

'WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE?'

Guidance Counsellors are helping students with disabilities to shape their futures by making the transition into higher education.

In a follow up to the joint publication between AHEAD and NCGE, *Charting Your Course: A handbook for Guidance Counsellors and Information Officers working with disability issues in adult education (2008)*, AHEAD provides information and guidelines for guidance counsellors who are helping students with disabilities to shape their futures by making the transition into higher education.

The Education Act 1998 states that a school shall use its available resources to ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices.

In the DES Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 of the Education Act 1998, relating to students access to appropriate guidance” schools are encouraged to develop a whole school guidance plan which should reflect the needs of both junior and senior cycle students. These guidelines clearly state in relation to students with disabilities and special needs that *‘The school’s guidance plan should take cognisance of the available support services and include provision for an appropriate range of interventions, information formats and delivery methodologies to meet the special needs of these students.’*

Whole school guidance plans should include written policies on supports available to students with disabilities and/or special needs. School Policies covering issues such as clarification around confidentiality, disclosure of disability, mental health issues, the consideration of parental involvement and the whole school guidance approach should be documented.

School policies should include a written consent form for parents and students with disabilities regarding disclosure etc.

With these structures in place within the school, this supplement from AHEAD will provide further guidelines for the guidance counsellor to support their students with disabilities in preparing for higher education.

AHEAD

AHEAD is a National Centre of Expertise whose central role is to share expertise and information on how professionals can include students with disabilities in their services. AHEAD works to build disability confidence and to change mindsets about the ability of students with disability and to actively promote equal access to higher education

Our lives run on assumptions. Some of our assumptions are based on fact. If we know dog breeds, for example, we know it's a lot safer to cosy up to a Labrador puppy than it is to pet a strange, full-grown Rottweiler. Not all of our assumptions are based on fact, however, and we make assumptions about other people, based on little more than a glance. Unconsciously, our prejudices and stereotypes can guide our behaviours and decisions. Those decisions can be enormously important to someone else's life.

Most people make assumptions when they encounter somebody with a disability. We can assume, if the disability is visible, that the person needs help, sympathy, that they are sick or have a problem. These cultural assumptions are powerful and affect our actions even when the individual is not in front of us. For example, we go through the CV of someone who wants to become a nurse, and – somewhere in the CV – we find a reference to a disability, we may immediately assume this disability means the person can't be a nurse. This assumption is simplistic and WRONG.

Traditionally students with disability did not go to third level, ten years ago there were only 400 students with disabilities in higher education, less than 1%. Today there are over 6,800 or 5% of the student population studying across all courses and they have the same career ambitions and expectations as any other student. Advances in innovative technology are enabling these students to take a place in higher education in a way not possible ten years ago. Technology opens doors and allows students to fully engage in education in real time, the same as any other student. Sophisticated voice recognition software and MP3 players make a huge difference and blind students can now access information, scan documents and use software to read and write, where previously they were unable to engage with such activities. Tools such as e-books, moodle and computer software such as Texthelp literacy systems, can unlock the world of learning for students who have visual impairments or dyslexia and allow them to learn independently.

Attitudes to disability can change in an instant. We are all familiar with the ambiguous vase illusion; it is the one where you see two vases. When you look at it long enough your perception shifts and you see two faces, two profiles facing each other. This is the moment when the teacher or guidance counsellor stops seeing the disability and sees the person with talents, different thinking and ambitions, who just happens to have a disability. This is a dramatic shift in perception one where the disability shifts into the background and the abilities take centre stage.

It is a fact that students and graduates with disabilities are creative, motivated, hard working and due to their circumstances well used to thinking outside the box. These qualities are highly valued in today's knowledge economy.

