Moving to Further and Higher Education

An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs

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An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs

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Foreword

The NCSE is pleased to publish this research report on the experiences of students with special educational needs moving on from school to either further or higher education. The report is based on a research study which set out to answer a series of questions about student transitions from school, and access to further educational options beyond school. What kind of support and preparation do they receive? What kind of barriers do they face? What can we do to build on good practice or improve on what is currently in place?

To answer these questions, the researchers examined international evidence on these issues and engaged directly with students and professionals working in colleges and support networks throughout the country. The findings are organised around three themes: pathways and making choices; resources and supports; and student experiences. Based on the findings, the researchers have identified a number of recommendations which focus on the need for a national policy on access, transfer and progression to further and higher education for students with special educational needs; strengthening transition planning at school; improved information for students on options available to them; ensuring the delivery of appropriate support for students once they get to further and higher education; and enabling students to adapt to new academic and social demands they may face.

The report links to other valuable work being carried out at the NCSE on post-school provision including a forthcoming international review of what work's best in education and training for adults with disabilities. The report will help inform our continued role in this area and will also be of great interest to students, parents and policy makers, as well as other stakeholders working in the second and third level sectors.

Teresa Griffin,
Chief Executive Officer

Key Words

Access; disability; further education; higher education; progression; special educational need; transfer; transition.

Acknowledgements

List of Acronyms

ADD   Attention deficit disorder

ADHD   Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

AHEAD   Association for Higher Education Access and Disability

ASD   Autistic spectrum disorder

CAO   Central Applications Office

CDVEC   City of Dublin Vocational Educational Committee

CPD   Continuing professional development

DARE   Disability Access Route to Education

DAWN   Disability Advisors Working Network

DEIS   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES   Department of Education and Skills

DfES   Department for Education and Skills (UK)

EBD   Emotional and behavioural disorders

EPSEN   Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs

ERIC   Educational Resource Information Center

ESF   European Social Fund

EURYDICE Education Information Network

FÁS   Foras Áiseanna Saothair (Irish National Training and Employment Authority)

FET   Further education and training

FETAC   Further Education and Training Awards Council

GAM   General Allocation Model

HEA   Higher Education Authority

HEAR   Higher Education Access Route

HELS   Higher Education Links Scheme

HETAC   Higher Education and Training Awards Council

HSE   Health Service Executive

IDEA   Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (US)

IEP   Individual Education Plan

IGC   Institute of Guidance Counsellors

IT   Institute of Technology

IUA   Irish Universities Association

LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
MGLD	Mild general learning disability
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDA	National Disability Authority
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NLN	National Learning Network
NLTS2	National Longitudinal Transition Study – 2
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
RTGS	Rehabilitation Training and Guidance Service
SEAS	Special Education Administrative System
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organiser
SERC	Special Education Review Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America
VEC	Vocational Education Committee
VET	Vocational education and training

Glossary

Assistive (or adaptive) technology: All technologies used for either assistance or rehabilitation purposes for people with physical or learning disabilities. Its objective is to promote greater independence (see also universal design).

Disability (access) officers: Mandated by the Disability Act (2005: Section 26), all public bodies (since December 31st, 2005), including publicly funded education providers, are required to ensure that the service they provide is accessible to persons with disabilities, including the head of a public body ensuring one person is nominated as an 'access officer' to provide assistance to people with disabilities in accessing the service being provided (OECD, 2011). Access officers are responsible for co-ordinating the work of widening participation for under-represented groups, including students with a disability, in their institution.

Further education: Internationally, terms such as further education, further education and training, vocational education and training, and technical education are among those used for this type of provision. In Ireland, the term further education and training (FET) is used and, for the purposes of this research, is defined as post-secondary non-tertiary full-time education and training provision designed to provide successful participants with specific vocational skills to enhance their prospects of securing lasting, full-time employment or progression to other studies.

Guidance: Guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society (National Guidance Forum, 2007).

Guidance counsellors / practitioners: Guidance professionals work in a range of settings. In second level schools and colleges of further education, guidance counsellors provide support in the areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance. They assist students in developing self-management skills leading to effective choices and decisions about their lives. Guidance professionals also work within the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative helping young people and adults make informed and self-determined choices about education, training, and employment opportunities. Career advisors work within higher education and a number of guidance professionals also work in private practice.

(A range of terms are used when referring to guidance professionals including guidance counsellor, guidance practitioner, guidance professional, careers advisor, etc.)

Higher education: Also known as third level or tertiary level education, higher education comprises universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and private, independent colleges. Higher education also encompasses what is known as fourth (i.e. post-doctoral) level education. Entry to higher education is competitive and based upon performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations, or through a range of alternative routes (e.g. FETAC, accreditation for prior learning). Awards outside the university sector (and the Dublin Institute of Technology) are regulated and authorised by the Higher

Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) whose responsibility is to monitor standards across the sector up to doctorate level.

Inclusion: Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of learners through enabling participation in learning, cultures and communities, and removing barriers within and from education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his / her attendance at school (Winter & O'Raw, 2010, p. 39).

Learning support teachers: These teachers are appointed to provide support for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) under the General Allocation Model (GAM) arrangements, as detailed in, for example, the Department of Education and Science Circular (Sp Ed 02 / 05: DES, 2005a). Their role is to provide supplementary teaching to classroom-based learning for selected students with high incidence SEN (e.g. dyslexia) in both the classroom and/or in the 'learning support room'. (See also resource teachers.)

Leaving Certificate (LC): This is a statutory, terminal examination at second level which enables students to apply for direct entry to third level education. Subjects can be taken at ordinary or higher level, or foundation level for Irish and mathematics.

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA): This is a two-year Leaving Certificate programme with a practical and vocational emphasis, and whose main objective is to prepare students and adults for employment and work.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP): First introduced in 1994, LCVP is similar to the Leaving Certificate, but stresses vocational and technical subjects.

Needs assessment: The process by which a school, or further or higher education institution, identifies a learner's educational, medical, emotional, social and other needs through self-assessment and diagnostic assessment. In a school, a detailed needs assessment can be carried out in partnership with other educational and medical professionals as well as parents or carers.

Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course: The Department of Education and Skills (DES, formerly Education and Science) describes a PLC courses as a self-contained whole-time learning experience designed to provide successful participants with specific vocational skills either for employment or further study (DES, 2010).

Resource teachers: In schools, resource teachers provide additional support to classroom teaching (in small groups, on the basis of individual withdrawal, or working with class teachers) to students with SEN (DES, 2007).

Special education needs (SEN): The EPSEN Act (2004) defines special educational needs as a 'restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition' (2004, p. 6).

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs): SENOs are appointed by the NCSE to allocate additional teaching and special needs assistant (SNA) support for school-aged students with SEN. SENOs also process applications for specialist equipment, assistive

technology, and transport on behalf of the DES. SENOs keep parents / carers informed of what resourcing decisions are being made on their child's behalf. SENOs are not available to students in further education and vocational education and training (VET) schools and colleges, or in higher education.

Special needs assistants (SNAs): SNAs are appointed to support students who require extra non-teaching support due to their special care needs. They are deployed by schools but are not available to students in further education / VET schools or higher education.

Universal design: Universal design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood, and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability (Disability Act, 2005). Universal design follows seven principles: (i) equitable use, (ii) flexibility in use, (iii) simple and intuitive use, (iv) perceptible information, (v) tolerance for error, (vi) low physical effort, and (vii) size and space for approach and use (see http://www.ncsu.edu/www/ncsu/design/sod5/cud/about_ud/udprinciplestext.htm).

Executive Summary

Introduction

In May 2009, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) invited tenders for a study to explore the access and progression experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) moving from compulsory education to further and higher education, with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression to further and higher education (see Appendix 2). A team from the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, and the Centre for Special Needs Education and Research, University of Northampton responded to this invitation and was awarded the contract in July 2009. The research was conducted between July 2009 and July 2012.

Pathways: Making Choices, Access, and Progression

Policies aimed at widening societal participation for people from marginalised groups are an established feature of the international landscape (Council of Europe, 2006; United Nations, 1993). Irish policies in relation to access to education for people from marginalised groups have developed rapidly over the past couple of decades. Access initiatives for post second level education initially targeted at people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups have been extended to include people with SEN (Government of Ireland, 2001). Internationally, there is considerable evidence that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of people with SEN participating in higher education (OECD, 2003; Wagner *et al.*, 2006).

Participation rates in higher education for students with SEN have also increased in Ireland (AHEAD, 2005, 2010). However this increase has not been evidenced in each category of SEN and some categories, such as sensory and physical impairment and mental health remain seriously under-represented (AHEAD, 2010; HEA, 2008, 2012; University College Cork / Cork Institute of Technology, 2010). Despite this fact, as noted in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (2011), Ireland does not have an established national policy on transition for students with SEN to further and higher education. National targeted access initiatives have focused on facilitating access for students with SEN to higher education (Government of Ireland, 2001; HEA, 2005; HEA, 2008) and as a result an infrastructure has been established (HEA, 2008; OECD, 2011) which includes a supplementary admissions system (DARE, 2011) and a network of access and disability officers across higher education institutions. While there have been worthwhile initiatives promoting access to further education for students with SEN (Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010) there is little evidence of a coherent, sector-wide approach (Trant, 2011 [conference paper]).

Resources and Support

Schools play a critical role in preparing students with SEN for passage to adulthood and helping these young people to acquire the necessary life skills to make a successful transition (OECD, 2011). In particular, individualised support provided by guidance counsellors is regarded as pivotal in enabling students to make informed choices about post-school options (Marriott, 2008; OECD, 2011). The critical importance of an individualised approach to transition planning has been highlighted in a number of studies (Dee, 2006; Marriott, 2008; Wagner *et al.*, 2003) and in the US it is mandated that transition planning begins at age 14 (Newman, Wagner, Cameto & Knokey, 2009). It has been widely acknowledged that young people with SEN, in common with their peers without SEN, need preparation within school to become more autonomous and develop self-determination skills (Harrison, 2006; OECD, 2011). The establishment of collaborative relationships between post-primary schools and further and higher education institutions has been demonstrated to be very effective in facilitating successful transitions for students with SEN internationally (Dee, 2006; OECD, 2011). Parents and families play a crucial role in supporting students with SEN in decision making regarding post-school options (Aspel *et al.*, 1999; Blalock & Patton, 1996; Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004).

Providing appropriate individualised support in further and higher education for students with SEN has been demonstrated to support an effective transition process and progression (Dee, 2006, OECD, 2011). While disclosure of their special education need by the student to the receiving institution is highly recommended (OECD, 2011) in order to ensure that appropriate supports and structures are in place, this is not always clearly understood or conveyed to the student concerned, their families or the professionals involved (Goode, 2007; Jacklin, 2011; Stanley *et al.*, 2007). Institutional readiness to facilitate access, transfer and progression for students with SEN is considered a critical factor in ensuring successful transition and progression within further and higher education (Action on Access, 2008; Marriott, 2008; Thomas, 2010).

Student Experience

One of the biggest challenges facing all students on transition to further and higher education is concerned with the significant changes in teaching, learning and assessment encountered (Yorke, 2007; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Students with SEN particularly welcome the opportunity to establish working relationships with tutors and lecturers who are approachable and treat them like adults (Gibson, 2012). Social integration into further or higher education environments is recognised as a critical factor in ensuring successful transition and retention for all students including those with SEN within the educational setting (Harrison, 2006; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, & Kjellgren, 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Losing established friendship groups and social networks is perceived to be a major challenge in transition for students with SEN (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004) and stereotypical reactions to SEN among student peers without SEN has been reported as a major fear of students with SEN (Marriott, 2008).

The Study

The study focused on seven key research questions laid out in the tender document:

1. What are the access and progression pathways for students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education institutes?

2. What are the roles of educational institutes, individuals and health services in the preparation of students with SEN for this progression?

3. What resources and supports are available to students with SEN to accommodate them making this progression?

4. What are the experiences of students with SEN in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

5. What are the views of educational and health personnel involved in supporting students in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

6. What major issues and barriers arise with regards to access, progression and transition?

7. What best practices and strategies exist in relation to access, progression and transition?

Methodology

To answer the key research questions and aims of the research, the research was planned in distinct, but related, work packages (see Appendix 3).

Literature review

So as to contextualise the research in an appropriate empirical and policy context, both nationally and internationally, desk-based research was conducted in order to identify key research issues for exploration during the fieldwork stage. To confirm and consolidate the desk-based literature review, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 key personnel and experts from statutory and non-statutory bodies involved in the development and direction of policy at the national level.

Focus groups

To help further identify topic areas or questions for subsequent interviews with students in the pre-transition phase of the research, interviews (n = 2) and focus groups (n1 = 5, n2 = 2, n3 = 5) were held with students who had already made the transition to further and higher education. Themed areas of questions relating to 'current experience', 'previous school experience', 'feelings and emotions' and 'rights' were explored with the participants. The interviews and focus groups confirmed that the questions planned for the subsequent interviews with pre-transition students were appropriate and sufficiently focused.

So as to gain an understanding of the 'professional voice', focus groups were conducted with relevant personnel from the further and higher education sectors. Issues relating

to access, transfer, and progression were explored in thematic areas (e.g. outreach activities, admissions systems and procedures, teaching, learning, and assessment). The focus groups consisted of personnel from:

- The Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN, n = 9)

- Disability support officers working in the further education sector (n = 2)

- Two institutes of technology (2: both regional: $n_1 = 5$, $n_2 = 8$)

- A university (n = 6)

- Three colleges of further education (including one in Dublin; $n_1 = 5$, $n_2 = 3$, $n_3 = 4$).

Student interviews: pre- and post-transition

For the student interviews at the pre-transition phase of the research, the sample of schools and students within those schools was taken from the NCSE's Special Education Administration System (SEAS) database. The database contains the number of pupils in mainstream post-primary and special schools in the Republic of Ireland who are currently in receipt of resource teaching and special needs assistant support from the NCSE. No identifying pupil information was contained in these data.

Forty schools were contacted to determine their interest in participating in the research. From the 20 schools who agreed to participate in the pre-transition phase of data collection, a total of 42 student interviews took place (including one parent who was interviewed as a proxy for one student who had severe and profound disability).

Interviews were also conducted with 28 educational professionals, such as a guidance counsellor, a SEN team, and principals identified as having an important role in the transition planning for these students. Despite invitations to parents of students to participate in the research, just two parents agreed to be interviewed (not including the parent who acted as a proxy for their child). For this reason, no findings are presented in relation to parental experiences.

At the post-transition phase of the research, attempts were made to contact and interview all of the student participants about their transition experience. For a variety of reasons, a total of 19 participants (from the pre-transition sample of 42) did not participate in the post-transition interviews. Consequently, the attained sample for interview at post-transition was 23 students (including one parent who acted as a proxy for their child).

Main Findings

The study used a qualitative approach to gather the views and experiences of young people progressing from compulsory school to further and higher education. Although the nature of the small sample does not warrant generalisations across the population of students with SEN, the findings were strengthened by triangulation with data collected from professionals in the schools and further and higher education institutions. Key themes emerging from this study comprised access and progression pathways, resources and supports available in schools, further and higher education and the

experiences of students with SEN in the access and progression pathway to further and higher education.

The findings are summarised under the following main headings:

1. pathways: making choices, access, and progression

2. resources and supports

3. student experience.

Pathways: Making Choices, Access and Progression

Making choices is a complex process, which requires time and is influenced by a number of interrelated factors. Firstly, choice making is influenced by access routes; availability and suitability of courses; and academic requirements. Secondly, for some students, disclosure of their SEN was another factor not only in their choice of college and course, but also a choice in itself. Finally, transport, the availability of accommodation, and the accessibility of the college buildings both in terms of physical design and welcoming atmosphere, were relevant factors in choice making.

Access to higher education, as opposed to further education, constituted the predominant focus of targeted national access initiatives in relation to students with SEN. Progress has been made in establishing an infrastructure within higher education to support access and participation for students with SEN. The supplementary admissions system (i.e. the Disability Access Route to Education; DARE) and a network of access and disability officers have been established across higher education institutions.

The DARE scheme was generally welcomed by support professionals in higher education as a structured national-level approach to accessing higher education for students with SEN. In particular, it was noted that a significant number of students with SEN had accessed college through this pathway. However, the DARE scheme was also perceived to present a number of unintentional barriers to access. This included difficulties with the requirement for a recent psycho-educational assessment for the student, such as limited availability of assessment professionals and additional costs, and a perception that the points reduction within the DARE scheme was insufficient to encourage students with SEN to apply for admission to higher education.

