



NATIONAL ACCESS PLAN 2022 – 2026

A Submission by Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities

TO The Higher Education Authority (HEA) & the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS)

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RE Public Consultation for the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026)

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) welcomes the opportunity to contribute toward the next National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026). The National Access Plan (2015-2019/20) has been instrumental in tackling educational disadvantage in Ireland. The policy has been successful in achieving its goal of increasing access to higher education for the six main priority groupings. While there has been a shift in the overall profile of students accessing FE/HE through various initiatives, the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels does not fully reflect the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. Students with intellectual disabilities remain one of the lowest represented minorities within FE/HE and the delivery of equity of access in higher education to include this cohort has not been mainstreamed.

2 CONTEXT

It is well documented that people with intellectual disabilities have historically been absent from participation within FE/HE in Ireland. According to the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2016), people with intellectual disabilities account for 1.4 per cent of the Irish population. The 2020 National Ability Supports System (NASS) database reports a majority of people registered with an intellectual disability as attending i) Day Service (n= 14,036); Rehabilitative Training (RT) (n= 1,471), or Supported Employment (n= 1,413), with just 0.4 per cent (n= 133) of people with an intellectual disability reported to be in third-level education (HRB, 2021). There are roughly 2000 students with intellectual disabilities engaged with further/higher education. It is believed that many of these are linked to the National Adult Literacy Association (NALA). Quite often, the provision for this cohort is delivered by the Health Service Executive (HSE). In some cases, these programmes/services are appropriate and conduct valuable work, but often, people with intellectual disabilities are offered little choice in terms of meaningful opportunities for engagement with, and progression through, further/higher education.



3 RATIONALE

International and national developments are being shaped by the ratification of the UNCRPD by the Government of Ireland (2018) and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015). As a result, it is essential that young people from marginalised groups are granted equitable access and opportunities to succeed through lifelong learning. Increasingly young people with intellectual disabilities and their families wish to access educational opportunities through bespoke higher education programmes (INHEF, 2019). Inclusive educational initiatives have been developed among Irish higher education institutions (HEI) over the past two decades. However, not all of these initiatives have survived or become embedded within the higher education landscape, with at least eight initiatives being discontinued or not being resourced past the pilot phase in recent years.

Since the introduction of the first initiatives in 2003/04, it is estimated that between 650-700 students with intellectual disabilities have successfully graduated from inclusive educational initiatives offered by HEIs across the Republic of Ireland (INHEF, 2021). Currently, there are seven HEI's offering education programmes for students with intellectual disabilities – although many of these had to be paused throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. TCPID's **Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP)** course is a two-year, full-time level five certificate programme accredited by **Trinity College Dublin** to learners with intellectual disabilities. The **ASIAP** course offers students a high academic standard of learning, with teaching staff from the **School of Education** and lecturers from across the Trinity academic community. The course objective is to realise the full potential of the students and helps to develop a broad range of skills across a comprehensive curriculum, equipping students with transferable skills to work in diverse employment settings.

These types of education initiatives have been designed as a responsive measure to the lacunae in post-school provision for students with intellectual disabilities. Consequentially, they are often viewed as operating on the margins of the higher



education system and are not formally recognised as mainstream. Additionally, students with intellectual disability have not been counted in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) datasets and targets, prior to 2021.

4 ASIAP GRADUATE EXPERIENCES

In line with the HEA consultation advice, TCPID held a consultation session with graduates (N=5) of the **Arts, Science and inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP)** in June 2021 using the student/graduate consultation guide.

4.1 APPLYING FOR COLLEGE

Graduates spoke at length about the difficulties and challenges they faced when attempting to access higher education. Just one graduate recall being eligible to apply to the Central Applications Office (CAO) as they prepared to sit their Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) exams.

“I found that the CAO wasn’t suited to a person like me. It would be more suited to a more neuro-typical person or someone else who already has a better chance of getting into a top university in Ireland.”

All other graduates that participated in the consultation (n=4) disclosed they were ineligible to apply to the CAO system for various reasons such as attending a special education school; not sitting the LCE exams; or completing the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

All participants shared the experience of limited post-school options and being directed toward localised disability organisations:

“I went to the disability officer, and he said there was one option, to go to [Disability Support Organisation] and I said, ‘No thank you!’. I wanted a job in an office, and they couldn’t do that for me...”



Another participant who was also career driven, expressed how they completed three different courses in a rehabilitative training centre but:

“Nobody seemed to get jobs out of it. So, I went to a recruitment agency myself and they helped me get a volunteering job in the charity shop.”

While the participant appreciated the value that volunteering plays, and the importance of work experience, they expressed it wasn't what they really wanted to do.

“I wanted to get a job that I enjoy doing, there's no point in me doing a job I don't want to do.”

Another person added that they too had enrolled on rehabilitative training programmes and completed FETAC Level One, Two and Three. However, they were discouraged from doing an employability course they wanted to do, and so, looked elsewhere for other avenues to achieve their employment goal.

“I wanted to do an employability course and they said I wouldn't be able for it. Then my Mam heard about the course in Trinity, so, I went to the open day and applied.”

One graduate remembers how, through previous negative experiences in school and other training, they had limited expectations of their own abilities.