Having said all that, students with disabilities are still under represented in higher education and while things are moving in the right direction, equality is still a long way off and there are still areas of unacceptable under-representation. Students with sensory disabilities are four times less likely to make the transition to higher education than other students, only 17% of these students go to college against 60% of other school leavers. The reasons are complex involving the interaction of a number of factors including an inadequate curriculum, supports in second level, training in using technology, subject choices and a lack of career expectations. All students benefit from technology, but many students with disabilities cannot succeed without it. Students with disabilities will not have career expectations unless their parents, guidance counsellors or other key adults have expectations for them. Their careers are often set by the limitations and assumptions of others and this situation is a huge loss of talent and ability.

Why should Guidance Counsellors be inclusive in their practices?

As guidance counsellors, you have a key role to play in encouraging students with disabilities to follow their career aspirations and to think about their

employment future. Students with disabilities often report that they are never asked what they want to do with their lives. Guidance counsellors can play a real part in encouraging students with disabilities to have high expectations, and to plan out their futures.

According to National Council of Special Education Report on the Implementation of the EPSEN ACT 2004, there are 190,000 children with special educational needs throughout the school system and every year over 12,000 students seek accommodations in state examinations. The EPSEN ACT is informed by the principle of inclusion and states that children with disabilities have:

The right to an appropriate education for all in an inclusive setting ... which will deliver for them the same outcomes, in the same educational settings as those available to their peers who do not have special educational needs.

Why schools must be inclusive of all children is best summed up by an excerpt from the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities which quotes a parent of a child which says it all.

'If I accepted defeat in my efforts to have my daughter educated with her peers she would follow so many other children from the west of Ireland....there seems to be unlimited money to send my child away from home but none to enable her to stay at home with her family and friends.'

Compliance with a legislative framework:

Current legislation promotes equal opportunities for all and reinforces the position of people with disabilities. Compliance with an increasing amount of legislation places the onus on schools and professionals working in schools to be inclusive in their practices. The most important acts are the Employment Equality acts 2004 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 - 2008, the disabilities ACT 2005 and the EPSEN ACT 2004.

So what is a disability?

What exactly is a disability and what does it mean for you. The equality legislation defines disability as:

- A. The total or partial absence of a person's bodily or mental functions, including the absence of a part of a person's body.
- B. The presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness.
- C. The malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person's body.
- D. A condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction.
- E. A condition, illness or disease which affects a person's thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement, or which results in disturbed behaviour.

Under the Equality ACTs it is against the law to discriminate against a person who has a disability and discrimination is defined as the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person on the grounds of disability. Educational establishments are prohibited under the acts from discriminating directly or indirectly in relation to

- Admission
- Terms of admission
- Access to any course
- Access to any benefit or facility provided
- Full participation in all aspects of the course
- Expulsion or any other sanction

Also under the Employment Equality Act 2004, which covers courses with a vocational aspect such as nursing, the college is obliged to take appropriate measures or make reasonable accommodations to enable the student with a disability to have access and participate in all school activities, unless those measures impose a disproportionate burden.

But rather than get bogged down in legal definitions, it is more helpful to consider the alternative definition of disability. A disabled person is a person with an impairment who experiences disability – disability being the result of negative attitudes that take place in a situation between a person with a

disability and the situation. While the impairment is part of the negativity, it is not the reason for, nor does it justify the loss of opportunities to take part in society on an equal level with others.

Including students with disabilities in Career Guidance

The main purpose of career guidance for students with disabilities is to find out whether the student knows what they want to do and whether they have an understanding of what the career involves, the opportunities, skills and the nuts and bolts of the career choice. In the case of a student with a disability you may be uncertain how to ask them about their disability and its impact.

Firstly, the student is not obliged to disclose their disability and this position is to be respected. It is OK to ask the student to consider all of the aspects of what they want to do, the competencies required to do the job and any supports they feel they may need. Questions may be framed around the requirements of the courses being considered, the subjects, the demands, whether or not there is a work placement, whether or not there are fitness to practice criteria for employment. It is acceptable to ask the student sensitively about what works for them, how they think they will deal with specific tasks. It is not appropriate, nonetheless, to ask the student what is wrong with them.