There have been worthwhile initiatives promoting access to further education for students with SEN; however, there is little evidence of a coherent, sector-wide approach. It was reported by the support professionals in further and higher education that it would be beneficial to establish a specific pathway for students with SEN within the existing Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS).[1]

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1   The HELS was established in the mid 1990s to enable students in FE to access places in the institutes of technology. The HELS links particular FETAC Level 5 certificates and Level 6 advanced certificates to designated places on a range of HE programmes. By 2009, a total of 41 institutions were involved (HEA, 2009).

Resources and Supports

Schools were generally regarded by students with SEN as positive environments, with teachers who were open and approachable. In particular, there was considerable evidence that the support provided by guidance counsellors was highly valued by students with SEN, and regarded as pivotal in enabling them to make informed choices about post-school options. Students with SEN in this study particularly valued individualised sessions with their guidance counsellor, especially the support offered in completion of CAO and DARE application forms.

While guidance counsellors provided individualised support, there was little evidence that schools were proactive in developing transition planning at an early stage in the school career of students with SEN.

Guidance counsellors and school professionals in this study were conscious that students with SEN were moving from a highly supported and structured school environment to a more challenging situation that demanded a higher degree of self-reliance. They were concerned about achieving the balance between delivering appropriate support for academic attainment while encouraging the development of greater autonomy and the practical life skills required for active engagement in further and higher education.

Guidance counsellors were concerned that they were not fully aware of supports available in further and higher education, and identified the need for continuing professional development (CPD) on the structure of supports and entitlements for students with SEN in further and higher education and the establishment of a central point to access relevant and regularly updated information regarding support provision in further and higher education.

There was evidence of the usefulness of structured links between schools and further and higher education institutions, though these types of programmes were not established features of the transition process. Pre-course contact with further and higher education institutions, in particular direct personal contact with students with SEN, was regarded by students with SEN as highly significant in influencing their course choices.

Students with SEN reported that their parents and families were very involved in supporting their decisions regarding post-school options though there was limited evidence of formal engagement by parents with school professionals in this process.

We found evidence that further and higher education institutions had a wide range of supports available for students with SEN. For example, the use of a needs assessment on entry, in particular in higher education, facilitated the establishment of individualised supports. However, there were reports of significant delays in the processing and delivery of essential supports, particularly within further education.

There was evidence within this study that both professionals in school and in further and higher education institutions recognised the need for institutional readiness to facilitate access, transfer and progression for students with SEN and to develop an inclusive ethos through establishing effective outreach strategies, ongoing professional development (e.g. modes of accessible assessment), adapting terminology in institutional literature

and the provision of comprehensive information on, and realistic views of, course content and requirements.

Student Experience

Students with SEN were looking forward to their post-school education and the opportunity to have a 'fresh start', involving assuming more adult responsibilities. Once in their new institution, some students with SEN were anxious about the changes they encountered in teaching, learning and assessment, and their ability to keep up with the volume and pace of work in the new setting. However, other students appreciated changes in the learning environment, such as delivery and class size.

The multiple modes of assessment used were viewed favourably by the students and they particularly welcomed the opportunity to establish working relationships with staff who were approachable and who treated them like adults.

Students with SEN were particularly appreciative of social events organised as an induction for all students and 'ice-breaker' activities within their class groupings ensured that they had opportunities for a 'fresh start' and to meet their peer group within a supportive environment.

Recommendations

In light of the findings we make the following recommendations.

1 Developing national policy

A key recommendation from this research, aimed at developing a national policy on access, transfer, and progression to further and higher education for students with SEN, is that an expert group be convened to:

1.1 Co-ordinate and develop national policy advice on transition from school to further and higher education for students with SEN.

1.2 Consider the development of targeted access initiatives for further education provision (as happened for higher education) to increase the capacity of further education to support the academic and social needs of students with SEN making the transition to, and progressing through, further education.

1.3 Review the DARE scheme to ensure that policy and criteria adopted are appropriate and, in particular, examine the requirement for a recent psycho- educational assessment. The feasibility of extending the DARE scheme to all higher education providers should also be explored.

1.4 Examine the feasibility of establishing a specific pathway for students with SEN within the existing Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS).

2   Facilitating effective access

The following key recommendations from this research are aimed at facilitating effective access, transfer and progression for students with SEN to further and higher education:

2.1   School professionals should begin the process of transition planning for students with SEN in junior cycle, and parents should be facilitated to become active participants in this process, while at national policy level, the individual education planning process as envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004) should be commenced to provide a structured framework of support for this transition planning process.

2.2   It is essential that guidance counsellors are afforded the opportunity to further enhance their knowledge and skills regarding critical aspects of transition planning through appropriate continuous professional development.

2.3   One central point of information, in relation to access, transfer and progression pathways across all further and higher education institutions, needs to be established.

2.4   In addition, targeted funding should be provided to enable the development of structured partnerships between schools and further and higher education institutions.

3   Ensuring the delivery of appropriate support

The following key recommendations aim at ensuring the delivery of appropriate support for students with SEN in further and higher education and enabling these establishments to develop an inclusive ethos:

3.1   Further and higher education institutions need to ensure that accessibility procedures and funding and support mechanisms are regularly reviewed and audited to enable students with SEN to avail of appropriate supports.

3.2   Support services for students with SEN need to be conceptualised as a core element in a continuum of support for all students in further and higher education.

3.3   Within this context, disclosure of SEN should continue to be promoted by support professionals, and actively facilitated at multiple points in the transition process.

3.4   Opportunities should be made available for CPD for staff in further and higher education in the establishment of accessible courses and modes of assessment.

4   Enabling students to adapt to new demands

The following two key recommendations from this research, and reflecting best practice internationally, are aimed at enabling students with SEN to adapt to the academic and social demands of further and higher education:

4.1   Course literature should be designed to provide comprehensive information about available supports for students with SEN in adapting to the academic requirements of the course.

4.2   Specific information should be provided on teaching, learning, and assessment strategies pursued in the institution.

Conclusion

From the research it is evident that access, transfer and progression pathways to higher education for students with SEN are well established and that an infrastructure has been developed within higher education to support the academic and social needs of students with SEN. Pathways into further education for students with SEN tend to be more localised, and the infrastructure to support students with SEN within further education is an emerging, rather than an established, feature of provision. School support in accessing further and higher education is highly valued by students with SEN and they were generally positive about their experiences of the pathways to, and experiences of, further and higher education to date. However, a number of issues regarding pathways and provision arose that require attention: equity of assessment requirements for eligibility for DARE scheme; lack of early school career planning regarding post-school transitions; and perception by school professionals that they lacked specific knowledge on aspects of supports available in further and higher education.

Due to the research brief this study focused on access, transfer and progression pathways for students with SEN completing compulsory education and, as a result, it was not possible to include the experiences of mature students with SEN who are accessing further and higher education provision. Further research could focus on the facilitating factors and barriers experienced by mature students with SEN when they participate in further and higher education, and the transition pathway from further to higher education.

Although the study focused on Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) provision within further education, some students with general learning disability were found, at post-transition, to be in non-PLC provision, such as special schools and the National Learning Network (NLN) provision. Further research could examine available pathways to post-school education options for students with general learning disability, apart from PLC provision.

This research has examined the transition pathways for students with SEN and documented the initial experiences of students with SEN in further and higher education. This research could be extended to track the study participants on a longitudinal basis, in their progression through further and higher education towards further training and employment.

1 Introduction

1.1 Study Rationale and Brief

This research study examined the access, transfer and progression experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) moving from compulsory education to further education and higher education in Ireland, with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression to further and higher education.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) who commissioned this research has a specific remit under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) to provide policy advice to support access and progression to further and higher education for young people with disabilities:

a. to review generally the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of higher education and adult and continuing education, rehabilitation and training

b. to advise all educational institutions concerning best practice in respect of the education of adults who have disabilities. (Section 20)

The role of the NCSE in this area is encapsulated in one of the key objectives laid out in the NCSE's Implementation Report (2006) that 'children with SEN will achieve outcomes from education which will facilitate them in transferring to the workplace, progressing to further education and lifelong learning, participating meaningfully in economic, social and cultural activity and, in effect, in living fulfilled lives independently in the community' (p. 12).

Participation rates for students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland have remained persistently low, despite legislative developments which require educational institutions to do all that is reasonable to accommodate students with disabilities (Equal Status Acts [1998 to 2004: Government of Ireland], Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act [2004: Government of Ireland], the Universities Act [1998: Government of Ireland] and the Disabilities Act [2005: Government of Ireland]) and subsequent efforts made by many institutions in recent years to accommodate students with disabilities.

Figures are not available for the further education sector but in the 2010–11 academic year, only 6.4 per cent of all new entrants to higher education indicated that they had one or more disabilities (Higher Education Authority; HEA, 2012). While these participation rates show a substantial increase from a decade before (1.1 per cent in the 1998–99 academic year: AHEAD, 2009a) they are well below current national entry rates for non-disabled students. People with sensory disabilities, physical disabilities, and multiple disabilities continue to be under-represented. In relation to this situation, the National Access Plan (HEA, 2008) has set a number of targets relating to participation rates for people with disabilities in higher education, with plans to double the numbers of people with sensory, physical, and multiple disabilities in higher

education by 2013 (based on the 2006–7 number of students who were in receipt of supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities).

It is generally acknowledged that all students experience significant changes in their learning environment, teaching approaches and peer and social networks when they progress to further and higher education. For students with disabilities, this experience is fraught with additional challenges, such as a change in the organisation of special education resources and supports, and the need for collaboration and coordination between schools and further and higher education institutions to ensure effective and appropriate information sharing and a continuum of support to address their needs. These challenges can have significant implications for participation and continuity rates for people with disabilities in further and higher education.

This research study addressed the following key research questions in relation to access, transfer and progression into further and higher education for people with disabilities:

1. What are the access, transfer, and progression pathways for students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education institutes?

2. What are the roles of educational institutes, individuals, and health services in the preparation of students with SEN for this progression?

3. What resources and supports are available to students with SEN to accommodate them making this progression?

4. What are the experiences of students with SEN in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

5. What are the views of educational and health personnel involved in supporting students in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

6. What major issues and barriers arise with regards to access, progression, and transition?

7. What best practices and strategies exist in relation to access, progression, and transition?

1.2 Scope of the Study: Limitations

This study was designed to examine access, transfer and progression pathways for students with SEN from post-primary school into further and higher education. It was agreed at an early stage that, in relation to further education, the study should focus on access pathways for students with SEN into Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, although the team followed students at post-transition whatever their final destination. It was recognised that further education provision covers a wide variety of courses and that many participants in further education are not represented by the traditional school-leaver who has just completed the Leaving Certificate programme. While it is probable that there are a number of people with SEN who have accessed further education as non-traditional (e.g. mature) students or early school leavers it was not considered feasible for this study to address this issue given the time and budgetary constraints.

In addition to outlining the scope of the study, this introductory chapter also describes the key concepts involved. Chapter 2 consists of a review of national policy in relation to access, transfer, and progression for students with SEN, a description of the context for access, transfer and progression policies, and finally the international literature, as it relates to the research questions. Whilst Chapter 3 details the methodology employed for the study, Chapter 4 reports the main study findings, and Chapter 5 presents a discussion of these findings in relation to the literature and the current Irish policy context. The implications of the findings and recommendations for future policy are presented.

1.3 Key Concepts and Terminology

Four concepts that are central to the study are discussed briefly below: SEN, access, transfer and progression. Each of these concepts will be explored further in Chapter 3.

1.3.1 Special educational need (SEN)

Many definitions of SEN have been used in Irish policy and legislation since the term was introduced within an Irish context in the report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC: Department of Education and Skills [formerly Education and Science]: DES, 1993). For the purposes of this study, the definition used was that given in the EPSEN Act (2004) which defines SEN as follows:

> … in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly. (Section 1 [1], EPSEN Act, Government of Ireland, 2004)

The generic term SEN will be used throughout this report though the authors acknowledge that the terms SEN and disability are not necessarily interchangeable and that a person with a disability may have an access need rather than requiring additional support for learning. It must also be noted that categories of SEN are conceptualised in slightly different ways in schools compared to further and higher education. For example, a 14 category model of SEN is employed to allocate additional resources within a school context, including physical disability, sensory disability, autistic spectrum disorder, emotional disturbance, and varying levels of intellectual disability. In higher education, students within the following five categories qualify for additional support from the Fund for Students with Disabilities (HEA, 2012): sensory impairment, physical condition, specific learning difficulty, psychological / emotional condition, and 'other', including chronic illness. In further education, students within the above categories taking a PLC course are eligible for additional support from this fund.

1.3.2 Access, transfer and progression

The concepts of access, transfer, and progression are inextricably linked. Within the Irish context they are outlined as follows by the National Qualifications Authority (2003, p. 5) (based on the Qualifications [Education and Training] Act 1999):

Access: The process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired.

Transfer: The process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence acquired.

Progression: The process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

These concepts are linked to the idea that educational opportunities should be provided appropriate to the aspirations and abilities of an individual throughout their lifetime, usually referred to as 'lifelong learning'. National policy seeks to broaden access based on the concept of 'disadvantage' or 'educational disadvantage', so in effect over time the term 'access' has become inextricably linked to 'disadvantage' (O'Reilly, 2008). As a result, the concept of access is understood to encompass not only entry to further and higher education but also retention and successful completion (HEA, 2008), although these were not addressed in this study.

For the purposes of this study the concept of transfer is understood to include the transition of students with SEN from post primary school into further and higher education.

In Chapter 3 the concepts of access, transfer, and progression will be discussed in greater detail, particularly in relation to the Irish policy context. In addition, the research literature relating to the experiences of students with SEN in accessing further and higher education will be examined.

2 Literature Review

This chapter begins with a more detailed examination of the access, transfer and progression pathways for all students including those with SEN in relation to entry to further and higher education.

2.1 Pathways: Making Choices, Access and Progression

The concepts of access, transfer, and progression mandated in the Qualifications Act (1999) were encapsulated in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) established by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI, 2003). It was envisaged that this framework should be structured to 'facilitate learner entry and to promote transfer and progression, so that learners are encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realise their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities' (NQAI, 2003, p. i). Seven operational principles were developed to inform and guide policies, actions and procedures for access, transfer and progression, two of which have particular relevance for this research study (NQAI, 2003, p.1):

i.   [P]rogrammes leading to awards in the National Framework of Qualifications should accommodate a variety of access and entry arrangements.

ii. Policies should be designed in the context of national policy in relation to equality, with particular regard to the relevant provisions of the Equal Status Act 2000 and the Employment Equality Act 1998.

The NQAI, while not explicitly responsible for extending levels of participation in further and higher education , clearly recognised that promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression within the context of a national awards framework should ' contribute as strongly as possible to the wider national objective of encouraging lifelong learning' (NQAI, 2003, p. 5). The Authority was conscious that while the concept of 'access' should apply to all learners, it was particularly relevant to currently under-represented learner cohorts in further and higher education , such as those with SEN and learners from disadvantaged communities. In order to facilitate meaningful access for these learners, access policies and procedures would have to be adapted, supports provided, and flexible delivery of programmes (part-time) facilitated. Ensuring that this comprehensive vision of 'access' can be realised means that the learner should have access to: information and guidance; appropriate support in participation; flexible arrangements for participation; and programmes 'to promote equality and combat discrimination' (NQAI, 2003, p. 6). Both the Equal Status Act (2000) and the Employment Equality Act (1998) have provisions that support the comprehensive access vision formulated by the NQAI. The Equal Status Act (2000) stipulates that reasonable accommodation should be made for a student with a disability where: 'without this treatment or facilities, it would be impossible or unduly difficult to avail of the services provided' (NQAI, 2003, p. 8). The Employment Equality Act (1998) also prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in entry to vocational training and allows for positive action on the grounds of disability.

The Authority anticipated that the establishment of the NFQ would contribute to the creation of a new culture of access, transfer, and progression that would result in 'a more diverse learner community throughout further and higher education' (NQAI, 2003, p. 15). It was envisaged that a national approach to credit for learning achievement would be particularly beneficial for students with disabilities who could participate in a more flexible way in education and achieve awards over time that would otherwise have been inaccessible. In order to ensure that learners can benefit from fair and transparent entry arrangements the Authority has developed two integrated policies designed to encourage education and training providers to 'undertake structural and procedural changes that will extend the accessibility of programmes leading to awards, and to adapt programmes to facilitate participation by more diverse learner groups' (NQAI, 2003, p. 31). Information provision is crucial in promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression and the NQAI asserts that all learners should have 'accurate and reliable information available, to enable them to plan their learning on the basis of a clear understanding of the awards available and the associated entry arrangements and transfer and progression routes' (NQAI, 2003, p. 35).

