



Strategic Plan 2022:

Inclusive Higher
Education –
The Challenges and
Opportunities for
Transformative Policy
Development



Who we are

The Inclusive National Higher Education Forum [INHEF] is a national interest group comprised of representatives of Irish higher education providers and other professionals interested in supporting access routes and inclusive education initiatives for learners with intellectual disabilities in Ireland.

INHEF was established by stakeholders who want to develop real and meaningful higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities across the Republic of Ireland. At the heart of this group of enthusiastic change-makers are the INHEF core values: inclusion, equality, diversity, equity, respect, and autonomy.

INHEF is led by a 13-person Steering Committee drawn from among members. It is funded through the Education Grant and the Growth Fund awarded to Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities [TCPID] by Rethink Ireland (previously the Social Innovation Fund Ireland).

The **mission** of INHEF is 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 who are deemed to have an intellectual disability.

The **vision** of INHEF is to embed inclusive education initiatives and alternative access routes into the higher education landscape in the Republic of Ireland so that students with intellectual disabilities have meaningful post secondary educational opportunities available to them.

More information and resources are available at www.inhef.ie or contact INHEF directly via info@inhef.ie



Core Values



Inclusion



Equality



Diversity



Equity



Respect



Autonomy

The case for inclusive education

The impetus towards, and the rationale for inclusive education represents the confluence of several different factors, including social, political, and educational ideological paradigms.

It has arisen from demands for greater social justice, calls for civil rights, prohibition of discrimination in legislation, educational research and from the voices of service users and their families (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). One of the most significant paradigm shifts occasioning this transition is the move beyond the medical model of disability towards the social model of inclusion, which seeks to remove barriers that inhibit full participation of people with disabilities in education and society.

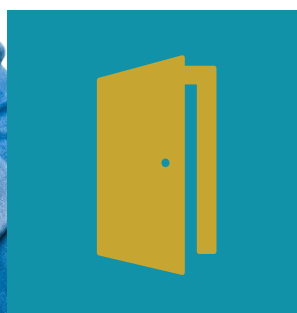
Higher Education

While there has been a predominant focus on inclusion in early childhood care and primary and post-primary education settings over the past two decades, comparatively minimal progress has occurred in the context of higher education in Ireland. While access to higher education is more widely accepted for students with general learning and physical disabilities, *'access for people with intellectual disabilities has taken longer to gain traction.'* As O'Brien et al. (2009) note:

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One of the challenges in Ireland is that although progress has been made in including students with intellectual disabilities in primary and second level schooling, there has been little progress at the third level for students with intellectual disabilities.

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The case for inclusive education

(continued)

Human Rights

The growing recognition that people with intellectual disabilities have a fundamental human right to further their educational goals has provided universities with an important ethical mandate. This mandate has been driven largely by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) and acknowledgement that continuing education offers a pathway to employment and full participation in society for people with disabilities (O'Connor et al., 2012; Disability Act, 2005). Inclusion is a significant human rights issue, which is closely aligned with social justice, primarily because the practice is seen to support respect, care, recognition, and empathy, as well as challenging *'beliefs and practices that directly or indirectly foster the perpetuation of marginalization and exclusion'* (Ford, 2013).

Pathways to Employment

There is growing consensus among researchers, educators and policy makers that the inclusion of adults with intellectual disability in education has beneficial social and economic implications, and that continuing education provides a pathway to employment and fuller participation in society (O'Connor et al., 2012). Inclusive higher education provides an opportunity to address an historic injustice which has culminated in a limitation of opportunity for people with disability in general, and those with intellectual disability in particular. As Spassiani notes:

'Individuals with an intellectual disability (ID) have been marginalized and ostracized by mainstream society. They have been represented as flawed, in need of pity, and are forced to adapt to/conform to an ableist society.' (Spassiani, 2018)

Spassiani further highlights the benefits of including people with ID in higher education by pointing to the well-documented fact that *'the completion of any post-secondary education significantly improves an individual's chance of attaining competitive employment,'* while highlighting the consequence of excluding people with ID from the same range of opportunities as their mainstream peers. She notes that *'individuals with an ID continue to be more likely to be unemployed or underemployed compared to their peers without disability'* (Johnson, Mellard & Lancaster, 2007 as cited in Spassiani, 2018) a point which has also been made evident in the Irish context by Watson (2017).