“I was really doubting myself as to like, what I can really do, as a person. I was always thinking, ‘what if I am not good enough for this’; ‘surely nobody is going to accept someone like me’, especially given the fact that I have a disability.”



Other applicants conveyed the want to “*get a proper education*”, explaining that once they completed school and went to a day service, there was little focus on their education:

“...after school I just did puzzles and stuff.”

The participant portrayed a strong sense of self-determination, claiming:

“I wanted to show others that a person with a disability, like me, can do what they want to do - if they put their mind to it.”

4.2 DECIDING TO GO TO COLLEGE

All participants placed significant value in the confidence they gained during their time studying at **Trinity College Dublin**, and the importance of gaining a qualification that could lead to employment. Additionally, several participants mentioned family and friends that had participated in third level education and their want to be ‘*the same*’.

“I wanted to get a qualification because I knew that was the only way to get the job. And I wanted a paid job. Like my brother.”

The application procedures to gain access to higher education can prove extremely difficult and cause added stress and anxiety to students with intellectual disabilities and their families.

“Trying to find college courses for people with disabilities is hard to try find a course that suits your needs. It’s a big factor for people with I.D. applying for college... Even if it’s not the CAO, it’s the difficult application forms...”

The applicant explained how they felt students with intellectual disabilities are not given enough support when trying to decide their post-school options:

“For people with I.D. they are not given enough resources to figure out is this



the college they want to go to, or is this the course they want to study... Is there any way of figuring out, is this the best choice, or is this the best journey I am going on?"

Recent research by **TCPID** and the **School of Education, Trinity College Dublin** has highlighted a lack of professional guidance for students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream post-primary education (Aston, Banks and Shevlin, 2021). Additionally, special education schools currently have no guidance allocation to support post-school transition planning, which is echoed by a graduate:

"I don't think higher education institutions, nor secondary schools, nor the state are investing their time with supporting people with I.D. to find a right path to college, or third level which can lead to employment or another college when they are leaving secondary school."

4.3 COLLEGE SUPPORTS

The three main supports that participants listed as essential to their academic success included support from friends, family and staff/tutors on the ASIAP course. External supports such as family, friends and keyworker were acknowledged as an essential support to individuals.

Although the participants didn't explicitly name Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the approach by the lecturing staff that helped them during their studies included, but were not limited to:

- *"The lecturers sending me my notes by email"*
- *"Taking photos of the whiteboard"*
- *"The 1:1 meetings with the occupational therapist"*
- *"You could email them [teaching staff] if you had a question or weren't understanding something they would explain it to you in an easy-to-understand way."*
- *"They [teaching staff] took as long as it took for us to understand"*



something. They [teaching staff] were very patient and understanding.”

All of the supports described by graduates are a direct result of a course underpinned by the principles of UDL and the teaching staff’s awareness and application of the continuum of support model (AHEAD, 2017).

4.5 BEING A COLLEGE STUDENT

Becoming a university student, registering with student services, joining clubs and societies, and identifying as a college student were amongst the most popular responses from **ASIAP** graduates with all fondly remembering the day they received their **TCD** student card as a pivotal moment. At this point, students felt they could break free of the disability label that had been attached to them previously, into a new role as a college student.

“The staff in Trinity looked beyond my disability and just saw me as a normal person who wanted to learn new skills and wanted to be able to gain an independent life going to college.”

One participant was able to closely link their classroom-based learning with a newly discovered passion for self-advocacy.

“We had these St. Vincent DePaul society meetings on campus, and I really enjoyed them. I also really enjoyed the long lunches with the other members and then I got the chance to go to a protest in Dublin. As a student, I was learning about disability rights and then going to the protest I was actually gaining more information on what actually needs to be done to help us improve our rights as disabled people.”



5 TCPID RECOMMENDATIONS

It is very evident from the graduate experiences and feedback from representative organisations that students with an intellectual disability, require greater options within the post-school educational environments. Enabling these young people to access meaningful post-school education will increase the likelihood that they will be able to achieve employment opportunities and increase their overall quality of life. This National Access Plan offers an unparalleled opportunity to create the conditions for participation by these young people in meaningful post-school education environments. Therefore, **TCPID** recommend the following:

5.1 Priority Groups

People with an intellectual disability to be targeted as a priority group for participation in higher education (following the process established for increasing participation among under-represented groups in higher education in the previous National Access Plans).

5.2 Transition Planning

For targeted groups, a whole of education approach to access and inclusion is required as many barriers are also experienced in primary and post-primary education. This can be improved through the Whole School Guidance Framework and strong linkages between schools and Further/Higher Education providers.

5.3 High-Quality Support Services/Outreach

Targeted high-quality support services and outreach for priority cohorts including students with an intellectual disability.

5.4 SUSI Grant Scheme

Students with intellectual disabilities attending accredited higher education courses should be eligible to apply for the SUSI grant scheme.



5.5 Fund for Students with Disabilities

Students with intellectual disabilities attending accredited higher education courses should be eligible to avail of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).

5.6 Universal Design for Learning

Mainstreaming access and participation through whole-institution approach to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the continuum of support model.