2.2 Pathways: Making Choices, Access and Progression Policies

Since the latter years of the twentieth century there has been a concerted effort, both internationally and nationally, to develop policies and procedures to support access, transfer and progression for people with disabilities and/or SEN through the various phases of the education system, up to and including higher education. The World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (UNESCO, 1994), for example, encouraged educational providers to take steps to ensure that students with SEN had full access to education. Article 56 of the Salamanca Declaration specifically refers to the importance of supporting access, transfer, and progression:

> Young people with special educational needs should be helped to make an effective transition from school to adult working life ... Curricula for students with special educational needs in senior classes should include specific transitional programmes, support to enter higher education whenever possible and subsequent vocational training preparing them to function as independent, contributing members of their communities after leaving school. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 34)

UNESCO (2000) reinforced the deliberations of the Salamanca Conference through an emphasis on the centrality of promoting access, transfer and progression opportunities in education for people with disabilities and/or SEN and encouraged the development of effective partnerships 'between school teachers, families, communities, civil society, employers, voluntary bodies, social services and political authorities' (2000, p. 66) to achieve this goal.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which the Irish government has signed though not ratified (Quinn, 2009), asserts the rights of people with disabilities and/or SEN to access all levels of education as expressed in education (Article 24) which includes an imperative that:

> States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities. (United Nations, 2006)

This Convention recognises that support may need to be individualised, and that educational inclusion is linked between 'academic and social development', which is an important part of the access, transfer, and progression process.

At national policy level in Ireland, there has been increased recognition that Ireland should strive to develop a more inclusive society which involves greater participation for people with disabilities and/or SEN within society. Major policy documents, including the Towards 2016 – Ten Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006) and the National Development Plan 2007–13 – Transforming Ireland: A Better Quality of Life (Government of Ireland, 2007), have explicitly focused on enabling people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who have disabilities and/or SEN to have the same life opportunities as their non-disabled peers. The Towards 2016 document, specifically, emphasises the importance of 'investing in further support measures in the areas of further and higher education to enhance participation by those from disadvantaged backgrounds, in particular: socio-economically disadvantaged school-leavers, members of the Traveller community and ethnic minorities, mature students, lone parents and students with a disability' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2006, p. 56).

Despite the policy commitment to extend support for the participation of students with SEN in both further and higher education, reviewing recent access policy and implementation indicates that a stronger infrastructure to support access has emerged in higher education.

Under the Universities Act (1997) each university was mandated to prepare statements of policies with regard to 'access to the university and to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body' (Section 36; 1 [a]). Active engagement with the access issue was evident in the establishment of the Action Group on Access to Third Level whose report (DES, 2001) recommended the setting of national targets for increased participation by students with disabilities and/or SEN and recommended the establishment of a national access office within the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

The National Access Office was established in 2003 and its work has included the development of national access plans (HEA, 2005, 2008) and the allocation of the Fund for Students with Disabilities in further and higher education. Further and higher education institutions apply to this scheme on behalf of students with disabilities who require supports such as assistive technology, sign language interpreters and extra tuition. The second National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–13 (HEA, 2008) sets out a strong rationale for widening access to higher education, recognising the importance of higher education both for individual personal development and also

for the economic stability and social cohesion of a society. The report built on previous initiatives to set targets for participation rates of people with disabilities in higher education. As part of extending access for a number of identified groups of young people who are under-represented in higher education, the plan aimed to double the number of people with sensory, physical, and multiple disabilities availing of higher education. The plan also sets out the Fund for Students with Disabilities, which would provide funding to institutions for students who require additional support and services.

The Mid-Term Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–13 (HEA, 2010a) documents the progress achieved to date for the targets set out in the access plan and outlines remaining challenges. The changed economic circumstances have impacted on the focus of the access plan with increased recognition of the needs of the newly unemployed while retaining a commitment to achieving the original access targets for the disadvantaged groups:

> A major challenge before us is to respond to the demand for re-skilling opportunities among those who have become unemployed while also remaining fully focused on achieving the access targets set out for those disadvantaged by social and economic circumstances, people with disabilities, older people who have missed out on opportunities to access higher education in the past, and vulnerable minority groups. (HEA, 2010a, 5–6)

The HEA clearly states that while some progress in achieving access targets has been made, the majority of participation targets for 2010 have not been met. The original target for participation in higher education for people with physical and/or sensory disabilities for 2010 was set at 699 students while a total of 668 was achieved (96 per cent of the original target). It was also reported that higher education institutions had developed a number of initiatives to support access for under-represented cohorts, including more part-time and flexible programme options, positive discrimination for disadvantaged students through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE), and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) schemes and study skills support and assistive technology. Similar national level programmes supporting access for students with SEN are not available in further education though there are a number of local initiatives, which are discussed in a later section.

2.3 The National Framework of Qualifications

The DES has established mechanisms for quality assurance in further and higher education: the HEA, the NQAI; the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC); and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). The NFQ administered by the NQAI provides the overarching framework of national awards and each award in further and higher education is mapped onto this framework. The framework comprises ten levels ranging from certificate through degree to doctoral level. Each level is based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill, and competence (i.e. what the learner is expected to know, understand, and be able to do on successful completion of a programme of study). The framework has been specifically designed to support the government policy priority of moving towards a 'lifelong

learning society' and ensuring the development of appropriate progression pathways (NQAI, 2003).

2.4 Post-Primary Education

There are three types of post-primary mainstream schools for students aged 12 to 17–18 years of age: community and comprehensive schools (managed by a board of management and appointed in accordance with a deed of trust); vocational schools and community colleges (administered by vocational education committees); and voluntary secondary schools (privately owned and managed by a board of management appointed by the trustees). Voluntary secondary schools can be either fee-paying or non-fee paying.

Post-primary education in Ireland consists of two principal phases: the junior cycle (a three year programme that covers a wide range of curricular areas and is assessed by a national terminal examination, the Junior Certificate); and the senior cycle (consisting of either a two or three year programme of study offering a broad curriculum with a certain degree of specialisation, culminating in a national terminal examination, the Leaving Certificate). Senior cycle education is considered pivotal in providing young people with 'a high quality learning experience to prepare them for the world of work, for further and higher education and for successful personal lives, whatever that may entail for the individual learner' (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009, p. 6).

A three year senior cycle begins with transition year (a one year programme), which bridges the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes. Transition year has a flexible structure enabling schools to offer a wide variety of learning experiences for their students without the pressure of a formal examination. Three distinct programmes are offered within the senior cycle phase of post-primary education: Leaving Certificate; Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme; and Leaving Certificate Applied. The Leaving Certificate is a two year programme taken in most schools in which students generally take six or more subjects for examination, including Irish which is compulsory (unless an exemption is granted). The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme is also a two year programme which has a greater focus on the vocational dimension. Students take some of their Leaving Certificate subjects from a specified list of vocational subjects and in addition, take two link modules (called 'preparation for the world of work' and 'enterprise education'). The Leaving Certificate Applied course is designed for those students whose aptitudes are not appropriately addressed in the other two Leaving Certificate programmes, and also for those students at risk of early school leaving. This two year programme focuses on practical task-centred activities and is designed to prepare students for transition to adult and working life.

Students with SEN of post-primary age (12–18 years) can also be educated in special schools. This setting has been defined as 'a primary school which caters exclusively for pupils with one or more categories of special educational need, regardless of the age range of pupils catered for, or the catchment area from which they come' (Ware *et al.*, 2009, p. 18). Special schools were designed to accommodate specific categories of SEN, including mild general learning disabilities (MGLD), physical and/or sensory disabilities and multiple disabilities. These schools are recognised as primary schools, although the

student cohort does include students up to the age of 18 years. Ware *et al*. (2009), for example, reported that the majority of students in MGLD special schools were of post-primary age. A wide range of programmes are on offer in special schools depending on the individual needs of the student with SEN. These include Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied, and FETAC level programmes. There is also a strong emphasis on the development of life skills.

2.5 Further Education Provision

Further education provision is highly diverse and more fragmented than the higher education sector. Further education is described in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is, as illustrated in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 Section 2(1), where it is defined as 'education and training, other than primary and post-primary education or higher education and training'.

Further education qualifications in Ireland are regulated by FETAC and are provided by a wide range of different providers, including vocational education committees (VECs), secondary schools, comprehensive schools and community schools or colleges, and a variety of adult learning and community education centres (FETAC, 2005). FETAC makes quality assured awards that are part of the NFQ, from Levels 1 to 6 on the 10 level framework. The establishment of FETAC provided a framework for quality assurance and, as the awarding body, regularised a situation in Ireland where there had been multiple awarding bodies in the Further education sector. An institution offering further education provision may provide both academic and vocational programmes of study and training, primarily (but not exclusively) at pre-degree level for school leavers.

A PLC course is a self-contained whole-time learning experience designed to provide successful participants with specific vocational skills either for employment or further study (Qualifax, 2012). Introduced in 1985, the objective of PLC courses is to enable young people who have completed the senior cycle of education to bridge the gap between school and employment, or to access higher education courses and qualifications. PLC courses emerged from the Vocational Preparation and Training Programme, which began in 1984, in response to the European-wide problem of young people leaving school early without any qualifications, and were funded largely by the European Social Fund (ESF). These programmes aimed to 'provide integrated general education, vocational training and work experience for young people who had completed upper second level education or equivalent, to enhance their prospects of gaining employment' (Miss de Valera, 2004). PLCs are provided within the post-primary system in second level schools and colleges. There are over 1,000 PLC courses in more than 60 disciplines provided in 213 centres across Ireland. In total, 92 per cent of provision occurs in VEC schools and colleges. These courses, lasting either one or two years, combine general education and vocational training and include a mandatory element of work experience. They are certified at Level 5 and Level 6 as set out on the NFQ, and they are awarded by FETAC. Participant numbers gradually increased, doubling from 12,000 (1989–1990) to over 24,000 (1999–2000). The McIver Report (McIver Consulting, 2003), in reviewing PLC programmes, noted that PLC courses constituted an important progression route to higher education through the institutes of technology.

2.6 Higher Education Provision

The higher education sector in Ireland consists of a variety of institutions, including seven universities (with associated colleges of education), 14 institutes of technology and some private independent colleges. The universities and institutes of technology are independent and self-governing, but are to a large extent state-funded. Each institution determines the minimum entry requirements for programmes of study, which are generally based on performance in the Leaving Certificate examination. Awards outside the university sector (and the Dublin institute of technology) are regulated and authorised by HETAC whose responsibility is to monitor standards across the sector.

2.7 Entry into Further and Higher Education

In response to the substantially increased numbers seeking places in these sectors over the past two decades, there has been a rapid expansion in educational provision within further and higher education. In 2010, new entrants to higher education numbered approximately 43,000, and it is anticipated that the number of new entrants will continue to grow to an estimated 65,000 by 2025 (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, DES, 2011). Whilst the vast majority of new entrants to higher education in 2010 consisted of school-leavers who had completed the Leaving Certificate programme, more than 20 per cent were either mature students, students from further education who held FETAC qualifications, and a small number of students were admitted via alternative entry schemes (i.e. HEAR and DARE) (Hyland, 2011). Applicants for higher education are obliged to meet the minimum requirements for their chosen course, and when demand for places outstrips the number available, students are rank ordered on the basis of a points scale derived from their results in six subjects in the Leaving Certificate examinations. The application / admission system, commonly referred to as 'the points system' is administered by the Central Applications Office (CAO), which was set up by higher education institutions to coordinate and manage the applications / admissions process.

PLC programmes are provided mainly by the 33 VECs throughout the country. Unlike entry to higher education, there is no standard national application process for entry to the further education sector. In general, applicants apply directly to the provider for enrolment on their preferred course.

A variety of programmes of study are offered in further education which aim to enable learners over 16 years of age to acquire qualifications, and to access the world of work, with a particular emphasis on supporting early school leavers and those who require additional vocational education and training to improve their prospects of employment. However, the profile of students participating on PLC courses has changed over the years. The McIver Consulting Report (2003) on PLC courses noted that these courses targeting early school leavers had moved quickly to become post-secondary initial education and training, with an increasing number of mature students enrolled:

> Participation by mature students is a major, and increasing, feature of PLC courses. Half of the students in the sector are over 20 years of age and more than a fifth are over 30. (McIver Consulting Report, 2003, p.13)

This trend was confirmed in the report by Watson, McCoy and Gorby (2006), who noted:

> The number of 'younger' participants has remained relatively stable, at around 15,000, since the late 1990s, so that the growth in numbers since that time has been largely driven by increased participation among those over age 21. … PLC courses today appear to be catering for a more diverse population, considerably broader than the traditional 17–20 year old school-leaver (pp. 9–10).

Since 2000, there has been a steady increase in numbers enrolled on PLC courses from 24,337 in 1999–2000 to 38,680 in 2010–11 with the vast majority enrolled in VEC schools for these courses (DES Statistics Database, accessed December 5th, 2011.

Increasingly, PLC courses and other FETAC award bearing courses are seen as a legitimate progression route to higher education, and there has been a significant rise in levels of progression from further to higher education in recent years (HEA, 2009). It was reported by the HEA (2009) that the proportion of students with further education awards accepting places in higher education had risen from three per cent in 2005 to almost ten per cent in 2007. This trend was also noted by the Irish Universities Association (IUA, 2011) which reported a substantial increase from 2008 to 2010 in applications from FETAC graduates for entry to higher education through the CAO and the numbers of these applicants being offered and accepting places increased from 235 (2008) to 2,360 (2010).

A number of factors have contributed to this increase including the sustained level of demand for places in higher education, greater numbers of school leavers from traditionally under-represented social and SEN groups applying to higher education, the development of the NFQ and the establishment of the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS). The introduction of the ten level NFQ (NQAI, 2003) has increased the transparency and coherence of national awards and has been 'a key factor in promoting an increased awareness of the quality and purpose of awards made by the further education sector: including that of supporting access, transfer, and progression to higher education' (HEA, 2009, p. 7). One of the biggest factors in facilitating progression to higher education was attributed by the NQAI (2006) to the acceptance of FETAC awards for entry.

The HELS was established in the mid 1990s to enable students in further education to access places in the institutes of technology. The HELS links particular FETAC Level 5 certificates and Level 6 advanced certificates to designated places on a range of higher education programmes. This progression route has been extended through the development of the pilot scheme, which facilitates advancement to higher certificate (Level 6), ordinary degree (Level 7), and honours degree (Level 8) courses from the HELS linked FETAC Level 5 certificates and Level 6 advanced certificates (except for nursing degree courses). Since the development of the NFQ, more higher education institutions are participating in the scheme and by 2009 a total of 41 institutions were involved (HEA, 2009). In 2009 the National Access Office (with the HEA) assessed progression routes from further to higher education and reported that in the previous year approximately 3,000 students progressed to higher education through access routes such as the HELS, the pilot scheme and other informal routes developed between

local further and higher education providers (HEA, 2010a). In effect, most higher education courses in participating institutions are open to FETAC applicants, along with Leaving Certificate applicants (FETAC, 2011). The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008–13 Mid-Term Review (2010a), recognising the importance of this progression route between further and higher education , recommended that 'new, enhanced partnership agreements are developed between further and higher education providers on access provision and on routes of progression from further to higher education' (p. 11).

2.8 Supplementary Admissions Routes to Higher Education

Supplementary admissions routes to higher education through the CAO mechanism were developed to encourage and support applications from students who were traditionally under-represented in higher education. These students included those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, young people with a disability / SEN, applicants over the age of 23 (mature), and applicants with FETAC qualifications. These cohorts were specifically targeted for support by HEA sponsored access programmes, which developed an access infrastructure within higher education institutions (HEA, 2008).

Mature students can apply through the CAO and/or a supplementary admissions route which usually involves direct application to the higher education institution for consideration. In 2010, 15 per cent (7,132) of those accepting places on full-time undergraduate courses were mature students (IUA, 2011).

HEAR and DARE are national schemes that have been developed to address the under-representation in higher education of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (HEAR) and those who have a disability / SEN (DARE).

From 2008 to 2010, applications through the HEAR scheme increased rapidly and from 2007 to 2011, participating higher education institutions had risen from eight to 17 (IUA, 2011). Eligible applicants can compete for places in the participating institutions on reduced Leaving Certificate points and are also eligible to receive additional financial and academic supports while in college.

The DARE scheme (see http://www.accesscollege.ie/dare/index.php) is designed to support increased numbers of students with a disability / SEN in higher education. DARE is specifically aimed at facilitating access to higher education for students whose disability / SEN has had an adverse effect on their ability to achieve the required entry points for their chosen programmes of study (HEA, 2008). Eligible students under the DARE scheme, like those in HEAR, are enabled to compete for places in participating institutions on reduced Leaving Certificate points and to benefit from extra academic and financial supports while in college. Applications through DARE grew rapidly from 2008 to 2010, and in the period 2007 to 2011 the number of participating institutions had increased from eight to 13 (IUA, 2011). Applicants to the DARE scheme have also increased, with the number of students deemed eligible for participation in the scheme increasing from 953 (2010) to 1,279 (2011) with 251 acceptances of an offer by eligible students in 2010 compared to 419 acceptances in 2011. Students who enter higher

education through the DARE scheme are eligible for support from the Students with Disabilities Fund though the application must be made on their behalf by the higher education institution.