Wider Impact on Higher Education

Research also highlights the positive impact on the wider teaching and learning community of including people with intellectual disability in higher education. O'Connor et al. (2012) found that the practice of including students with intellectual disability in mainstream undergraduate lectures had a number of benefits for the general student population, who were found to experience social and ethical benefits through increased engagement with students with intellectual disability. Participating faculty members also reported that the practice of including students with intellectual disabilities had enhanced their teaching and learning practices, and that measures designed to support this group of learners had immediate benefits for the entire learning community, who were found to respond favourably to the addition of visual aids during lectures and to learning materials that were accessible and clearly comprehensible (O'Connor et al., 2012). Other studies also highlight the benefits which follow from including learners with intellectual disability in mainstream

lecture settings and point to the positive attitudinal change regarding intellectual disability which follows as a result (Florian and Rouse, 2009). The inclusion of adults with ID in higher education requires real and meaningful change within the university sector. If higher education is committed to celebrating diversity and nurturing societal equality, then the academy must open its doors to people with ID and thereby create a rich learning environment which cherishes all the people of our nation equally.



What is needed in Ireland?

The Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) was introduced as the primary policy document which stipulates a constitutional right to be educated in the Republic of Ireland.

However, the Supreme Court ruled that the right to free primary education ends at age 18 and does not continue based on need (Sinnott v-Minister for Education, 2001). At the time of writing [2022], we are 18 years on from the introduction of the EPSEN Act. Children who were entering the education system at the time of enactment are now coming of age and are transitioning out of the compulsory school system.

While Ireland has acted on the recommendations of the UNCRPD and has endeavoured to make access to compulsory and tertiary education a reality for people with disabilities (Shevlin et al., 2020), there are still not sufficient pathways to tertiary education and/or employment opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities (O'Brien, 2009; WALK, 2015; Scanlon and Doyle, 2018). While the UNCRPD is welcomed by the disability community as a powerful tool in advocating for human rights, the main barrier to a fully inclusive society is based around the lack of opportunities and entitlements. The reality is that human rights policies and guidelines mean little if they are not operationalised in the real world (Groce and Trani, 2009).

While there are opportunities in the further education (FE) and voluntary sectors (under the auspices of the Health Service Executive),

this appears to be fragmented and lacks structured pathways that are evident in other parts of the education system (Newman et al., 2009; Pallisera et al., 2018).

In recent years, an ever-increasing number of young people with intellectual disabilities are attending mainstream primary and post-primary education settings. 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. The central projection shows adults with intellectual disabilities needing specialist services will grow by a sixth between 2018 and 2032.

Day service provision has become the largest programme of support for young people with intellectual disabilities upon leaving school. In some cases, these services are appropriate and conduct valuable work. However, often people with intellectual disabilities are offered little choice in terms of meaningful opportunity for engagement with, and progression through, further/higher education and training. Participation in day services is virtually lifelong, while participation in education and training programmes is time limited.

The National Ability Support System (NASS) figures for 2019 further highlight the increase in students with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream primary (n=1891, 29.3%)¹ and post-primary (n=859, 10.5%)² education. The figures also show stark statistics for those with an intellectual disability engaged in third-level education (n=95, 0.6%) in comparison to rehabilitative training (n=988, 6.2%). Currently, many participants with intellectual disabilities transfer to day services on completing traditional rehabilitative training with very few sustaining meaningful career trajectories.

¹ Total mainstream primary plus special class/unit in mainstream school

² Total mainstream secondary plus special class/unit in mainstream school

Our strategy

Our goals are across four areas: sustainability, quality, awareness, and progression. We believe we must achieve the goals in each of these areas in order to advance our mission.

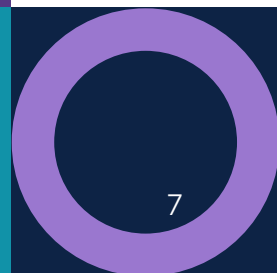
For each goal, we have set out the means by which we will achieve it. Within each area, we have also set out our planned actions, with these actions often contributing to more than one area of our strategy. We aspire to achieve all our goals by the end of 2024.

Sustainability

Individual programmes - and their combined activity as INHEF - are reliant on funding and resources.

Goal 1: Secure funding and resources.

