need by age, NASS 2019									
Day Service	Current Use n (%)*			Enhancement required n (%)**			Unmet need n (%)***		
	U18	18 +	Total	U18	18 +	Total	U18	18 +	Total
Pre-schools	418	0	418	34	0	34	106	0	106
Mainstream pre-school	214 (3.3)	0	214 (1.0)	12 (0.2)	0	12 (5.6)	78 (1.2)	0	78 (0.4)
Special pre-school	204 (3.2)	0	204 (0.9)	22 (0.3)	0	22 (10.8)	28 (0.4)	0	28 (0.1)
Primary schools	3,271	23	3,294	328	6	334	150	0	150
Mainstream primary school	1,444 (22.4)	0	1,444 (6.4)	56 (0.9)	0	56 (3.9)	65 (1.0)	0	65 (0.3)
Special primary school	1,381 (21.4)	22 (0.1)	1,403 (6.3)	176 (2.7)	6 (0.0)	182 (13.0)	51 (0.8)	0	51 (0.2)
Special class/unit in mainstream primary school	446 (6.9)	~	447 (2.0)	96 (1.5)	0	96 (21.5)	34 (0.5)	0	34 (0.2)
Secondary schools	1,423	384	1,807	185	38	223	86	0	86
Mainstream secondary school	449 (7.0)	136 (0.9)	585 (2.6)	41 (0.6)	14 (0.1)	55 (9.4)	38 (0.6)	0	38 (0.2)
Special secondary school	748 (11.6)	200 (1.3)	948 (4.2)	83 (1.3)	17 (0.1)	100 (10.5)	14 (0.2)	0	14 (0.1)
Special class/unit in mainstream secondary school	226 (3.5)	48 (0.3)	274 (1.2)	61 (0.9)	7 (0.0)	68 (24.8)	34 (0.5)	0	34 (0.2)
Third level education	0	95	95	0	7	7	~	7	8
Third level education	0	95 (0.6)	95 (0.4)	0	7 (0.0)	7 (7.4)	~	7 (0.0)	8 (0.0)
Home tutor	7	0	7	~	0	~	~	0	~
Home tutor	7 (0.1)	0	7 (0.0)	~	0	~	~	0	~
Total	5,236	12,556	17,792	550	2,014	598	479	594	350

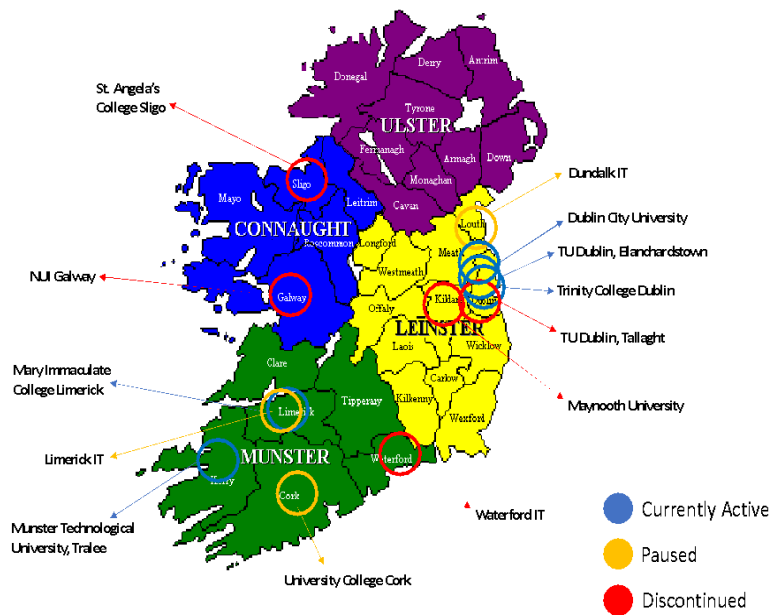
*% based on total population (U18 n = 6,452; over 18 n = 15982)
 **% based on number currently accessing the service
 ***% based on the number not currently accessing the service
 ~ To protect against the risk of indirect identification of individuals, values in cells containing less than five cases have been suppressed.

National NASS Bulletin | 2019

Fig 3 Day service and progression of people with ID

Current Provision of Higher Education Pathways for Students with ID

In the 2021-2022 academic year, there are just five INHEF affiliated higher education providers offering education programmes to learners with intellectual disabilities, nationally. While the Covid-19 pandemic and the uncertainty around a return to on-campus teaching has impacted a number of providers from recruiting a new cohort for their inclusive programmes, the number of programmes on offer to students with intellectual disabilities has been on a downward trajectory for a number of years ([Aston, 2019](#)).



INHEF Member Representative Institutions, 2021

INHEF Core Principles

Despite the array of inclusive curricula on offer, each of the programmes shares the same core principles that underpin and foster the inclusive nature of these types of programmes.



01 Creating educational contexts which celebrate and reflect societal diversity, with a particular emphasis on including people with ID within the landscape of further and higher education in Ireland.



02 Creating meaningful educational opportunities that afford choice to people with ID, to attend community based rather than congregated settings.



03 Creating multiple progression pathways which enable people with ID to transition to employment, and/or progress to educational initiatives on the NFQ.



04 Creating appropriate quality assurance structures which are student-centered and driven by inclusive pedagogical principles and assessment practices.



05 Removing barriers which inhibit full and meaningful access and engagement to third level education for people with ID.

INHEF Core Principles, 2021?

In addition to the core principles that INHEF providers of inclusive higher education provision share, students completing these programmes are actively encouraged to develop the following graduate attributes as a result of

their inclusion within the landscape of higher education.