As with all guidance counselling interviews, it is important to clarify the confidentiality of the sessions. It would be important also to clarify that there

are school policies in place to support the student and to provide them with the best help for them.

Ensure that both the student and his/her parents are aware of the written consent forms, as in order to share information about a student's disability with others, you must get written consent from the student. It is important to respect the student's right to privacy. Failing to protect confidential personal information in relation to a person's disability may involve or lead to discrimination in some circumstances. For example within the whole school guidance approach, you may wish to inform other teachers that a student has dyslexia and will require essay templates, task breakdowns, or to be encouraged to build up personalised dictionaries. It is important that the student understands the whole school approach which is there to support them. As with all guidance counselling interviews/sessions, clarify the issue of confidentiality, and ensure the student knows what the meeting is about and who you might inform.

Questions you can put to the student within the guidance counselling session are:

- What are their interests, why they are interested in this course/subject?
- What do they know regarding their career choices, who would they ask?
- What technology are they using, how is it working for them?
- What aspects of schools do they like?

- Does he/she play sports or are they involved with other social activities in the school?

Language and Etiquette

Language around disability can be a minefield and many people are afraid to say the politically incorrect thing. Language is important as it can be used to negative or positive effect and should be directed by people with disabilities themselves and the terms they prefer to use. Terms such as the ‘handicapped’, ‘crippled’, ‘wheelchair bound’ are inappropriate, while terms such as

- People with disabilities
- The wheelchair user
- Person with an intellectual disability.

are more appropriate and preferred. **If in doubt always ask the student what the correct expression is** and do not worry about using everyday expressions such as ‘*I must be running along*’. Watching your language too carefully indicates you are not at ease with the person.

Assessment of Need

It is a useful exercise to carry out a needs assessment with the student to identify the impact of their disability and how best to accommodate and support the student with their studies. The accommodation is designed to help the student to compensate for the disadvantage of the disability, not to give them an unfair advantage. The NCGE/AHEAD publication *Charting your Course* outlines this process in detail.

It is important not to assume you know what will work for a student, as all students with disabilities are different. For example two students with the same disability will have completely different support requirements, for example one deaf student may lip read, while another may use sign language and require a sign language interpreter. Ask the student directly what works for them.

Within your whole school guidance plan and in consultation with school management, ensure that students with disabilities should be able to access career guidance offices independently. Where possible make sure your office and all of the materials you use are accessible to students with different disabilities. Work closely with school staff, year heads and school management to develop policies within the whole school guidance plan which support students with any disability.

Creating an accessible environment

There are a number of things you can do such as:

- Make sure students using wheelchairs can get into your office
- Make sure your signs are large and bold
- Promotional leaflets and information should be written in simple, clear language and avoid using tables.
- Make sure you have technology available such as *text help gold* for students with dyslexia

- Text information should be available via email or CD or Braille if appropriate
- Provide information about specific disability organisations

Communicating with a student with a physical disability

Access is a major issue for students with reduced mobility. Often the physical energy required to access and negotiate the environment can be exhausting and valuable learning time can be lost. **Some pointers**

- Seat yourself at the level of the wheelchair when talking to them
- Do not lean on the wheelchair, it is a persons personal space
- Ask the student for directions on how to assist them
- If the person has a special needs assistant , don't ask him/her the questions, direct the question to the student with the disability

For an Access Audit go to Charting your Course pg 40

Communicating with a Deaf student

Profoundly deaf people will not use spoken language and are likely to communicate through Sign Language. People who are deaf must function in a world geared to sound and this restricts communication. Some students in your

school may have varying levels of hearing difficulties. **Some pointers**

- Face the student you are speaking to
- Use gestures and communicate in writing if necessary
- Allow time for an interpreter to convey messages if appropriate
- Provide copies of text in advance
- Do not have a conversation with an interpreter while he/she is working with the student