To expand the provision of inclusive education, we will secure the funding and resources to provide programmes in individual colleges, as well as to support the functions of INHEF including the implementation of this strategy. Funding for programmes serves three purposes: to fund the continued delivery of the programmes currently in existence, to avoid progress to date being undermined, and to allow the establishment of new programmes. The impact of expanded provision is that more students, from a wider geographical catchment area, will be able to access programmes.



Our strategy

(continued)

Goal 2: Establish the core principles for inclusive education. To inform the development of additional programmes, we will establish the core principles for inclusive third-level education. By setting out these INHEF principles, we will define the elements that all curricula and programmes should contain, while allowing for continued innovation among colleges.

Actions we will take to implement these goals include:

- Issue a declaration containing the fundamental arguments for realising our vision of inclusive education and seek signatories to this declaration
- Produce a policy paper with funding options for inclusive education and engage with elected officials and others on this
- Consult with students and graduates so that our actions are informed by their experiences and insights (this action also supports our quality goals)
- Pursue additional funding for INHEF operations and specifically for the recruitment of a coordinator
- Consolidate the individual curricula, support models, and teaching methodologies currently in use by programmes in order to identify the core principles of these (this action also supports our quality goals)





Quality

As the number of programmes increases, the quality of those programmes will require support. To ensure the quality of programmes and curricula, we will:

Goal 3: Establish a mechanism for quality assurance by programmes.

Actions we will take to implement these goals include:

- Conduct a review of approaches to quality assurance and develop a recommendation for INHEF's quality assurance programme (this action also supports our progression goals)
- Organise Inclusive higher education symposia that, inter alia, consolidate and disseminate research and tools on elements of programmes and curricula (this action also supports our awareness goals)

Awareness

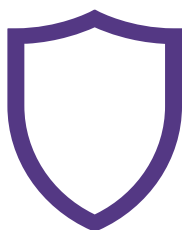
People with intellectual disabilities are not always aware that higher education is a realistic choice as a post-school destination, and building their awareness is critical. Public understanding of and support for inclusive education at all levels will also need to be wider and deeper to drive both policy and funding changes, as well as to create a society in which people with intellectual disabilities receive support for their choice to participate in higher education.

Goal 4: Increase awareness among people with intellectual disabilities (and parents, guardians, school staff, support staff) that higher education is a realistic choice as a post-school destination.

Goal 5: Increase awareness in society that people with intellectual disabilities can participate in higher education and make a meaningful contribution to society.

Actions we will take to implement goals 4 and 5 include:

- Issue a concise version of this strategy for public information (this action also supports our sustainability goals)
- Develop and launch a public communications programme, supported by education, research and employment
- Develop and launch a targeted communications programme for people with intellectual disabilities, including signposting to practical resources
- Create linkages and partnerships to engage others in achieving these goals



Our strategy

(continued)

Progression

Higher education, in addition to its inherent value, also provides a means to progress into additional education and employment.

Goal 6: Build the resources and networks necessary to support progression. Ensure that participation in an inclusive higher education programme forms part of a progression to FE, HE or employment by building the resources and networks necessary to support that progression.

- Establish links/partnerships between FE/HE providers that support the development of progression pathways
- Develop a progression planning toolkit for people with intellectual disabilities with a focus on progression to further education, higher education, or employment
- Identify a partner to help us create a network(s) of businesses who can provide work placements or internships for graduates of INHEF programmes

Actions we will take to implement this goal include:

- Develop a discussion paper on progression and with this, engage with FE/HE partners on how to develop resources and networks (this action also supports our sustainability goals)



Appendix



Current programmes among INHEF members

Dundalk IT

Skills for Independent Living

DCU

Ability Programme

Trinity College Dublin

Arts, Science and Inclusive
Applied Practice (ASIAP)

TU Dublin, Blanchardstown

Integrated Education
Programme

Mary Immaculate College

General Learning and
Personal Development

Limerick Institute of Technology

Advocacy Leadership &
Independent Living

Campaigning for Human
Rights and Equality

Munster Technological University - Kerry

Skills for Life Programme

University College Cork

Certificate in Social
Citizenship

Certificate in Disability
Inclusive Practice

Munster Technological University - Cork School of Music

Inclusive Music Ensemble

Cert in Inclusive Music
Performance