INHEF Graduate Attributes, 2021

Full Participation

Participation in third level education offers a broad experience that includes the academic, social, and cultural aspects of life as a college student. Over time, INHEF affiliated programmes have worked hard to embed their education programmes into the mainstream systems within their own institutions so students with intellectual disabilities are recognised as fully participating students and members of the college/university community. It is imperative that students with an intellectual disability are accorded parity of recognition, have the same rights and responsibilities as other students, and have access to the full range of services and supports enjoyed by their peers. A human rights-based approach to education at all levels ([UNCRPD, 2006](#)) requires that students with intellectual disabilities are fully registered and enjoy the same rights as other members of the student body. It is vital that students with intellectual disabilities are not perceived, or administratively categorised, as visitors to the college/university.

Flexible Accreditation Framework

Research has shown that one of the challenges associated with including people with intellectual disabilities in higher education, is the expectation of fitting into existing degree courses ([Corby, et al. 2012](#)). In the Irish context, a key challenge associated with providing courses of education for people with intellectual disabilities in higher education is achieving formal programme accreditation that is achievable for people with intellectual disabilities.

The [National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#) typically recognises further education and training as levels 1-6 and higher education awards at levels 6-10. The inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in third-level education, therefore, requires the creation of an inclusive pathway to third-level education for this cohort that is student-centred; responsive to their learning needs; is flexible; – and – fully integrated within the existing accreditation framework.

Progression Pathways

The [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 \(Department of Education and Skills, 2011\)](#) was published in the immediate aftermath of the economic recession, while the Republic of Ireland, and many other countries were in a state of recovery. The Report of the Strategy Group stated:

If Ireland is to achieve its ambitions for recovery and development within an innovation-driven economy, it is essential to create and enhance human capital by expanding participation in higher education. The scale of the projected widening and growth in participation over the period of this strategy demands that Ireland's higher education system become much more flexible in provision in both time and place, and that it facilitates transfer and progression through all levels of the system.

[\(Department of Education and Skills, 2011\)](#)

In 2021, we are facing a new, and unprecedented state of societal recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet again, our higher education system will play a vital role in this recovery and it is essential that our definition of 'progression' be flexible within and across higher education institutions.

Educational Progression

Progression for students with intellectual disabilities is less linear than it is for traditional learners. They display progression patterns that are marked by circularity within and across further and higher education systems and rehabilitative training structures. Facilitation of flexibility within and across education and training systems is a core principle of inclusive and student-centred educational provision for people with intellectual disabilities.

As currently configured under the NFQ, further education and higher education facilitate the acquisition of prescribed skill and knowledge sets, that are commensurate with vocational and professional employment destinations. This qualification and employment trajectory is designed to scaffold the educational journeys of people without disabilities. It does not map productively onto the life trajectories of people with intellectual disabilities. The reasons why people with intellectual disabilities seek to engage in higher education, how they engage and what they expect to gain from this engagement, are different to those of people without intellectual disabilities. For people with intellectual disabilities, the value of such engagement is the potential it provides for socially valued, shared learning and social experiences with their peers. Having the opportunity to engage in co-learning in mainstream settings constitutes progression in that it provides much needed social and cultural capital for people with intellectual disabilities. As such, consideration of progression for students with intellectual disabilities must include recognition of the social return on investment ([Kova, T. et al., 2021](#)) as well as the academic/qualification value of the learning experience.

Career Progression

It is well established that people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be placed in day services ([NAAS, 2019](#)); unemployed ([ESRI, 2021](#)); more dependent on social welfare ([Make Work Pay, 2017](#)); and living with an increased risk of living in poverty ([ESRI, 2017](#); [ESRI, 2021](#)).

A significant challenge for individuals with intellectual disabilities is a lack of work experience prior to leaving school ([Manderscheid, 2018](#)). Many of the INHEF programmes incorporate work preparation and placement opportunities

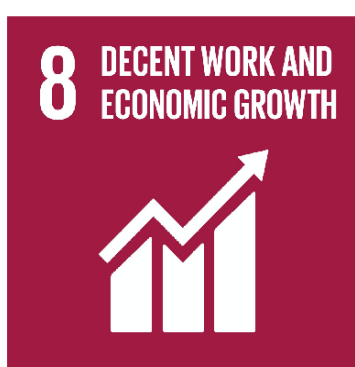
within their formal curriculum. Students learn about C.V. preparation, interview skills and techniques, professional conduct, and workplace procedures. They are supported to make informed choices about their work and career options and equipped with resources to seek, obtain and be successful in employment. In some cases, a structured pathway to employment is supported through employer engagement ([Corby, et al., 2021](#)), or a graduate internship programme facilitated through a network of business partners ([Shevlin, et al., 2020](#)).

Sustainability

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all



Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all



Reduce inequality within and among countries

[Sustainable Development Goals \(United Nations, 2015\)](#)

Current Funding Models

Some INHEF affiliated programmes have closed due to a lack of sustainable funding ([Aston, 2019](#)). Many of the programmes have been funded through a philanthropic funding model, while others have operated on a 'cost-neutral' basis; with existing faculty members contributing hours to teaching and/or programme coordination. Neither of these options allows for programmes to develop strategically, due to lack of capacity to plan beyond specific and limited timeframes. At an operational level, many programmes rely on part-time staff who work on hourly contracts and who cannot be retained from year-to-year. The lack of sustainable core funding also impacts programme marketing and recruitment, as due to funding constraints many providers are unable to determine if they will continue to operate from year to year.

It is a core belief of INHEF members that public funding should be allocated to enable educational initiatives to continue to serve people with an intellectual disability in higher education. This is an important ethical imperative that stems from a rights-based perspective and sees education as a basic human right for all members of society, and in particular people with intellectual disabilities who have historically occupied marginalised identities within society in general and education in particular ([UNCRPD, 2006](#)).

Acknowledgement

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