Specific Learning Difficulties Dyslexia

Dyslexia is the most common form of impairment and affects up to 8% of the population, it cannot be cured but many students develop coping strategies and are highly successful in their own field. Appropriate Subject choices for junior certificate and leaving certificate can help the student to achieve success in subjects which reflect their strengths and abilities. Working closely with the Learning support teacher, year head and special needs assistants will provide an opportunity to develop a team approach to supporting the student. **Some Pointers**

- Highlight strengths and abilities and discuss the aspects of subjects that student enjoys
- Adopt a multi sensory approach using audio, visuals, u-tube, diagrams, Mind Maps and other visual cues.
- Keep it simple

- Use clear fonts such as Arial, Verdana and a minimum of size 12 font
- Space documents and use a clear structure
- Use a yellow/cream paper and blue print to minimise glare
- Give clear instructions
- Provide templates and Colours to highlight text.

Supporting students with Mental Health issues

Learning and achieving is a force for positive change in a student's life and a network of support is important to the student. Where a student or parents inform the guidance counsellor that the student is experiencing mental health issues, once again clarify the boundaries of counselling within guidance counselling in the school. **Some pointers**

- Focus on the positive
- Ask the person how you can help
- Become familiar with mental health issues through CPD
- Clarify your role in supporting the student, but clarify that you are not their therapist
- Be clear about what you expect
- Set clear achievable goals

- Agree timeframes and targets
- Be consistent
- Be prepared for setbacks
- Create a safe place for time out

Communicating with a student with a visual impairment

The loss of vision can affect a person's performance of everyday tasks such as reading and writing and can affect their ability to absorb complex information. **Some pointers**

- Ensure that you arrange a one-to-one guidance session with the students as early as possible to identify their specific needs
- Introduce yourself by name so they know who they are speaking to
- Speak clearly in a normal voice
- Let the person know if you are entering or leaving the room
- If guiding the person, offer your arm and allow the person to take your arm above the elbow.

Preparing the student with a disability for transition to college

Students with disabilities are individuals, each with their own particular way of dealing with life. Having a good support structure really makes a difference and guidance

counsellors are a valuable source of encouragement and positive reinforcement. How we behave to students with disabilities can have a positive or negative effect, the key word is respect. **Some pointers**

- Focus on abilities and potential, not on inabilities
- Ask the person and listen to what they say, don't assume you know what is best
- Do not assist unless your offer of help is accepted
- Work with the student in the same way as you would with any other student attending a guidance counselling session
- Speak directly to the student, and not through a third party such as a personal assistant
- Provide information on the DARE process, an alternative entry system
- Facilitate the student to identify courses and careers which play to their strengths and minimise the impact of disability
- Identify what accommodations and supports the student will need

Transition means making changes, in what they are doing, where they live, in friendships and how they see themselves. This change places heavy demands on how the student copes. They will cope more effectively if they prepare for and/or consider the effect

going to college is going to have on their lives in terms of transport, accommodation, supports they will need. So encourage the student to rehearse and make a plan.

College/University can be an exciting but daunting experience but inform the student that there are a range of supports and services available in the college to help make the transition to third level a smooth one.

Disclosure of a Disability

Disclosure can be very challenging for many students with disability particularly where they are hidden disabilities. Disclosure is complex and part of a person's self-identity and the decision to disclose their disability seems to be made on the basis of the perceived benefits versus the labelling. Inform the student that colleges are legally prohibited from discriminating against students on the basis of disability and advise them to link in with the appropriate support services at the start of the year. Unfortunately some students realise their mistake when it is too late and don't get the supports they would be entitled to.