2.9 School Guidance and Counselling: Supporting Access, Transfer and Progression

In the post-primary school context, guidance is provided by a guidance counsellor, whose remit is broader than the provision of vocational guidance. Guidance counselling in schools is provided for within the Education Act 1998 (Section 9 [specifically subsection (c)]), which states that:

> A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and … shall use its available resources to – (c) ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices. (p. 13)

In setting out the conditions of appointment for guidance counsellors in schools, the DES (DES, 2005b) details guidance as 'a whole school activity that is integrated into all school programmes (Section 1) and that

> Given the broad range of activities it encompasses, guidance in addition to being a specialist area, is also a whole school activity and so will engage a range of staff members, parents and community agencies as well as the young people themselves. (Section 3.1)

Further, it is pointed out that:

> The guidance counsellor's time will be allocated to a range of guidance activities, including work with individual students, group or class contact and other support activities. The school guidance plan should ensure that all students can avail of a developmental guidance programme. (Section 3.2)

In terms of ensuring that students in second level schools have access to appropriate guidance, the DES (2005c) guidelines on the implications of the Education Act 1998 (Section 9 [c]) determine that:

> Guidance in schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence, that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance. (p. 4)

In supporting young people across these key areas, the DES (2005c) guidelines also identify, and offer supporting advice, on the importance of a successful 'transition' from second level education to further and higher education, training, or directly into employment.

The guidance counsellor within second level schools is an essential support for all students as they make critical decisions regarding their post-school options. Thus, the guidance process with any student should involve access to, and provision of, appropriate up-to-date information and consideration of personal experiences, educational experiences, vocational experiences, hopes and dreams. Through class-based guidance work and confidential one-to-one guidance sessions with a guidance counsellor, students should be encouraged to explore pertinent issues, such as: where am I now?; what are my likes and dislikes?; what are my values?; where would I like to go next?; and what goals do I want to set and achieve in my personal life, education and career?

In relation to disability and SEN, the DES (2005c) guidelines state 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. This should include provision for liaison between the school and … relevant agencies in relation to planning for the long-term educational and training needs of such students. (p. 11)

Extending the information and guidance provided by the DES, the Institute of Guidance Counsellors has collaborated with AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability; see www.ahead.ie) on the development of 'Great expectations – A handbook for guidance counsellors when working with students with disabilities' (AHEAD, 2008), and has also incorporated a training component for guidance counsellors. However, the extent of participation in this training is not known. Neither is it known if it has been offered on a continual basis. This handbook was developed in response to the need to ensure that guidance counsellors were knowledgeable about the specific issues regarding access, transfer and progression to post-school settings facing students with SEN. It is pointed out that while some guidance counsellors may be a little apprehensive about being able to provide an appropriate service for students with SEN: 'guidance counsellors will already have all the interpersonal and work skills they need in order to work effectively with students with disabilities' (AHEAD, 2008, p. 5). However, while students with SEN share many of the same guidance needs as their peers, it is emphasised that those students with SEN may have difficulties accessing appropriate levels of information to facilitate their decision making. The critical issue of disclosure of disability is also addressed. Students with SEN may fear that disclosure will change how other people see them and have a negative impact on options available to them. The positive and negative aspects of disclosure particularly in relation to accessing further and higher education can be explored with the student. Supporting the students with SEN to develop positive aspirations for their post-school education and/or career is a crucial aspect of the guidance counsellor's role and it is vital that the counsellor does not rule out particular jobs, courses or training because the student has a disability. The overall thrust of the handbook is to emphasise that students with SEN should not experience lowered expectations in relation to their aspirations from professionals as has been documented in the past (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011).

Generally, special schools do not have a sanctioned guidance counsellor on staff though some students, depending on the nature of their SEN and when their post-school placements are likely to involve Health Service Executive (HSE) funded services, do have access to the Rehabilitation Training and Guidance Service (RTGS). Many special schools have developed links with adult services and training providers and support students on an individual basis in decision making in relation to post-school options (Ware *et al.*, 2009).

2.9.1 Specific supports for students with SEN in second level schools

A range of supports are offered within second level schools to enable students with SEN to access the curriculum and participate in a meaningful way in school and classroom activities. It is evident from the NCSE Annual Report (NCSE, 2010) that substantial numbers of second level students are receiving additional teaching support and/or support from special needs assistants (SNAs). In 2010, 7,063 applications for additional teaching support were received and 4,646 (66 per cent) of these applications resulted in additional resource teaching support being granted. With regard to SNA support in the same year, 1,730 applications were received and 955 (55 per cent) were granted. Depending on the nature of their special educational need students may also be eligible to avail of assistive technology, specialist equipment and transport.

Increased numbers of young people with SEN in second level schooling are availing of the system of reasonable accommodations designed to support them in state examinations. These supports include the use of a scribe, reading assistance, use of a word processor, tape recorder for documenting answers to examination questions, and in some cases, exemptions from a specific subject. Between 2001 and 2007, reasonable accommodations for Leaving Certificate examinations increased from 534 in 2001, to 1,940 in 2004 and to 3,459 in 2007 (HEA, 2010c).

2.9.2 Systemic supports for access, transfer and progression to further and higher education

Systemic support for students with SEN in higher education, in particular, has developed substantially over the last decade or so. The HEA, established in 1971, has a statutory responsibility to promote equality of access to higher education, and higher education institutions are encouraged to provide 'special arrangements' to ensure access for students with SEN (DES, 1995).

In implementing these special arrangements, the State provides the overall block of funding for higher education, while the HEA is responsible for allocating this funding and supporting and monitoring implementation by third-level institutions, but not private third-level institutions. From 1996 to 2005, the HEA supported the establishment of access programmes within higher education through its Targeted Initiative Funding Programme (HEA, 2008). This annual 'targeted initiative' funding aimed to support new measures by institutions to increase participation by students with SEN and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This funding, in tandem with the provisions of the Universities Act 1997, has been key to the development of disability and support services in the university sector. Since 2006, in recognition of the continuing

and growing need for baseline services, this funding has been allocated as a 'core' access grant.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (HEA, 2010a) has played a significant role in extending and embedding the support available for students with SEN, in higher education in particular and to a more limited extent in further education. Since 2004, the fund has been managed by the HEA's National Access Office on behalf of the DES. Funding can be sought for support under the following three broad categories: (a) personal and academic support; (b) assistive technology equipment and software; and (c) transport costs. As can be seen from Table 1, funding substantially increased from 2003 to 2009.

Table 1: Fund for Students with Disabilities

Year	Amount spent (€m)	No. of students supported (further and higher education)
2003–4	5.6	1,425
2008–9	11.3	3,689

Source: HEA (2010a)

The vast majority of students with SEN receiving support through this fund are registered in higher education institutions, with comparatively fewer students with SEN receiving support in further education. In the 2008–9 academic year, for example, 3,257 students with SEN in higher education (universities and institutes of technology) were receiving support, of whom 1,458 were students in institutes of technology. In comparison, in further education, 432 students with SEN were approved for support. Approximately 84 per cent of available funding from the Fund for Students with Disabilities is allocated to higher education institutions, though more recently there are increasing numbers availing of this fund in further education (Trant, 2011).

By 1994 students on PLC courses were deemed eligible to apply for support from the Fund for Students with Disabilities. However, despite this provision, it is evident that there has been limited development of a support infrastructure to facilitate access, transfer and progression for students with SEN within further education. It is difficult to be definitive about why comparatively fewer students with SEN in further education avail of this funding. However, it is possible that the fragmented and localised nature of further education provision mitigates against greater uptake by students with SEN. In contrast to higher education, there were few, if any, targeted initiatives to support access, transfer and progression for students with SEN and initiatives, when they occurred, tended to be localised (National Disability Authority, 2004).

From 2008 to 2010 the Strategic Innovation Fund and the Dormant Accounts Funding have supported a number of initiatives in higher education to promote greater access for students with SEN to higher education (HEA, 2010a). Some initiatives have focused on raising educational aspirations for students with SEN, their schools and their families through partnership models between higher education institutions, schools, community-based groups and statutory or voluntary agencies. Other funded projects have focused on the use of assistive technology to enable students with SEN to access relevant information about educational opportunities in higher education. Another project funded the

establishment of a regionally based needs assessment service to facilitate greater access to and retention within higher education of students with SEN (HEA, 2010a).

2.9.3 Pre-entry activities

Higher education institutions are increasingly aware of the need to promote outreach activities that target students who have traditionally been under-represented in further and higher education. This commitment to increasing access is evident in the range of activities pursued by further and higher education institutions in encouraging greater participation by these groups.

The HEA 2006 report on access programmes had strongly recommended that higher education institutions needed to be proactive in developing pre-entry activities that would help to prepare students from under-represented cohorts for the realities of college life. The suggestions to address this issue included open days, school visits, recruitment fairs, taster programmes, shadowing days, and summer schools. Higher education institutions had tended to focus on supporting the student with SEN on entry to college (AHEAD, 2008) and this emphasis has gradually changed to developing a more coherent policy that prioritises engagement with students with SEN at pre-entry level. Generic events such as open days, while useful as a general introduction to college, do not always address the very specific issues that are critical for students with SEN such as accessibility, availability of supports and reasonable accommodations (AHEAD, 2008). One example of this more targeted approach is the Better Options Fair, which is a nationally representative information day for students with SEN interested in finding out about supports available in higher education (AHEAD, 2008). Some universities have developed more sophisticated outreach models by targeting schools with high numbers of students with SEN, liaising with the schools' guidance counsellors, and providing relevant information on the supplementary admissions route and specific college information on supports (AHEAD, 2008).

2.10 Supports Available within Further and Higher Education

A highly developed support infrastructure has been established for students with SEN within higher education over the past decade through the implementation of legislation and government policy supporting access, transfer and progression for students with SEN in the Irish educational system.

Disability (access) officers have been appointed in every higher education institution (HEA, 2010a). The disability officer is responsible for developing support services to enable students with SEN to successfully transfer to, and progress through, higher education. Support services generally include, for example, a needs assessment on entry to determine support needs, academic support through focused tutorials, curricular access through assistive technology, sign interpreters, and note takers. The disability officer also ensures that students with SEN receive appropriate reasonable accommodations in examinations and coursework. In addition, they usually liaise with academic and administrative staff in the institution to ensure that the specific needs of students with SEN are understood and responded to in an appropriate manner. The role

of the disability officer has also extended to pre-entry activities designed to encourage students with SEN to consider accessing higher education through an active collaboration with post-primary schools. A range of activities are organised for students with SEN in post-primary schools including visits to the higher education institution, shadowing days, summer schools, study skills seminars, and transition year projects. Disability officers in higher education have formed a professional organisation – the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN), which aims to develop professional standards and best practice in supporting students with SEN in higher education (See http://www4.dcu.ie/ students/disability/dawn.shtml). Students with SEN can also access the generic student services within the institution, such as counselling and careers advisory services.

The support infrastructure for students with SEN in further education is not as highly developed as within higher education. Due to the localised nature of further education provision it is difficult to provide a comprehensive overview of specific services available to students with SEN in further education. As in secondary schools, a guidance counsellor is available to all students to advise on possible options after further education and progression pathways to additional qualifications, higher education, or the world of work. Some further education institutions have appointed a teacher to take specific responsibility for access, transfer and progression of students with SEN (O'Sullivan, 2012).

A more formalised partnership has developed between the National Learning Network (NLN) and the City of Dublin Vocational Educational Education Committee (CDVEC) to support access, transfer and progression for students with SEN in further education. The NLN is the education, training, and employment division of the Rehab Group. Since 2001, NLN provides a 'whole college' service (with three disability officers) for students with SEN within eight designated further education colleges in the CDVEC. The disability officers work closely with all administrative and teaching staff, and in particular with guidance counsellors to facilitate the access needs of students with SEN within the further education colleges (Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010). In addition, a principal's manual (Duffin & McCarthy, 2006) has been developed to provide readily accessible information on the services available to students with SEN through the disability service. The manual includes guidance on completing funding application forms, provision of guidance and support services for students and staff, recruiting support workers and personal assistants, and meeting financial and auditing regulations.

There is an increasing awareness that while adapting to different teaching, learning, and assessment methodologies is a challenge for all students making the transfer to further and higher education, students with SEN may face additional difficulties. In particular, staff in these institutions require support in responding to specific needs of students with SEN in relation to curricular access and reasonable accommodations (OECD, 2011).

There is an increasing recognition that the wider diversity of intake into further and higher education requires that:

> practices in teaching and learning must continue to adapt and be inclusive of a range of student needs and learning styles, and so enable students to reach their full potential as graduates, post-graduates, workers and members of society. (AHEAD / HEA, 2009b, p. 1)

In response to this specific issue of teaching, learning, and assessment for students with SEN in further and higher education, three publications are of particular relevance (i) Teaching and Learning: Making Learning Accessible for Students with Disabilities in Further Education (AHEAD, 2011a), (ii) Study Skills Manual (Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010), and (iii) Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning (AHEAD / HEA, 2009b).

Further education is acknowledged as an important option for students with SEN and has the distinct advantage of offering locally based courses (AHEAD, 2011b) that have a strong emphasis on student-centred learning with associated active learning methodologies. The accessible teaching and assessment methods embedded in FETAC courses are also regarded as helping to ensure that students with SEN can learn and achieve at this level. The handbook was designed to help teaching and support staff to develop a greater understanding of the learning needs of students with SEN and it also suggests ways of adjusting course design and delivery to ensure that all students have access to the same learning opportunities.

The Study Skills Manual (Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson., 2010) was developed through the NLN and CDVEC partnership and provides teachers in further education with valuable information on how to make the curriculum accessible for students with SEN. In addition, the manual offers practical support to students with SEN in helping them to engage with the curriculum. Many key issues are examined and elucidated for students with SEN including understanding various learning styles, strengthening organisational skills, developing active learning strategies and coping with examination stress.

The Charter for Inclusive Teaching and Learning (AHEAD / HEA, 2009b) attempts to promote good practice by offering a range of inclusive strategies designed to ensure that all students have equitable access to the learning environment. More specifically, the charter was developed to support teaching staff in higher education to recognise and respond appropriately to the learning needs of all students, but in particular, those who have SEN. The charter sets out standards for each institution to ensure that, at minimum, students are provided with access to course materials, that academic staff teach in accessible formats, and that training is provided for staff to develop their expertise in teaching and learning.

2.11 Participation of Students with SEN in Further Education

Given the diverse and often localised nature of further education courses and the lack of a central application process, it can be difficult to quantify the extent of participation by students with SEN within this educational sector. There has been a steady increase from 2003–4 to 2009–10 in the number of students in further education with SEN availing of support from the Disability Fund administered by the HEA (Trant, 2011 [conference paper]). Approximately 600 students were granted support in the academic year 2009–10, the majority (51 per cent) of whom had specific learning disabilities. As in higher education, students with sensory impairments are seriously under-represented (at ten per cent). The majority of students with SEN (68 per cent) availing of the Disability Fund are aged 18 to 23 years, with 12 per cent aged 23 to 30 years. Students with SEN are

predominantly enrolled in courses within humanities and the arts (24 per cent), services (22 per cent), and health and welfare (21 per cent). Trant (2011[conference paper]) outlined the following challenges for further education in ensuring access for students with SEN: relatively low numbers accessing the Disability Fund; low participation rates of students with sensory impairments, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities; lack of participation targets; and the fact that only full-time students are eligible.

2.12 Participation of Students with SEN in Higher Education

Data about the participation of students with SEN in higher education has been collected since the mid 1990s and it is evident that there has been a steady increase in the participation rates of students with SEN in higher education in the intervening period (HEA, 2008). A number of AHEAD surveys (AHEAD, 2010) document this gradual increase from an estimated 3.2 per cent (2005–6) to 3.4 per cent (2008–9), and though the overall percentage figure for participation decreased slightly (3.3 per cent in 2009/10), this did not represent an actual decrease in numbers. In fact, as the overall numbers accessing higher education had increased, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Estimated Number of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

	2005–6	2008–9	2009–10
Total SWD – % of total population	3,608 (3.2%)	4,853 (3.4%)	6,321 (3.3%)
Undergraduate SWD	3,330	4,392	5,243
Postgraduate SWD	278	461	399

Source: AHEAD (2010)
Note: SWD = students with disabilities

The most recent data (HEA, 2012) have been collated through the Equal Access Survey, which has been conducted on an annual basis since 2007. This data will support policy makers to evaluate the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing access to higher education for under-represented groups such as those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, people with SEN and mature students (HEA, 2012). According to the Equal Access Survey for 2010–11 a total of 2,544 new entrants to higher education indicated that they had SEN (6.4 per cent of all new entrants). Not surprisingly, given that specific learning disabilities together constitute a high incidence category, the largest category of SEN comprised those with specific learning disabilities (54.2 per cent), a slight increase on 2009–10 figures (54 per cent). Entrants indicating a sensory disability comprised the smallest category (7.5 per cent). It was noted that less than half of the students indicating a SEN (43.3 per cent) reported that they required extra support. Mature students with SEN are included in the overall figures for new entrants with SEN outlined above. A total of 562 mature students indicated having SEN and the largest category comprised those reporting a psychological or emotional condition (33.3 per cent). As seen in Table 3 below for this data from the HEA (2012), less than half of those (43.3 per cent) who indicated a disability reported that they required additional support. This figure is slightly down on last year.

