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Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, School of Education

# Guidance to an Independent Adult Life



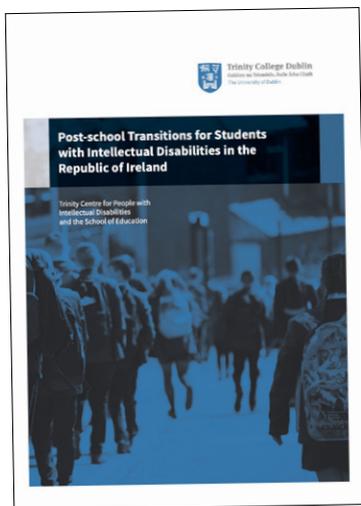
**In this article, Des Aston of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), provides an insightful reflection on Post-School Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland. Students with Special Educational Needs and in particular those with Intellectual Disabilities require a spectrum of additional supports to complete post primary school and consider their own future education, career and life options. Recommendations within the report, referenced here, provide an opportunity for school management to consider their lead role and obligations under both the Education Act (1998) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004), where the benefits of a whole school inclusive ethos include co-operation and co-ordination between whole school guidance and special education needs supports.**

The narrative around intellectual disability, and disability more generally, has shifted dramatically over the past few decades nationally. What was once considered a medical impairment, which needed strict supervision and intervention from clinicians, is now more commonly viewed as a societal responsibility to ensure our citizens with an intellectual disability can meaningfully participate in all aspects of society. It is no longer tolerable that we design new physical building structures to be inaccessible to over 5% of the Irish population who have mobility difficulties (CSO, 2018). Similarly, we must ensure our learning environments are made accessible for those with intellectual/learning disabilities who make up 1.4% of our population (CSO, 2018).

In Ireland, the right to education is highly valued and underpinned by national policy and law. Furthermore, the right to education for every child is enshrined in the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs

(EPSEN) Act (2004). This inclusive educational policy ensures that every child is entitled to a free education in a suitable environment, up until the age of eighteen, at which point they are expected to enter adult services. Since the enactment in 2004, an ever-increasing number of students with intellectual disabilities have been attending mainstream primary, and post-primary education within their local community and alongside their siblings and peers. Educators working in these schools have responded to the specific needs of these children by creating inclusive learning environments and opportunities for social inclusion. These children are expected to wake up early, put on their uniform and turn up for school - the same as their peers. Through these raised expectations, these young people are gaining essential skills for a more independent adult life; building their self-determination and resilience and, essentially, self-awareness of their own capabilities (Newman et al., 2009).

Although the advancements of including students with intellectual disabilities in the school system is to be celebrated, we need to address the fact that the wider societal expectation for this group of students is lowered once they leave compulsory schooling. Irish research is starting to investigate why so many people with intellectual disabilities are struggling to successfully transition from school to post-school education or training environments. Several Irish studies (Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Scanlon and Doyle, 2018; WALK, 2015) have identified a worrying trend amongst school personnel who assume that students with intellectual disabilities will progress seamlessly into adult day services/vocational training centres coordinated by the Health Service Executive.



Similar findings have been highlighted in a recent research report by the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), and the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin. The report, entitled “Post-school Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities in the Republic of Ireland” has been endorsed by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) and hopes to have a positive impact at both the policy and school level by engaging with a variety of stakeholders to address some of the findings. This article intends to provide practical suggestions to aid the development of more coherent, aspirational post-school transition routes for young people with intellectual disabilities across the country.

The research report (Aston et al., 2021) goes into detail about the myriad of complex, and interdependent complications experienced by school personnel who, with every goodwill, are doing their best to appropriately support their students with special educational needs to make important life decisions with very little formal support or resources (mainly time). The systemic fascination with the Leaving Certificate seems to overshadow any other alternative planning, therefore, students that sit

outside the mainstream CAO system will likely have a very different transition experience. The reality is that there have historically been very few appropriate post-school destinations for these students, and so, the safest option for education professionals to recommend to students, and their parents, was a localised disability support organisation. There is a genuine concern from educators and parents alike, that young people with intellectual disabilities would be “safer” in this highly supported environment, rather than being set up to fail in the competitive race for access to higher education, where it is felt they would not receive the same level of structured supports that are apparent at school level.