Within the guidance counselling session, encourage them to think about why they would disclose. They may ask themselves 'Will I disclose to the college ... :

- Because they need to know medical information in case something happens to me

- Because I want them to know
- Because I need technology
- Because I need accessible rooms or equipment
- Because I use Irish Sign Language
- Because I bring a personal assistant
- Because I need help getting around
- Because I need time off

For further information see the AHEAD Guide to Disclosure 2010

Pre- transition

Encourage the student to disclose their disability to the prospective college. Encourage the student to visit the colleges open days and to talk to the disability or access officer about supports for students with specific disabilities. Reassure the student that the disclosure of disability will not go against them but will inform their choices. Encourage the student to plan out how they approach the college:

- Check out college websites
- Visit the college
- Ask questions about the entry requirements for the course
- Look at their websites and policies
- Are they part of DARE, the supplementary entry scheme (see details below)

- Do they have a separate orientation and induction
- What accommodations and supports do they provide?
- Do they have career support for students?
- What technology and training will be available?

Research shows that most students in third level drop out because of bad course choice and students with disabilities are no different. Students need to be actively involved in planning their own future and to be aware of the impact of their disability (including positive and negative impact) on their choice of career. They need to think about the sort of supports they may need to deal with the course and to be prepared to advocate on their own behalf for supports. Students need to know their rights and to be aware of when those rights are violated.

Disability Access Route to Education, DARE

DARE is a supplementary admissions scheme which offers college places on reduced points to school leavers with disabilities. It was set up in recognition of the impact and disadvantages of disability in an educational environment. All disabilities are eligible. For further information go to <http://www.accesscollege.ie>

It is important to note that not all higher education colleges are in the DARE

scheme and it is important for students to contact the college directly to enquire about local supplementary routes. You don't have to be eligible for DARE to get support in college. All students with a disability can avail of a range of academic and personal supports while studying in college.

For further information on DARE see <http://www.accesscollege.ie>

Encourage the students to attend the Better Options this year in NCAD in November 2011, and talk to the Disability Officers, find out about the DARE scheme and get answers to all their questions in the one place. For more information check the AHEAD website.

Thinking AHEAD

In the run up to the leaving cert students don't think beyond the exam and don't envision what college life will be like and what it will involve. They may not know what is ahead and making the transition can be daunting on a number of fronts. Academically they are in a different environment and will be on their own, may be living away from home and will have loads of freedom. While the transition is something all students have to manage, students with disabilities may have some additional factors to consider, such as supports. It is vital therefore to introduce the concept of going to college early in the senior cycle – example a career guidance project for students with disabilities introduced during transition year, continued

through 5th and 6th years, would reduce the amount of research to be done at college application time.

Going to third level is a big change and the more advance planning students do the smoother it will be.

Help the student to think of the following:

- (i) **Transport.** Students with disabilities particularly students with mobility or sensory impairments may have to consider how they are going to get to college; can they access public transport or will they have to arrange an alternative, for example Vantastic, which a door to door subsidised wheelchair accessible transport service for the Dublin area. However there is a huge demand for this service so it is worth contacting them and making arrangements well before the start of the academic year.
- (ii) **Accommodation.** If the college is located far from home then the student will need to organize accommodation as soon as they receive an offer of a college place. Accommodation in or near universities and colleges is notoriously difficult to find once college starts and may require extensive search.
- (iii) **Orientation prior to term start.** Colleges can be extremely busy and crowded places so students with mobility or sensory impairments should **arrange for an orientation**

prior to the start of term. This will enable them to become familiar with routes to and from lectures, the canteen, the library, the students union offices, etc. This will also give wheelchair users a chance to anticipate and address any access issues they have before they start college.

- (iv) **Register with Disability support services.** Students need to contact Disability Support Services as soon as they are registered in college. Academic life is demanding and they need to consider that their impairment may have an impact on their ability to deal with the extensive reading, note taking, and essay writing with little or no help. Unlike school where the entire day is structured, students in third level are expected to direct and organise their own learning, if a student doesn't turn up for lectures or hand in assignments on time no one is going to go looking for them.
- (v) **Student Union.** The new student should visit the college Students Union office and check out the events calendar. Most colleges have a range of student societies and clubs and joining one of these is a great way to meet people and make new friends

Supports in higher education

All Irish third level institutions have support services in place to enable students with disabilities to succeed in their academic studies. Recent UCC research clearly shows that students with disabilities, when supported, are outperforming other students in their results. Universities have Disability Support Services and Institutes of Technology have Access Offices, whose role is to support students with disabilities and co-ordinate services throughout the college. Better still, most departments and lecturers understand disability issues and are open to doing things differently such as using technology to ensure students have access to their notes on line before or after the lecture.