Table 3: Access Survey: New Entrants to Higher Education Indicating a Disability

Total indicating a disability in higher education	2,544	
Category of disability	**% of above total**	**% entrants**
Blindness, deafness, severe vision or hearing impairment	7.5	0.5
Physical conditions	9.1	0.6
Specific learning disability	54.2	3.5
Psych./emotional condition	16.4	1.1
Other, incl. chronic illness	21.3	1.4
% of all entrants/undergrads	-	6.4
% of all respondents	-	7.4
% indicating support required	43.3	2.8

Source: HEA (2012)

As can be seen in Table 4 below (DARE, 2011), in 2011 a substantial rise occurred in applicant eligibility in the DARE scheme, rising from 948 in 2010 to 1,279 in 2011 (from 51.6 per cent to 59.2 per cent). For details of the applicants and breakdown of category, see Table 5.

Table 4: DARE: Eligibility Rates

	Ineligible	Eligible	Total screened
DARE 2010	888 (48.3%)	948 (51.6%)	1,836
DARE 2011	881 (40.8%)	1,279 (59.2%)	2,160

Source: DARE (2011)

Table 5: Eligibility by Category of Disability

Disability	Total	% Eligible
Asperger's syndrome / Autistic spectrum disorder	94	91.5
ADHD	114	90.4
Blindness	9	100
Deafness	12	75
Dyspraxia	143	75.5
Hard of hearing	65	75.4
Mental health condition	129	86.8
Neurological conditions	36	94.4
Physical disability	94	91.5
Significant on-going illness	226	88.5
Speech, language and communications disorder	14	100
SPLD – dyscalculia	6	33.3
SPLD – dysgraphia	13	69.2
SPLD – dyslexia	1,178	37.2
Visual impairment	27	74.1
Total	2,160	59.2

Source: DARE (2011)

2.13 Context, Decision Making and Supports

This literature review now goes on to provide an overview of contextual issues, in Ireland and internationally, regarding access, transfer and progression of students with SEN in post-compulsory school placement. This relates to patterns of participation, decision making, planning, participation, and supports and resources. Factors influencing decision-making processes, regarding post-school choices for students with SEN, are examined within the context of how decision-making processes are facilitated for all students. In addition, a review is presented of resources and support for the effective access, transfer and progression of students with SEN.

2.13.1 Patterns of participation

International data indicate that young people with SEN are less likely to avail of further and higher education than their contemporaries (OECD, 2011). For example, the US based longitudinal study (referred to as 'NLTS2') used extensive statistical information to show that only 45 per cent of young people with SEN were likely to enrol on post-secondary educational courses compared to 53 per cent of their peers. There was also evidence that these young people were more likely to attend two year community college programmes (32 per cent) rather than vocational, business, or technical schools (23 per cent) or four year colleges or universities (14 per cent) and, of these options, were least likely to have enrolled in four year college programmes (Newman *et al.*, 2009). The authors of this study further state that SEN category differences are apparent in many of the post-school outcomes examined in their longitudinal study. Young people with sensory impairments, emotional disturbances, mild to moderate general learning disabilities, or multiple disabilities, presented varying patterns of successful post-school outcomes. For example, young people with visual or hearing impairments were more likely to attend post-secondary school than were those with speech/language, other health or orthopaedic impairments, multiple disabilities, emotional disturbances or general learning disabilities.

Within an Irish context, Watson and Nolan's (2011) study reviews existing data sets relating to the lives of people with disabilities drawing primarily on the National Disability Surveys conducted by the Central Statistics Office in 2008 and 2010. Watson and Nolan (2011) report that, in relation to highest level of education completed, 43 per cent of people with a disability had not progressed beyond primary education compared to 19 per cent in the general population. In addition, only ten per cent of people with a disability had a third level degree qualification compared to 19 per cent in the general population. People with a disability in each age cohort fare worse than their counterparts without a disability in relation to levels of education. For example, in the 25 to 29 years age group, 19 per cent of people with a disability finished formal schooling at the level of primary education compared to three per cent of the general population. Within the same age cohort people with a disability had lower rates of completion of second level schooling (63 per cent) compared to 84 per cent of the general population. Young people with a disability accessed a variety of supports to enable them to complete their education including accessible transport (16 per cent), adapted classroom or equipment (14 per cent), special needs assistant (14 per cent), personal assistant (eleven

per cent) and accessible buildings (ten per cent). However, one third of students left education earlier than intended due to their disability.

2.13.2 Decision making

Completing senior cycle education and undertaking state examinations raises many challenges for all students. Decision making about their life after school adds considerably to this challenging time in the life of the young person. A post-primary longitudinal study (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011) tracked 900 students in 12 case study schools in Ireland through their post-primary schooling to completion of senior cycle, and provides an insight into the factors influencing decision making by students as they prepare to leave school. Students reported that their parents, in particular their mothers, were the most significant source of advice regarding post-school options. Siblings and the wider family also played a role in the decision-making process. With regard to formal school guidance the findings indicated a 'wide variation in the nature and amount of guidance provided to students' (p. xviii). Students, while generally positive about the school guidance they received, were often unhappy about the time allocation for guidance and the dearth of individual guidance sessions. Students believed that guidance needed to be available earlier in their school career, as guidance tended to be provided when they had already made their subject choice. Some students observed that there was an over-emphasis on higher education within guidance provision, to the detriment of other options, such as PLC courses, employment and apprenticeships.

Smyth, Banks & Calvert's (2011) study also highlighted some key issues in relation to student progression to senior cycle education that influence the options available to students when making post-school choices. Students who experience difficulties managing homework in second year tend to achieve lower Leaving Certificate grades (allowing for all other factors). The authors reported that the allocation of students to 'higher' and 'lower' ability classes for all their Junior Certificate subjects 'resulted in significantly lower Leaving Certificate grades for students in lower stream classes' (p. xviii). The findings also indicated that 'Junior and Leaving Certificate exam grades are highly correlated; so many students who achieve lower grades in the Junior Certificate exam do not regain ground when they reach senior cycle' (xviii).

Taking into account that subject choice and subject level selection at junior cycle have a significant influence on options available to students for post-school placement; Smyth, Banks & Calvert (2011) concluded that guidance provision is required much earlier in the junior cycle when students and their families are making critical choices.

2.13.3 Decision making: school

Preparing students, including those with SEN, for effective access, transfer, and progression to post-school placement is a key task for post-primary schools. Students with SEN, in Phillips and Clarke's (2010) Irish study, reported that a positive school environment was a critical factor in enabling them to make a successful transition to higher education. Teachers were open, approachable and encouraging, and appropriate supports were provided by the schools in consultation with the young people themselves. In addition, schools have a key role in transition planning and coordinating

support for learners and empowering young people to make decisions about their future education (Marriott, 2008). The school is likely to be the primary source of information and guidance for a young person, and the connections that schools make with other agencies represent a key factor. Because the school is the point of contact for the young person with SEN within the world of education, schools provide much of the information on ongoing educational opportunities, and often act as the central coordinators of all the professionals in the transition process. The links and relationships between schools and other professionals, such as social workers and further and higher education institutions, are therefore critical to the transition process.

A review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) of access, transfer and progression pathways for students with SEN in five European countries and the United States confirmed the critical role of second level schools in facilitating the process of access, transfer, and progression for those students with SEN. In the review it was observed that '[a]ccess to tertiary education and employment for young adults with disabilities greatly depends on the capacity of the secondary education system to prepare them for the passage to adulthood' (p. 27). However, the report concluded that there were some inadequacies in the secondary school preparation. For example, while it was acknowledged that secondary schools attempted to provide appropriate information to enable students with SEN to make informed choices about educational pathways, schools were less inclined to encourage students to consider and plan for access, transfer and progression early in their school career. In addition, there was little evidence that schools routinely prepared students with SEN for the demands of further and higher education and/or employment.

There is limited research on the quality of information provided by schools to young people with SEN about their options in further and higher education. A report arising from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2) from the US (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004) is an exception. While the importance of transmitting reliable information to parents and families was acknowledged by school staff, it was reported that one quarter of families had not received this service. There was also strong evidence that access, transfer and progression planning primarily involved schools and families with little participation from outside agencies, despite the explicit intention that this process should be fully collaborative.

2.13.4 Planning

Planning for transition to post-school placement is evidently a critical factor for all students in second level schooling. The HEA, in association with the NCCA, have developed a transition planning programme for transition year students in secondary schools aimed at encouraging students to begin planning for transition to further and higher education after compulsory schooling. The Transition Unit is designed to inform students about the range and type of education courses available to them in further and higher education. Practical issues in relation to further study are also addressed including accessing financial supports, information about learning and pastoral supports, advice on accommodation, and some insights into student life in further and

higher education. Currently there is no information available on the extent of school engagement with the Transition Unit.

Students with SEN may experience additional challenges in the access and transfer process (Goode, 2007) and therefore it is particularly crucial that careful consideration is given to providing appropriate support for students with SEN throughout this process. These challenges can include access to appropriate information (OECD, 2011), and the provision of individualised support (Goupil, Tassé, Garcin & Doré, 2002). In the US and UK, for example, the importance of effective transition planning for students with SEN is recognised in legislation in the US (IDEA, 1997) and through a government sponsored code of practice in England (DfES, 2001).

In the US, the centrality of transition planning was mandated through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) which requires transition planning in the individualised education programmes (IEPs) of all secondary school students with SEN, beginning at age 14 (or earlier, if appropriate), in an effort to prepare them for the challenges of adulthood. This requirement was developed to support a central contention within IDEA which acknowledged that a primary purpose of the free appropriate public education, guaranteed to children and youth with SEN, is to 'prepare them for employment and independent living' (IDEA 1997 Final Regulations, Section 300.1[a]).

In order to gather information about the transition processes and improve post-school outcomes, the major longitudinal study NLTS2 was commissioned by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the US Department of Education (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004). NLTS2 findings revealed that the basic requirement for transition planning as outlined in IDEA 1997 was being met for the majority of students with SEN. Two thirds of students receiving special educational support had begun transition planning at age 14, as required, while almost 90 per cent of secondary school students had transition planning under way on their behalf. The mean age for the initiation of transition planning was reported as 14.4 years and, by the time students were 17 to 18 years old, 96 per cent had transition planning. In addition, school staff reported that about three-quarters of students receiving support had an identified course of study to enable them to achieve their transition goals. The vast majority of students and their parents (85 per cent) were active participants in the transition planning process. Despite this high level of involvement, there was some evidence that the partnership between parents and schools was limited, as parents reported that the school mostly decided students' transition goals for almost half of students. There was a real partnership, for about a third of students and parents, with school staff in the planning process. While Cameto, Levine & Wagner (2004) reported that over half of all students with SEN planned to go on to higher education, this varied considerably depending on SEN category. For example, this was a goal for only ten per cent of students with general learning disabilities compared to more than 70 per cent for students with visual impairments. Overall, fewer than ten per cent of students with SEN had supported employment as their transition goal, but it constituted the goal of almost 40 per cent of students with autistic spectrum disorder. Issues discussed at transition planning concentrated on education and employment, reflecting the goals of the young

people. Outside agencies, including educational and vocational training institutions or employers, were sometimes involved in transition planning for this group of young people. When interviewed four years after completing high school, it was found that 45 per cent of the sample had indeed made the transition into post-secondary educational settings (Newman *et al*., 2009).

In England, there is clear documented policy guidance on transition planning in the Department for Education and Skill's (2001) code of practice. This ensures that all pupils with 'statements' of SEN have an annually reviewed transition plan in place, which should be started in year nine of school, at around the age of 13 to 14 years. This plan takes into consideration the pupils' needs and wishes in terms of further education and training and employment. The Code of Practice states that both the young person themselves and their parents or carers must be involved in drawing up and agreeing this transition plan. The importance of liaison and co-operation with other institutions and agencies is also emphasised in this code of practice. Despite these stipulations, Dewson *et al*. (2004), in a study of post-16 transitions for young people with SEN, reported that less than half of all students interviewed two years after leaving compulsory education (at age 16) could recall having a transition planning review meeting.

Studies in the US and the UK (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004; Dewson *et al*., 2004; Marriott, 2008; Wagner *et al*., 2006) indicate that the following components are essential to ensure that transition planning for students with SEN is effective: reviewing available options; making informed choices based on accessible information; providing guidance around future careers and employment opportunities after the course; including the young person; including parents and carers; involving inter-agency liaison and communication; covering practical issues such as finance, accommodation and transport, and travel; ensuring continuity of medical care if necessary; considering issues such as losing and re-forming friendship groups and social networks and developing independence; including educational and pedagogical factors such as change of teaching styles and course demands.

It is highly improbable that one type of professional can deal with all these complex, inter-related issues, which is why multiple agencies must act together to make this process work for young people. Secondary schools, further education colleges or higher education establishments clearly play a key role in facilitating good liaison between these services (Carpenter & Morgan, 2003). The level of interagency collaboration and co-operation with education providers is crucial to the success of the transition process. While in school, many young people with SEN are supported by a number of professional services in the community, apart from those accessed within their school. For example, they may have social workers, health workers or be supported by voluntary groups, and all of these can play a part in enabling effective transition for students with SEN to post-school placement. Hudson (2003) observed that continuity in transition represents a key element in transition for students with SEN (Hudson, 2003). However, the traditional division between child and adult services can make continuity in essential services problematic. For example, students with SEN may be at an age when transfer to adult-focused services usually takes place, and yet still need the same level and nature of support offered by children's services (Beresford, 2004). It may also undermine

important links and relationships at times when the individual is feeling vulnerable and unsure of the future. Dee's (2006) research on the transition of students with SEN to post-school placement led to a concern that the professionals involved in the process of transition may lack awareness that their professional position may have an undue influence on the decision-making process of students, in contrast to that of the parents or the young person involved. Aspel *et al.* (1999) in North Carolina, US studied the development of a package of transition support services for school-leavers with SEN, which was found to be effective. Key criteria for success included good collaboration between agencies, beginning the planning process early, and creating the transition plan individually focused on the student.

Within the context of students with SEN leaving special schools in the UK, Dyson, Meagher & Robson's (2002) study revealed that young people generally have clear aims and a sense of direction, which relate to training, accreditation, and subsequent full-time employment. This study demonstrated that, though transition pathways and post-school activities may be fragmented and fractured, the young person often has a good idea of what he or she wishes for the future, for example, a stable job and an independent home. Therefore, difficult transitions should not be regarded as simply the result of difficult personal and emotional circumstances; it has been suggested that structured support may be needed for such students who have transitioned well following the point of exit from compulsory education:

> The most salient issue for many special school leavers is not how they access the first activity on leaving school, but how they avoid the 'revolving door' – the repetitive cycle of non-progressive activity and backward steps during succeeding years. (Dyson, Meagher & Robson, 2002, p. 9)

Phillips and Clarke (2010), in a UK study, found that students in their study who had attended special schools 'had to overcome deficits in the areas of English language, syllabus constraints and in some cases, outdated and even damaging attitudes about disability' (p. 36). The authors recommended that special schools in their transition planning needed to address their students' capacity to participate in mainstream environments and their longer term inclusion within society. There may be additional barriers associated with geographical separation from the home area for students with SEN in residential settings wishing to move back into their home area. Students who have been absent for extended periods of time may be seen as less of a priority than students who still have a high profile with local agencies, as they transfer back to their home area (Abbott & Heslop, 2009). Furthermore, the close bonds that these young people may have made with professionals and peers in residential settings can lead to emotional difficulties as they move on, leaving a well-established group of friends and supporters behind them. Parents, and indeed professionals, can also find the process stressful and upsetting (Abbott & Heslop, 2009), due to their emotional attachment and concern for these vulnerable young people.