In a previous Guidance Matters article, we [TCPID] have discussed the increasing popularity of alternative pathways to post-secondary education. The Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice course offered by TCPID, develops a broad range of skills across a comprehensive curriculum, including preparing graduates to work in diverse employment settings. Young people with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream post-primary schools are sharing the same spaces as their peers growing up, and as they reach their formative school years, conversations amongst them and their friends in the schoolyard naturally evolve to discussing their after-school options. Now, more so than ever, there are inclusive programmes specifically designed for learners with intellectual disabilities on offer from Irish higher education providers. These inclusive higher education programmes have been established in an attempt to address the gap in post-school provision for this cohort and tend to offer from level 3-5 on the National Framework of Qualifications – which mirrors empirical evidence that many young people with an intellectual disability are completing school without a full Leaving Certificate (level 5).

The introduction of the L1L2 programmes at Junior Cycle is of importance in this conversation as the research suggests the need for a continued programme for students with intellectual disabilities as they progress through second level into the senior cycle. There is a need for continuity for students who are engaged with the L1L2 programmes. An accredited Level 4 qualification would, for example, ensure they have appropriate access to the curriculum while in school, and have a clear pathway to Level 5 and 6 qualifications when they leave school.

According to international research, transition planning for students with special educational needs should begin as early as 14 years of age (Wagner et al., 2014; Newman et al., 2016). Although the recent Irish research showed that 80% of school principals that were surveyed reported the



use of Individualised Education Plans (IEP), less than 50% of those in the study reported using the IEP for the purpose of transition planning. Best practice for a robust transition plan would include utilising multidisciplinary student support teams that include the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO); the Guidance Counsellor and Support Teachers; and some form of leadership such as a Principal, Deputy or Year-Head. Using this collaborative approach from first year onward, has proved to be beneficial when it came to post-school transition planning, at which point all involved would have a good knowledge of the student by the time they enter senior cycle. The TCPID recognises that there are several people in a young person's life that can be influential in encouraging and facilitating the transition from compulsory schooling to "adult life". There are often many barriers that block students with intellectual disabilities from accessing post-secondary education - such as students moving from a highly supported and structured school environment to a more challenging situation that demands a higher degree of self-reliance. Moreover, parents and educators share a fear of a lack of suitable places for students with intellectual disabilities, and a lack of relevant information about suitable post-school education/training placements. While these barriers are often experienced by students with intellectual disabilities, they are not exclusive to this cohort. There is a clear need to address these issues through increased formal linkages between schools and further and higher education providers. Closer

collaboration allows for the development and awareness of adequate resources and supports to aide students to transfer from one system to the next.

Creating and embedding seamless post-school transition pathways (much like the structured transition from primary to post-primary that is evident throughout the country) requires a multidisciplinary approach. While school leaders have an integral role in creating an inclusive school ethos, guidance professionals are central to this process. Students with intellectual disabilities require a spectrum of additional supports when considering their future education, career and life opportunities. TCPID are prioritising the need for more collaboration between schools and higher education providers and invite you to engage directly with us.

There are many challenges that we all face when ensuring that we develop clear pathways from school to a more independent adult life for our citizens with an intellectual disability. We are but one of the pieces to this puzzle, but by working together we can piece together a viable pathway to a much more vibrant future for these young people.

Find out more about the ongoing work of TCPID [HERE](#)



### About the Author:

**Des Aston** is National and Schools Coordinator in School of Education, TCD and is based in the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities. Des is the point of contact within TCPID for schools/guidance counsellors that would like to engage with the centre.

Contact: [astond@tcd.ie](mailto:astond@tcd.ie)