There are a vast range of supports available for students with disabilities attending Universities and Institutes of Technology. A student with a disability can expect to be supported on their course through the provision of many inclusive supports such as notes on line, hard copy notes, glossaries of new terminology, putting exam questions on to an ipad /readable technology format, all of which facilitate learning. Students may also be entitled to additional supports such as sign language interpreters, personal assistants, assistive technology, alternative examination arrangements and learning support.

These supports are funded through the Higher Education Authority's Fund for Students with Disabilities. To qualify

the student must be registered with a college and the Disability/Access Office. The disability or access officer will carry out a **needs assessment** which will identify support needs. Medical verification of a disability or specific learning difficulty must be provided and any funding decisions are determined and are administered through the disability or access office in the college. No money will go directly to the student and it cannot be used to cover other costs such as food, books or study materials. Students attending private colleges are not eligible for the Fund for Students with Disabilities; however under the Equal Status Act 2000, private colleges are also legally obliged to support students with disabilities, subject to what is known as a 'disproportionate burden' cost, which takes into account the size and resources of the college, it is therefore advisable that you contact the relevant services when you register.

Students in receipt of a social welfare payment must provide a certificate from the school/college in question confirming registration, commencement and attendance at the course, to their local social welfare office. Students with disabilities may be entitled to the higher education maintenance grant. This grant is administered by local authorities to students who are studying fulltime in third level education, subject to a means test. For more information about grants and funding check out the student finance website: <http://www.studentfinance.ie>

For further information about access and supports for students with disabilities, in third level please contact AHEAD – Association for Higher Education Access & Disability, East Hall, UCD, Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, Co Dublin. Tel: 01

Useful Contacts:

Websites

AHEAD - <http://www.ahead.ie>

DARE - <http://www.accesscollege.ie/>
Student Finance -
<http://www.studentfinance.ie/>

The Equality Authority -
<http://www.equality.ie/>

Publications

Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning (2009)
Available to download from AHEAD website

Disclosure Guide - AHEAD
Available to download from AHEAD website

Department of Education and Skills,
Guidelines for Second level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998.
Available to download from
<http://www.education.ie>

National Council for Special Education
Implementation Report 2006
Available to download from
<http://www.ncse.ie>

A Strategy for Equality(1996) - Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities. Department of Justice pg 171

Students with Disabilities Tracking Report – 2005 Intake. An analysis of their progression, retention and success through Higher Education Institutions. Published by: Pathways to Education which is a joint access initiative of University College Cork and Cork Institute of Technology
Available to download from <http://www.pathwayscork.ie/connections-research/track-students-with-disabilities/>

Author:

Ann Heelan, BA, H. DIP. Masters in Education, Training and Development, is Executive Director of AHEAD. Originally a teacher who worked in Dundalk Institute of Technology. While working with adults with disabilities in the UK in the 1980's, she worked with students with disabilities for the first time and was shocked by the difficulties these able students experienced in mainstream education in doing the ordinary things other students could take for granted. Things like entering a course, reading books, communicating, getting a bus, doing a night course or getting a job. She is committed to promoting the rights of students with disabilities to education and to developing an infrastructure of inclusion throughout education based on the principles of Universal design and Innovative technology. AHEAD shares very practical information and know how with professional staff including the IGC and delivers training on Inclusive Practice to enable staff to become disability confident. AHEAD also works with employers to employ graduates with disabilities through the GET AHEAD and WAM Programmes.