2.13.5   Participation by students with SEN

Autonomy and empowerment for young people with SEN features as a key issue in facilitating access, transfer and progression to further and higher education (Lewis, Robertson & Parsons, 2005). The voices of young people with SEN comprise a crucial component in enabling successful transition to further and higher education (Aspel *et al*., 1999, Byers *et al*., 2008) yet Farmakopoulou and Watson (2003) note that the views of students who have SEN are little represented in studies of transition processes. In many instances, student views are not sought or attended to in the transition process (Cook, Swain & French, 2001). A study involving two Scottish FE colleges found that many students with SEN did not have any role to play in their choice of courses on leaving school, and that selection was carried out, in the main, by their parents (Farmakopoulou & Watson, 2003). Smyth and McConkey (2003), in their study of young people with a severe intellectual disability, asserted the principle that all young people, whatever their SEN, must be consulted in the transition process and, if necessary, provided with appropriate advocates to enable them to make their wishes heard.

The common assumption that children who are not high achievers at school, or who have SEN, have less formed ambitions and aspirations than their contemporaries is challenged by Dyson, Meagher & Robson (2002) in their study of the transition and progression of school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds. They reported that this cohort, whose members had low to zero accredited achievement at school, and which included young people with an identified SEN (15 per cent of the sample), had a very clear conception of what they required from their transitions. This included a steady job, opportunities for continuing education and independent housing. Dee (2006), in a study of transition from compulsory education for students with SEN, reiterated this point when stating that although educators may prioritise the acquisition and improvement of basic and key skills, the primary aim of many young people with learning difficulties is to find wage-generating employment. It is clear then, that the wishes of all young people with SEN should be taken into account at an early stage in transition planning, and career opportunities should be clearly presented to them before they decide to enrol on any course.

2.13.6   Participation by parents and families

Smyth, Banks & Calvert's (2011) study demonstrated very clearly that parents and families play a critical role in facilitating access, transfer and progression from compulsory education to post-school options for all students. In fact, parents and families had been consistently influential in enabling their children, throughout their school career, in making decisions around programmes, subject choice and level. Byrne and Smyth (2010) reported that parents regularly engaged with their children in discussions about post-school options at senior cycle stage. Similarly, it has been found that students with SEN look to their parents and families for support and guidance in the decision-making process around access, transfer and progression from compulsory schooling to post-school placement (Phillips & Clarke, 2010). Parental support and guidance can encourage positive aspirations for students with SEN as demonstrated in Phillips and Clarke's (2010) study of transition for students with SEN:

A background of having had active support and encouragement from parents about academic capabilities was a critical factor in encouraging progression into higher education from school … [a] strong parental belief in their children's ability seemed to counter even the most negative of early educational experiences by helping instil or reinforce self-efficacy and academic confidence, even when external validation was not present. (p. 35)

It is generally accepted as good practice that parents and carers of young people with SEN should be fully involved with the transition process (Aspel *et al*., 1999; Blalock & Patton, 1996). In the US based longitudinal study (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004) parents of students with SEN have been shown to be highly involved with transition planning for post-secondary education, and to have appreciated this level of participation. Studies have shown that parents can offer a crucial continuity of support at a period in life when there may be so many other changing areas for students with SEN (Aspel *et al*., 2009, Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004, Goupil *et al*., 2002). However, there is evidence that the families and carers of young people with disabilities are not sufficiently involved with the transition process, despite their wishes and concerns (Abbott & Heslop, 2009; Dee, 2006; Wagner *et al*., 2006). Although parents have been shown to offer a continuity of support throughout and beyond the transition process, they may not find it easy to access advice and information on transition choices (Dewson *et al*., 2004). Added to this, there is some evidence that even when families are included in the process, their key concerns are not always addressed. There is often a mismatch between the priorities of the professionals involved and the families themselves (Ward, Mallett, Heslop & Simons, 2003) and, as a result, the available options may not match the wishes or expectations either of the young people themselves or of their parents/ carers (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004).

In England, a review of the literature on the transfer of young people with SEN from children to adult services (Beresford, 2004) found that there is a lack of information provided for the parents and carers of young people with SEN. Parents are often unclear about what options are available and may be frustrated by a lack of available and realistic options in their local area (Byers *et al*., 2008; Lewis, Parsons & Robertson, 2007). This finding was also evident in a Canadian study (Goupil *et al*., 2002) which reported that parents were not sufficiently well informed about possible employment opportunities after the education courses that were offered to their children who had learning disabilities. A study by McConkey and Smyth (2001) in Northern Ireland revealed that three quarters of parents had not been involved in the choice of post-16 education or placement options for their children who had severe learning difficulties. In addition, none of the students in the study had been consulted at all. A positive transition experience for young people with SEN is predicated on the active involvement of families in the process (Lewis, Parsons & Robertson, 2007). Families will also require supports within this process and, as Beresford (2004) has commented, there is little research to offer guidance on how to offer this type of support effectively.

2.13.7 Supports and resources

Supports and resources designed to support the transition of students with SEN to further and higher education will be examined within the context of the challenges facing all students as they make the critical transition to post-school placement.

Many young people find the move from school to further and higher education problematic and stressful, coming simultaneously with many other significant transitions. These might include transferring from living at home to living independently, from family financial support to managing a budget, and coping with the demands of a completely different style of educational delivery and the intellectual demands of studying at a higher level (Yorke & Longden, 2007).

Higher education establishments are increasingly aware that ensuring a positive first year experience for all students is critical in enabling students to successfully complete their undergraduate programme and minimise attrition (Palmer, O' Kane & Owens, 2009). In the UK, for example, a number of programmes were introduced through government sponsored projects to enable students to adapt to the academic and social demands of higher education (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Yorke and Longden (2008) in their national study of first year student experiences of higher education in the UK reported that students were generally positive about their experiences and were confident that they would successfully complete their undergraduate programmes. The majority of students found their courses to be intellectually stimulating, their teachers supportive, and they received constructive feedback on their work.

Social integration into higher education has been shown to be a key factor in ensuring that all students make successful transitions and survive their first year at university (Palmer, O'Kane & Owens, 2009, Yorke & Langden, 2008). Students in Palmer, O'Kane & Owens (2009) study of first year higher education experiences reported that rebuilding friendship networks was a major challenge and developing a sense of belonging was a critical factor in successful transition to life in higher education. A Swedish study (Hultberg *et al.*, 2009) demonstrated that, to be successful, courses introducing students to higher education should give a good foundation for coping with the demands of higher education studies. In this study, it was noted that students stressed the importance of being given opportunities to work in groups that included encouragement to mix and collaborate with others from different disciplines and backgrounds. Encouraging participation in small group work was also reported to be beneficial by students with SEN in Gibson's (2012) study.

Yorke and Longden (2008) reported that inadequate student knowledge about the programme of study and/or the higher education establishment was a major risk factor militating against successful transition to higher education. Students who discontinued their studies reported that their decision to leave higher education was due, in varying measures, to poor programme choice, lack of personal motivation, limited contact with academic staff and financial problems. Harrison's (2006) research into first year student withdrawal in English higher education reiterated these points: 'poor preparation, poor or passive decision making and difficulties with socialization or adapting to the student

lifestyle' (p. 388) were potentially more important factors for success than the academic demands of the institution.

Yorke (2007) in a review of research on the first year experience in higher education identified the following features of higher education provision as crucial to a successful transition for students: positive management of the transition process; reinforcing the importance of the first year experience and providing appropriate resources; encouragement of student engagement with academic and social aspects of curriculum; and commitment to student learning and student success.

Students with SEN share many of the challenges faced by their peers in making a successful transition to post-school placement; however, they can also face additional challenges in relation to admissions procedures, institutional and programme accessibility, receiving appropriate supports, developing friendship networks and overcoming the negative stereotypes of SEN held by others in the new environment (Marriott, 2008). Dee (2006) observed that transition for students with SEN is often marked by a very public and bureaucratic process compared to their peers. The decision-making process often involves a number of professionals, sometimes support agencies, and a requirement to disclose SEN and undertake a needs assessment to determine levels of appropriate support. In addition, there may be attitudinal issues to be addressed at various stages of the student lifecycle (Marriott, 2008). Information about transition may focus on the course being offered and not on the nature of the new institution and the support available (Smith, 2006), leaving the young person unenlightened about the level of support they could expect and how this would be organised. Lewis, Parsons and Robertson (2007) highlight an additional difficulty faced by students with SEN and their families concerning the timing of the allocation of university places which can cause additional stress as they have less time to plan transition and ensure that support systems are put in place. The Aimhigher project in England (Elliott & Wilson, 2008a), which reviews access for students with hidden disabilities to higher education courses and institutions, highlighted the importance of pre-transition activities such as pre-entry visits, taster courses and open days, and also recommended the creation of opportunities for contact with students with SEN who have successfully made the transition to higher education. Providing positive role models can be seen to have an empowering effect on the aspirations of young people with SEN (Elliott & Wilson, 2008b; Marriott, 2008).

Disclosure of SEN is highly recommended by further and higher education institutions in order to ensure that adequate resources are in place to support the needs of the incoming students with SEN. However, disclosure of SEN can be problematic especially if the student with SEN perceives that disclosure will be a disadvantage in pursuing the chosen course of study (Goode, 2007; Jacklin, 2011; Stanley, Ridley, Manthorpe, Harris & Hurst, 2007). Disclosure from the perspective of the student with SEN 'can be influenced by a number of factors such as self-identity, personality, type of disability, context and previous experience' (AHEAD, 2011c: p. 3). Stanley *et al*.'s (2007) UK study of the experiences of students with disabilities and practitioners in social work, nursing, and teaching, in relation to disclosure, provides some insights into the perspectives of

people with SEN with regard to both the positive and negative aspects of disclosure of SEN.

Students with SEN may also be reluctant to assume a SEN identity and the accompanying labels. Participants reported that disability legislation had increased their confidence in disclosing SEN. People with mental health difficulties tended towards non-disclosure as they feared a negative response from service providers. Students with SEN disclosed for a variety of reasons: for some with visible SEN there was little choice; for others it was anticipated that disclosure would result in adaptations and reasonable accommodation. Students with SEN reported that there was often a lack of understanding of appropriate adjustments in their placement settings and this compared unfavourably with their experiences in universities or colleges. The authors concluded that information about disclosure and its consequences, and the positive benefits of disclosure in providing necessary adjustments, needed to be highlighted for students with SEN and staff in universities and colleges.

In particular, ensuring a quality transition process for students with SEN:

> depends on the existence of an inclusive ethos at the level of the institution which makes openness to diversity one of its goals and pedagogical, social, psychological and physical accessibility a component of the institution's culture. (OECD, 2011, p. 10)

The OECD review (2011) identified a number of institutional strategies to promote access, transfer and progression for students with SEN which includes explicitly designing the admissions and support strategies to provide an institutional access framework. Strategies include encouraging active involvement of students with SEN in their chosen course; developing links with services such as accommodation and transport to support the transition process; establishing close working relationships with secondary schools; encouraging early disclosure of support needs to facilitate provision of appropriate supports; and advising students on organisational aspects of their chosen course.

Gibson's (2012) study of the first year experiences of students with SEN in two higher education institutions in the UK observed that transition had been facilitated for these students through: 'the positive impact of friendships, peer support networks, significant education contacts and studying within an environment where the culture and related education practices understand and promote diverse learning' (p. 366). Support provision for students with SEN can be presented as a 'normal' yet important element of provision to all new students (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) which proved to be a significant indicator for a student with SEN in Gibson's (2012) study that she would be accepted and her needs met.

Another institutional initiative, uni4u (see www.ulster.ac.uk/uni4u), aimed to identify the barriers and enablers to widening access to and participation for students with SEN in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Northern Ireland. This initiative consisted of a three-year (2009–2012) research project that examined support services available to students with SEN and provided recommendations for widening access to and participation in HEIs for these students. Recommendations indicate that policy makers

should consider that young people have very structured lives from a young age and that once they reach university the freedom can be overwhelming and it is important that provision is made for this. Most of the students with SEN expressed a desire for the education system to be aware of their SEN as it meant they would receive the help they required, but were anxious that the disclosure of information would have a negative impact on their application. They also repeated that it is important to stress to young people that universities cannot discriminate against them because of their SEN.

Participants with SEN in Goode's (2007) UK study of their first year experiences in higher education reported that, in addition to managing their own personal adjustments to life in higher education, they were also expected to manage access to teaching and learning through personal approaches to lecturers regarding appropriate accommodations. For some students with SEN this constant battle to ensure access was a serious impediment to their study and, as a result, they had seriously considered leaving university.

Students with SEN, in common with their peers, are more likely to succeed if their course not only matches their strengths and weaknesses, but also is matched to their motivation and career aspirations. However, for some students this can be a complex issue. For students with dyslexia, accepting the label of dyslexia in order to access the necessary resources and supports can be a real difficulty. Despite the variation in dyslexic profile reflected in their own conceptualisation and experiences of dyslexia, Pollack (2005) showed that students in higher education with dyslexia regarded themselves as distinct from other students. Singleton (1999) commented that the point at which students have their dyslexia diagnosed may be crucial to their adaptation into further and higher education. Their acceptance, or not, of this label and the extent to which they have accepted and integrated it into their own identity may be an important part of their educational success (Armstrong & Humphrey, 2009). A recent study in England (Gibson & Kendall, 2010) supports the view that, despite the rise in students disclosing dyslexia in higher education, a lack of early diagnosis and recognition of dyslexia can impact negatively on learners as they make the transition into higher education without being able to reconcile themselves to their own learning profile.

Richardson and Wydell's (2003) research in England showed that students with dyslexia were less likely than their contemporaries, with no SEN, to achieve good results on their courses in their first year of study. They were also less likely to complete their full undergraduate or postgraduate degree than students with no SEN. However, their findings indicated that if students with dyslexia are given appropriate and timely support, their course completion rates are likely to match those of their non-dyslexic contemporaries, indicating the importance of within-institution specialist support services. The findings from this study are particularly relevant within an Irish context as young people with dyslexia form the most rapidly growing group of individuals with disclosed disabilities in higher education in Ireland (HEA, 2012).

For young people with SEN, in common with their peers, leaving school often means relinquishing a peer friendship group and trusted adults with whom they have shared their lives for many years (Raghavan & Pawson, 2008). These support mechanisms are essential for emotional wellbeing. Social contacts are naturally very important, as demonstrated by the young people with moderate general learning disabilities

interviewed by Smyth and McConkey (2003), who emphasised the importance of friendship and social contact in any further education opportunities open to them. Similarly, Raghavan and Pawson (2008) reported that young people with learning disabilities were anxious about losing friends and social networks when they transferred into further education. Social integration is particularly critical for students who have Asperger's syndrome, and adapting to higher education can be extremely stressful (Broderick & Mason-Williams, 2008). Careful transition, planning and preparation are essential to alleviate this stress (Browning, Osborne & Reed, 2009). Allaying fears about possible social and emotional issues, and planning and supporting opportunities for developing an active social life should be integral to the planning process (Marriott, 2008).

Gaining access to higher education and making a successful transition are the first steps for students with SEN; however, universities are also aware that retention and completion are vital. The access, retention and completion rates of students with SEN across nine higher education institutions in Ireland were investigated in the Pathways to Education project (University College Cork / Cork Institute of Technology, 2010). The report tracked the 2005 intake of students with disabilities within these institutions across their career in higher education. The authors reported a significant difference in the entry rate of students within individual SEN categories. Low levels of entry were reported for students with sensory impairments and also for students who have mental health difficulties, whereas across all institutions, students with specific learning disabilities comprised the largest cohort among students with disabilities (61.4 per cent). Students with mental health difficulties have the lowest retention rates across all SEN categories (56 per cent). The highest rate of withdrawals for students with SEN occurred in first year. Qualitative case studies conducted in two institutions revealed that first year represented a major challenge for students with SEN. Challenging factors include difficulties with accessing appropriate technologies, settling into a more diverse physical and learning environment and developing social networks.

While it has been reported that further education in Ireland has responded positively to the needs of many students with SEN (National Disability Authority, 2007; Trant, 2011 [conference paper]) there has been comparatively little research in this area in an Irish context and we are particularly reliant on UK research where provision for students with SEN in further education has been an established feature for many years. Lewis, Parsons and Robertson (2007) emphasised the importance of providing support in an accessible manner when students with SEN take up their place in further education. The authors observed that barriers may exist for students with SEN who have had negative experiences in the school system and so further education colleges must ensure that they offer a variety of appropriate supports to meet individual needs. Smith (2006) suggests that support services need to be developed so that they are viewed as an ordinary part of college life rather than a separate service for failing students. For example, in the English system, learning support assistants can be deployed to give additional support both within and outside classes, which in turn supports the course lecturer. Successful transition for students with SEN into further education relies on the availability of professional educators who can offer similar levels of support to those that were provided in schools (Lewis, Robertson and Carsons, 2007). McNab, Visser

and Daniels (2008) observed that the training of staff in further education settings must reflect the need for the provision of an inclusive environment, and that additional training to respond to the support needs of students with SEN will be required.

Despite the examples cited of good practice for students with SEN in further education, other researchers have expressed some concerns. There is the risk that further education options might be recommended by professionals not necessarily because it is the best option, but because further education offers a clear destination (Kaehne & Beyer, 2009).

As in higher education the first year of further education is critical for retention of students with SEN and successful completion of courses. Smith (2006) reports an example where a further education college (UK) had well developed policies on support for students with SEN but individual factors such as anxiety about discrimination and insecurity resulted in non-completion. McConkey and Smyth (2001) reported concerns that courses in further education may not move people on towards their goals but may simply put off entry to the employment market, potentially leading to unemployment, or attendance at day centres. It appears that students with SEN may require transition counselling on leaving further education, which is not standard practice, to ensure informed decision making around post-further education options (Jacobson, 2002).

3 Methodology

3.1 Ethics

Guided by the ethical principles and protocols of the British Psychological Society (2009), the Psychological Society of Ireland (1999), and the British Educational Research Association (2004), ethical approval for the research was granted by the Ethics Committee of the School of Education at Trinity College, Dublin. The essential confidentiality of the data was addressed throughout all the stages of the research. Participant codes were devised to replace all of the actual names of participants, schools and other educational institutions. The data were securely stored and access was restricted to the research team. The research team adopted an 'ethics as a process' (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001) approach, affording participants the ongoing opportunity to negotiate consent to participation, especially in relation to data collection with the young people in the pre- and post-transition data collection phases (i.e. work packages 3 and 5).

The purpose of the study, the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, and the option to withdraw from the research at any time without providing a reason were emphasised to all participants at all phases of the research. Informed consent and confidentiality of data are critical features in the respect and protection of research participants. This becomes even more critical when dealing with vulnerable populations. With the welfare of research participants as the foremost priority, once parental written consent and assent were received, contact was made with the participant (or parent where appropriate) by telephone so as to establish rapport, ensure that they were comfortable with their participation in the study, and to address any concerns that they might have. The parents of participants were also invited to make contact (if they so wished) with the research team to discuss the research.

The pre-transition interviews were conducted in the student's school and took place at a period in the academic year associated with heightened stress, both for the student and their teachers (i.e. prior to the Leaving Certificate examinations). With this in mind, the research team was cognisant that the maximum time available for interviews was approximately 30 minutes, as participants wished to return to their class.

During the pre-transition qualitative data collection phase (work package 3), the research team was conscious of the need to avoid causing undue distress to the students. The interviews required tact, understanding and acceptance of the students' level of engagement. For example, if a participant did not understand the question(s) it was clarified by the researcher or asked in a manner that could facilitate understanding. In one case, for example, a participant merely answered 'yes' to the first few questions being asked. Given the time of the academic year that the interviews were being conducted (noted above), this student was experiencing high levels of anxiety and the researcher decided not to pursue the interview with this participant. However, this participant participated in the post-transition (work package 5) interview.

Consistent with the 'ethics as a process' approach, although all participants had consented at the pre-transition stage to be interviewed at the post-transition stage,

a number of participants did not wish to participate in the follow-up interview when contacted. In addition, the research team decided that if participants did not respond to telephone calls or messages after three attempts, then no further contact would be made in this regard.

3.2 Literature Review

So as to contextualise the research in an appropriate empirical and policy context, both nationally and internationally, considerable attention was paid to the need to operationally define core concepts such as access, transfer and progression. In doing so, the research team consulted with various experts and groups regarding the most appropriate terminology to include in database searches. Where alternative search options emerged (e.g., 'scenic route'), these were included in searches of research databases, such as PsychInfo, ERIC, Medline, Web of Science, and Science Direct. Various search parameters (e.g. [transition OR scenic] AND [college OR university]) were explored. Input was also received from another NCSE research project that was identifying and cataloguing all research in the field of special education on the island of Ireland since 2000 (Travers, Butler & O'Donnell, 2011). As well as academic databases, appropriate documentation was sourced from organisations with a remit or interest in the area under enquiry, such as the OECD. All sourced documents were reviewed for relevance.

In order to explore the key research questions guiding the research, and to confirm and consolidate the desk-based literature review, semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately 70 minutes) were conducted with 13 key personnel and experts from statutory and non-statutory bodies involved in the development and direction of policy at the national level (e.g. Department of Education and Skills [DES], Higher Education Authority [HEA], Higher Education and Training Awards Council [HETAC], Further Education and Training Awards Council [FETAC], Association for Higher Education Access and Disability [AHEAD], Institution of Guidance Counsellors [IGC], and Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin). See Appendix 4 for a copy of the questions used for the interviews.

3.3 Focus Groups

One of the aims of the research was to develop a deeper understanding of the issues central to 'transition' from a student-centred perspective (key research questions three, four and six), and to identify any topic areas or questions for subsequent interviews with students in the pre-transition sample that had not been identified through the literature review. The research sought to explore these issues with students who had already made the transition to further and higher education institutions. With consideration of the need to sample across both educational sector and geographical region, four institutions were identified and approached to determine their interest in participating in the research. One institution (institute of technology, regional) was unable to facilitate the research. The final sample comprised: one university, one college of further education and one institute of technology. From the 640 students registered with the disability service at the university, just two students volunteered to participate in the research. These students were interviewed separately. From the 104 students registered with

the access service at the college of further education, seven students volunteered to participate in the research. So as to facilitate the participants and their helpers, two focus groups were organised (n1 = 5 participants, n2 = 2 participants). From the 167 students with SEN registered with the access service in the institute of technology, one focus group (n = 5 participants) was conducted. As is evident from the sampling process, issues regarding willingness to participate in the focus groups arose with the students at the university (i.e. two out of 640). Themed areas of questions relating to 'current experience', 'previous school experience', 'feelings and emotions', and 'rights' were explored with the participants. (A full copy of the student interview questions including focus group question areas can be found in Appendix 5.) These interviews and focus groups confirmed that the questions planned for the subsequent interviews with pre-transition students were appropriate and sufficiently well focused.

So as to gain an understanding of the 'professional voice' and to further explore the key research questions guiding the research (especially key research questions two and five), further focus groups were conducted with relevant personnel from the further and higher education sectors. Issues related to access, transfer and progression were explored in the following thematic areas:

> **Outreach** (e.g. What type of outreach activities are engaged in by your college?)

> **Admissions** (e.g. Do you believe there are any unintentional barriers to access for students with disabilities and/or SEN?)

> **Progression** (resources and supports) (e.g. What are your views about supporting students with disabilities and/or SEN in teaching, learning, and assessment?)

> **Teaching, learning and assessment** (e.g. What resources and supports are available to students with disabilities and/or SEN to accommodate them making this progression?)

> **Experiences** (e.g. Do you feel that students with disabilities and/or SEN have good experiences in this college?)

> **Transfer / pathways** (e.g. Do students with disabilities and/or SEN generally (i) advance to other courses provided by the college, (ii) exit after their course to another college, (iii) exit to the world of work, or (iv) other?)

> **Roles and responsibilities** (e.g. In terms of 'access', 'progression', 'transfer' and 'transition experience' for students with disabilities and/or SEN, what is the role, if any, of: government (HEA, DES, NCSE, etc.); college; you/your work area; the student/their supporter(s))

> **Best practice(s)** (e.g. Can you identify any best practice(s) in college or your own work that facilitates the successful transition of students with disabilities and/or SEN?)

A full copy of the focus group question topics and prompt questions can be found in Appendix 6.

The focus groups consisted of personnel from:

- The Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN)
- disability support officers working in the further education sector

- institutes of technology (two, both regional)

- university

- colleges of further education (three, including one in Dublin).

Table 6 presents further details regarding the focus groups and the professionals who participated. Also presented are shorthand codes for each focus group that are used in the findings chapter when referencing quotes.

Table 6: Professionals Interviewed from Further and Higher Education

Focus group	N	Code	Professional area represented
DAWN	9	HED1	Disability officers – representative of the institute of technology and university sectors.
Disability support officers (further education)	2	HED2	Disability support.
Institute of technology (1)	8	IT1	Admissions; Disability officer; Access officer; Disability service assistive technology; Students' union (x 2); Education support worker; Health and safety.
Institute of technology (2)	5	IT2	Admissions; Students' union (x 2); Disability administrator / DARE administrator / Exams; Co-ordinating disability officer.
University	6	U1	Dean of students (undergraduate); Admissions; Disability service; Student learning development; Lecturer; Careers advisory service.
College of further education (Dublin)	5	FE1	College principal; Guidance counsellor; Access officer; Disability support officer; Student representative on the college board.
College of further education (Regional 1)	3	FE2	Assistant principal teacher; Deputy director / vice principal (x 2).
College of further education (Regional 2)	4	FE3	College principal; Deputy principal; Education and career guidance counsellor; Common awards system (CAS) co-coordinator / secondary teacher.

3.4 Surveys, Questionnaire Development, Administration and Response

Surveys were designed to document the resources and supports available in relation to access, transfer and progression for students with SEN (related to key research questions two and three). With input from the advisory committee and a designated working group from the committee a 'master list' of 153 questions was developed across the thematic areas of (i) demographics, (ii) details of students with SEN, (iii) school guidance, (iv) access and progression experiences of students with SEN, (v) access services and supports at second and third level, (vi) transfer of information, and (vii) support and services at third level (e.g. How would you rate the quality of resources and services for students with SEN in your college?). Six separate surveys were constructed from the master list, each of which only included questions relevant to the appropriate sector. These were administered to (i) personnel in special schools, (ii) personnel in post-primary schools, (iii) guidance counsellors, (iv) further education staff, (v) higher education staff, and (vi) the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN). The surveys included both closed and open ended questions. All surveys and accompanying explanatory notes were administered electronically. A total of 2,411 potential respondents were identified from the six different sectors. Of these, whilst 2,125 were successfully contacted, 607 opened the email with the explanatory information and link to the survey. After a two to three week period, the surveys were re-sent to respondents as a 'reminder'. At this second distribution point, and similarly to the first administration, whilst 2,223 emails were successfully delivered, only 509 respondents opened the email. Across both time points of administration, only 48 respondents fully completed the surveys and 118 partially completed the surveys. Due to the low response rate, no presentation or interpretation of the data from this component of the research will be made.

3.5 Interviews: Sampling and Methodological Approach

For the purposes of the current research, the sampling framework for selecting the schools and students within those schools for interview (work packages 3 and 5) was derived from the NCSE's Special Education Administration System (SEAS) database. These data were provided, on a confidential basis, to the research team. The database contains the numbers of pupils in mainstream post-primary and special schools in the Republic of Ireland who are currently in receipt of resources and support from the NCSE. No pupil identifying information was contained in the data given to the researchers. From the database, the research team identified the most appropriate sample of students that accurately reflected the remit of the research project.

In order to achieve as representative a sample as possible (by geographical area, school type and category of SEN), the research team sub-divided the database into four approximated geographical areas, including urban and rural, representing north Ireland, south Ireland, east Ireland, and west Ireland. The final stage of the selection process involved identifying possible participants from a range of school types (e.g. voluntary, secondary, community school, community college, comprehensive, and special school),

taking into account the range of SEN categories represented within the identified schools.

To mitigate against possible attrition effects, 40 schools were contacted by letter and follow-up telephone call to determine their interest in participating in the research. Schools were informed that as well as interviews with the students, the research team would also like to interview associated educational or health professionals (where appropriate) and parents or guardians who supported or were in contact with the student.

The initial sample of schools contacted included: eight urban community schools, four rural community schools, four urban comprehensive schools, two rural community colleges, four urban community colleges, eight urban voluntary secondary schools, two rural voluntary secondary schools, and eight special schools. For a variety of reasons, 20 schools declined to participate. Reasons for non-participation included: (i) students were not willing to participate due to exam preparation; (ii) educational professionals were not willing to participate due to work and time commitments; and (iii) no available accommodation for the research team to conduct interviews as all rooms had been allocated to the oral examinations for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

From the 20 schools who agreed to participate in the pre-transition phase of data collection (work package 3), a total of 42 student interviews took place (including one parent who was interviewed as a proxy for one student who had severe and profound disability). This sample exceeded the remit of the project, which was to sample two students from each of the DES categories (see Table 7 and Table 8 for further details). Interviews were also conducted with 28 educational professionals (see Table 9 for further details). Despite invitations to parents of students to participate in the research, just two parents agreed to be interviewed (not including the parent who acted as a proxy for their child). For this reason, no findings are presented in relation to parental experiences. The reasons for this lack of engagement are not clear but, in general, schools reported that parents did not wish to be involved in the process. The final sample of schools included: four urban community schools, one rural community school, one urban comprehensive school, one rural community college, two urban community colleges, four urban voluntary secondary schools, two rural voluntary secondary schools, and five special schools.

Table 7: Pre-Transition Sampling and Geographical Locations of Students

Category	Number	Geographical location
Physical disability	4	Northwest, East, Southeast
Hearing impairment	1	Northeast
Visual impairment	1	East
Emotional disturbance	1	Southeast
Severe emotional disturbance	–	
Borderline mild general learning disability	2	Midlands
Mild general learning disability	6	Northwest, Southwest, East,
Moderate general learning disability	1	Southeast
Severe / profound general learning disability	1	East
Autistic spectrum disorder	7	East, Southwest
Specific learning disability	11	Northwest, South, Southeast, West, Northeast
Assessed syndrome	–	
Specific speech and language disability	2	West, East
Multiple disabilities	5	Northwest, East, Southeast, South
TOTAL	**42**	

Table 8 below presents details regarding the school type attended by the students who were interviewed.

Table 8:Students by School Type

School type	Number of schools	Number of students
Community School: urban	4	7
Community School: rural	1	1
Comprehensive: urban	1	4
Community college: rural	1	3
Community college: urban	2	3
Voluntary secondary school: urban	4	8
Voluntary secondary school: rural	2	4
Special schools	5	12
TOTAL	**20**	**42**

Table 9: School Professionals by School Type

School type	Professional role
Community college: rural	Guidance counsellor
	Resource teacher
Community college: urban	Guidance counsellor
	Resource teacher
Community college: urban	Guidance counsellor
	Resource teacher
Community school: rural (DEIS)	Guidance counsellor
	SEN team (resource teacher for senior cycle and resource teacher for junior cycle)
Community school: urban (DEIS)	SEN co-ordinator
	Resource teacher
Community school: urban	Guidance counsellor
Community School: urban	Resource teacher
Comprehensive: urban	Resource teacher
	Guidance counsellor
Special school	School co-ordinator
Special school	School principal
Voluntary secondary: rural (DEIS)	Resource teacher
	School principal
Voluntary secondary: rural	Guidance counsellor
	Resource teacher
Voluntary secondary: urban (DEIS)	SEN team (senior resource teacher, junior resource teacher, and guidance counsellor)
	Guidance counsellor
Voluntary secondary: urban (DEIS)	Guidance counsellor
Voluntary secondary: urban (DEIS)	Resource teacher
Voluntary secondary: urban	Guidance counsellor
TOTAL	28

Although agreement was reached with all schools to include their educational professionals in the research project, it was not possible to conduct interviews in some cases. For example, in two special schools the relevant staff were away on an in-service course, in another special school the relevant professional was absent due to long-term illness, and in a community urban school an emergency situation had arisen and the guidance counsellor was not available for interview. Due to a combination of factors, including the schools' ability to facilitate further interviews and the time constraints within the project, it was not possible to conduct these outstanding interviews.

3.5.1 Methodological approach

To answer key research question four, the core methodology for this aspect of the research was qualitative interviewing and analysis. A narrative approach seeking to understand how individual experiences affect and contribute to present and future

experiences (Ankeny & Lehman, 2010; Creswell, 2002) was seen as appropriate to the task because of the nature of the transition process (i.e., pre- and post-transition phases). By drawing on a variety of sources (e.g. the literature review and associated interviews with students with SEN who had already made the transition to further and higher education, semi-structured interview schedules were developed for use with the students and professionals in the pre-transition phase of the research (work package 3) (see Appendix 7). A similar schedule was developed, cognisant of results from the pre-transition interviews, for the post-transition interviews with students (work package 5) (see Appendix 8). A series of one-to-one student interviews (n = 42) were conducted (including the one parent who acted as a proxy) at the pre-transition phase. In order to gain a broader view of the issues that may be related to the process of access, transfer and progression, interviews were conducted with the professionals identified (n = 28). The primary goal of these interviews was to gain insight into their experiences regarding the transition process to further and higher education for students with SEN, and to identify key factors that enabled or prevented access, transfer, and progression for these students. These interviews enabled the researchers to pursue the specific aims of the research, with particular reference to several key research questions (namely research questions one to three and six).

3.5.2 Interview procedure

Given that the sample of student participants represented a vulnerable population, the research team made personal contact with participants in advance of the interviews. The aim of this contact was to enable the student to pose questions or voice any concerns that they may have had. This initial contact also involved several site visits to schools. Upon receipt of informed consent from parents and assent from the participants, students were invited to participate in a one-to-one interview. All interviews were conducted in the school attended by the student, except for the interview with the parent who acted as a proxy for their child, which was conducted in their home. As noted in relation to ethics, the research team were cognisant of the fact that the pre-transition interviews (work package 3) were conducted at a time in the school year associated with increased stress for all involved in the senior cycle. All of the student interviews at pre-transition phase, with one exception, lasted between 20 and 30 minutes (not inclusive of introductory material concerning the purpose of the research and any clarifications required). One student who had significant difficulties in social interaction and communication felt unable to continue with the interview process after five minutes. It was also reiterated to all of the student participants that the research team would like to interview them again for the post-transition phase of data collection.

The semi-structured interview schedules for students at pre-transition phase addressed the following themes: guidance and support received in decision-making processes around choice of post-school options; availability of resources and activities within schools; and student response to engaging in decision making around post-school options, characterised as student wellbeing. Students at the pre-transition phase engaged with all of these themes and recounted their experiences in relation to these decision-making processes. However, it was evident from student responses that support

and advice from voluntary and statutory bodies did not play a significant role within their decision-making processes.

The semi-structured interview schedules for students at post-transition addressed the following themes: post-school destination; experience of transition and settling-in; academic and social challenges in the new context; accessing support and resources; wellbeing and future plans. Students in the post-transition phase addressed all of the above themes and it was evident that they had given serious consideration to the impact of this significant transition on their lives.

The semi-structured interview schedule for school professionals at pre-transition addressed similar themes, including: the role of the school professional in supporting the transition planning for students with SEN; identification of facilitating factors and barriers for students with SEN in accessing further and higher education provision; knowledge of school professionals about supports available for students with SEN in further and higher education; and school professionals' perspectives on the student experience of the transition process to further and higher education.

The interview procedure was conceptualised across three stages, outlined below.

Stage 1

All participants (students and professionals) who had agreed to participate were interviewed. Students were interviewed, either on their own or with an appropriate adult present, if the student consented. When student interviews were completed, each student was asked if they would still be agreeable to the research team contacting them again for a follow-up interview. All students agreed to this request.

Stage 2

At Stage 2, the research team made attempts to contact all of the students again to arrange the post-transition interviews. This contact served three purposes: (i) to determine if the student had successfully transitioned to further and higher education; (ii) to ascertain if the student had made a transition to the college or course that they had aspired to at the pre-transition phase, or whether they had made a transition to an alternative college or course; and (iii) to inform the student that the research team would contact them again (in late September or early October) to conduct the follow-up interview (i.e., post-transition: work package 5). In some cases, the research team could not make immediate contact with the student for a variety of reasons, for example, the student changing their telephone number. In these cases, the parents of the students concerned were contacted and asked to inform the student of the follow-up interview. These parents also informed the research team of the course choice achieved by the student concerned.

Stage 3

At Stage 3, between late September and early October, attempts were made to contact all student participants to arrange for the follow-up interview. The attained sample for interview at post-transition phase was 23 students (including one parent acting as a

proxy for their child who has severe / profound intellectual disability), out of the original 42 interviewed at the pre-transition phase. Nineteen participants who had taken part in the pre-transition phase were unable to participate at post-transition for a variety of reasons detailed below.

In line with our 'ethics as a process' approach, it was decided that if participants did not respond after three telephone calls and/or messages, no further attempts would be made to contact the student. A total of five students were not contactable for this reason: two students with ADHD, one student with MGLD, one student with specific learning disability, and one student with speech and language difficulties. In some cases, telephone numbers provided by the students at the pre-transition phase were now defunct, thus making contact with these students impossible (no other contact information having been provided by them). This occurred in three instances: one student with MGLD, cerebral palsy and epilepsy, one student with MGLD and speech and language difficulties, and one student with visual impairment. One further student did not participate, citing that they were 'too busy' to participate (multiple disabilities). Also, although all student participants had consented to be interviewed at this post-transition phase, three students declined to participate in the follow-up interview when contacted: one student with specific learning disability, one with a physical disability, and one student with an acquired brain injury and MGLD. Furthermore, two students did not attend for their scheduled interview: one student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and speech and language difficulties, and one student with Asperger's syndrome and emotional and behavioural disorder (EBD). Two students cited personal reasons for not wishing to participate in the post-transition interviews: one student with specific learning disability, and one with ADHD and MGLD. Other reasons cited for non-participation in this post-transition phase included: outcomes not having resulted in any type of transition and the participant remained in their current school (one student with cerebral palsy / non-verbal quadriplegia); returning to school to repeat their Leaving Certificate examinations (one student with specific learning disability); and opting to go to work (one student with MGLD).

Of the 23 students that did participate in the follow-up interview, 16 achieved their first choice, six did not, and one student, due to their level of SEN, was not able to make a transition to further and higher education.

3.5.3 Interviews: transcription and coding

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in their entirety so as to gain valuable descriptive information and to capture the fullness of the narrative account, which varied greatly in relation to both length and depth. For example, in some cases only minimal information was provided by students (e.g. participatory ability or willingness), whilst in other cases the participants were vocal and reflective in the way in which they provided valuable information about their experience or knowledge of the transition process.

Given the extent of the data collected, analyses were conducted in three stages using NVivoTM to analyse and manage the dataset. In the first stage, an 'a priori' first analytical framework, based on the review of the literature and on a process of peer consultation, was drawn up. Given the narrative nature of the interviews, and sensitivity

to the nature of qualitative data, the researchers were able to develop further codes, which emerged from the data itself (stage 2). The revised codes were applied to a set of randomly chosen interviews with students and adults to check for inter-coder reliability (stage 3). This process was repeated for the three sets of qualitative data generated for the project: focus groups with professionals (work package 2b); pre-transition interviews (work package 3), and post-transition interviews (work package 5).

The next chapter presents the core themes identified from the data analysis. The quotes presented in support of each theme were selected as being representative of the views expressed and experiences recounted by the participants.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the research findings. It is organised into four main sections:

- the views of the further and higher education professionals involved in access, transfer, and progression (focus groups)

- the views of students and associated school professionals at the pre-progression phase when the student had an aspiration of transition to further and higher education

- the views of students at the post-progression phase

- case examples of best practice.

The first three sections are further broken down into subsections, reflecting both the main themes emerging from the data and the research questions, in particular questions about the views of students and professionals with regard to:

- access and progression pathways (including the process of making a choice)

- support and guidance (including changes in teaching, learning, and assessment practices)

- student experience or wellbeing.

When presenting quotes from further and higher education professionals, these are referenced with shorthand codes representing the focus group that the participant was involved in (see Table 6 in Chapter 3).

4.1 The Views of Professionals in Further and Higher Education

Eight focus groups were carried out to seek the views of professionals working in further and higher education. Professionals included, for example, disability support officers, college principals and vice-principals, admissions officers and student representatives. The analysis presented in this section addresses the following key research questions:

1. What are the access and progression pathways for students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education institutes?

2. What are the roles of educational institutes, individuals and health services in the preparation of students with SEN for this progression?

3. What are the views of educational and health personnel involved in supporting students in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

4. What major issues and barriers arise with regards to access, progression and transition?

4.1.1 Pathways: making choices, access and progression

Access, transfer, and progression were discussed in relation to:

- the structural process regarding access to further and higher education, including the CAO and DARE processes

- the implications for students of the identification and assessment of their disability, including issues surrounding the disclosure of disability

- flexibility of access, transfer and progression routes.

There was general agreement among professionals about the definition of access, which was in accord with that of the National Qualifications Authority (2003), based on the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, which defines access as including both entry to, and participation in, education programmes. For example:

> Access to us is that students apply for courses and access means then do they meet the requirements to participate in the course? Those requirements are straightforward, it is either they have Leaving Cert, Leaving Cert Applied or they have a FETAC Level 4 or in the case of mature students over 23 they have the ability to participate in the programme. [FE2, vice principal 1]

> We wouldn't look upon access as being a physical thing like access to buildings and so on because in terms of say people with disabilities, all the buildings are accessible. Access to us is access to the courses. [FE2, vice principal 2]

Furthermore, professionals were of the opinion that schools were perhaps under-resourced or that guidance counsellors may need a better understanding of how the system works:

> Guidance counsellors don't have the time or the level of expertise needed for people with some very specific requirements. [FE1, administrator]

> I would have to say as well – sometimes guidance counsellors call me in […] and some of the questions asked, like I can't believe that they don't have answers. They just don't know about the DARE scheme either. [IT1, disability support officer]

Specifically in relation to the DARE scheme, professionals identified aspects of the scheme which could either facilitate access, transfer and progression, or create unintentional barriers to these processes. In the first instance, the DARE scheme was seen to facilitate access, transfer, and progression because:

> [T]here's strength […] in being part of a national scheme and that there's, for example, there's an awful lot of work done behind DARE in terms of increasing the numbers of students with disabilities accessing college. [IT2, disability support officer]

In addition it was acknowledged that professionals from HEAR and DARE were proactive in disseminating information to promote these schemes:

> There is an awful lot of work done by the HEAR and DARE operators in each of the institutions that are in the scheme to promote the schemes and make people aware of the routes and that. We would hope that would go a long way to making the information available. [HED1, admissions officer]

A number of unintentional barriers were also discussed. One of these related to misperceptions about the scheme, by students and professionals alike. For example, this admissions officer noted a general misunderstanding by students with regard to who is eligible to apply through the DARE scheme:

> They [the students] seem to think, in the last number of years, that DARE is the only avenue for students with a disability and it is not. [IT1, admissions officer]

Moreover, the nature of the scheme could be misunderstood by professionals in terms of whether a DARE applicant gains access on merit:

> In [college annual reports] … it would say the students that got in through the DARE scheme, would talk about students getting in on merit and then the students getting in on these schemes so that the indication is that they were not getting in on merit. [IT2, senior university administrator]

The CAO and DARE applications process was considered problematic by some professionals. For example, in terms of labelling, one professional perceived the system as discriminatory:

> I would have issues over its equity anyway. I would think it is a very unfair system the way it is. […] If you are not a standard applicant or, God help us, a non-standard applicant, about the only thing worse is to be called a non-national. *That you have to be going through the DARE scheme or the HEAR scheme or both together. I think it is dreadful.* [FE1, principal]

The demands of the application process could also constitute a barrier for students with SEN:

> These routes, these additional or supplementary routes that are developed by CAO to assist people from previously under-represented groups are actually more difficult to use than if you were a Leaving Cert student […] These things are; the administrative or the organisational structures of the application system itself are a barrier to access. [FE1, principal]

Misperception about the DARE scheme could also be evidenced at the students' level according to this disability support officer:

> The other thing with DARE is that you would still get students saying, 'I got in through the DARE scheme', but they would have got in any way on their points. Most of our students would get in on the points. […] They think they only got in because of their disability and not because of their own achievement and that is not a good thing. [IT1, disability support officer]

Considering that the DARE scheme is an enabling process, as noted here, the language used in relation to DARE was reported to be more disabling than enabling:

> [I]f you have a disability and you are using the DARE scheme, you are referred to as a non-standard applicant. What an awful thing to actually call someone. [FE1, principal]

Furthermore, there was evidence of a misunderstanding of what the DARE scheme is and who it is for, which may have consequences for the success of the application and the smooth progression pathway:

> I suppose it hasn't moved on from being specific school leaver. [...] DARE is only to the school leaver but the perception is that if I don't qualify for DARE then I don't qualify for anything. That is not the case. That would mean that the candidates coming in from the Further Education colleges and the matures, they are slipping through the net simply because we are not picking up that piece of vital information at the application stage. [IT1, admissions officer]

However, this view was not shared by other professionals, who had different systems that facilitate students' access, transfer and progression within their institution:

> Colleges with different ways of assessing admissions, for example I work in an Art school [college] and we don't use the point system as a basis for admissions. Our core competency is assessed through a portfolio so that means that we can't participate but we do have a supplementary route that is based on the model of DARE and uses the principles of DARE in terms of good practice. [HED1, disability support officer]

A second unintentional barrier discussed by the professionals related to the way in which the DARE scheme required disclosure of disability. For example, there was a suggestion of a link between the disability disclosure issue and the method of disclosure advocated by DARE, which resulted in further misunderstanding at the point of application to the course:

> Because there is such an emphasis on DARE even on the online application, your attention is immediately drawn to DARE and they are not eligible for DARE but they don't subsequently tick the disability category either. [IT1, admissions officer]

Disability, its assessment, identification and self-disclosure were common themes across all focus groups and all professionals. In all cases, the process was of vital importance to gain the support and funding needed to ensure smooth access, transfer and progression. Nonetheless, it was not without problems. The process and importance of the identification and assessment were described below by a disability support officer. The first part of the process involved an educational needs assessment which would:

> go through everything from your past educational experience, your employment history if applicable, any technology that you may have used and what it involves, would you like to sample others. And what kind of human

> supports you need in terms of interpreters, note takers, academic assistants, PAs and all that kind of stuff. [FE1, disability support officer]

It was acknowledged that the student was always involved in this process but sometimes it was felt that families had an important contribution to make:

> So, basically all that is undertaken in conjunction with – usually just the students themselves but in some cases we would ask permission for parental involvement. That would always be done with the consent of the student and because all our students are over 18 but sometimes it is in the best interest of the students to involve parents. [FE1, disability support officer]

In this case, to ensure that provision was in place in time and therefore support a smooth progression for students with SEN, the institution made arrangements for support before the final result of the application came through:

> All of that is done and then I would apply for funding to the Higher Education Authority but usually [the principal] would give me permission to put in supports prior to the funding being approved because the student cannot function, some students will not physically be able to get here without the transport, without the note takers or without the assistance. So you have to kind of jump the gun in order to allow the student to participate. All of that has to be set up before they even enter the building. [FE1, disability support officer]

The quote above exemplifies and summarises the complex process through which disability support officers assess needs and set up support provision for students with SEN. Although pivotal to ensuring access, transfer and progression, the professionals identified a number of issues related to the assessment process such as the personal and institutional cost of the assessment, its usefulness for accessing funding, the availability of consultants, and the timing of the assessment.

The financial cost of the assessment was seen to be a barrier to access and progression:

> Even when they [students] are aware of a problem or where a problem has been pointed out to them here, they wouldn't necessarily have the money to actually go and get properly assessed and then to come into the system properly. [IT1, access officer]

> [I]t's a tick box exercise because if you have one then, then you get to move to the next level where you may get the funding. [FE2, vice-principal]

In other situations, financial cost and timelines for submission of reports, and the availability of consultants were seen to compound the problem:

> […] It is not just the educational psychologist report which we all tend to focus on a lot because they are so expensive, but also consultants' reports. Some students with physical disabilities might not have seen a consultant since they were nine years old. [IT1, disability support officer]

Difficulties in obtaining up-to-date reports, as a barrier to access, were also outlined in the following quote:

> Another case, I had a man who had an amputated leg, and we had huge difficulty getting a medical thing from the hospital, from the consultant. […] Others are waiting years. Their year's up before they even get to see a consultant. […] It can be frustrating. You meet with a student, you know they need particular supports, and you just can't get them in place. The report's a month out of date, you know. [HED2, disability support officer]

If gaining an official report can be, at times, problematic, so can the process of disclosure. There was agreement across all focus groups on the importance of students disclosing their disability, since this has implications for access, as well as funding for support. However, there was also an understanding that some students might not want to disclose their disability, and that this impacted on the process of access, transfer and progression. A number of possible reasons students might decide not to disclose their disability were proposed. For example, students might have had negative experiences in the past, and not disclosing is an opportunity to start afresh:

> [M]aybe it is a case that, say, some people that have a disability maybe had a problem in school, people have made fun of them or whatever that there is a case there that they want to come to college and think that is a clean slate that isn't going to happen them again. They don't necessarily want to point out that they have a disability and need a bit of help. [IT1, student union welfare officer]

In other cases, students might perceive disclosure as having a negative impact on the success of their application:

> Certainly from an admissions perspective we would have a number who would be reluctant to declare a disability for a fear that it might mitigate against them in any way in relation to admission to the institute. That fear is there no matter how hard you try to dissuade them and say it doesn't. [IT1, admissions officer]

In general, professionals suggested that those students with SEN who did not disclose did so because they wanted to be treated like their non-disabled peers:

> People are tired of being pigeonholed and labelled and they don't want to be seen to be going into this room with the disability officer. They just want to be the same as everybody else. [HED2, disability support officer]

A final factor that was seen as having an impact on the access, transfer and progression of students with SEN was the availability of courses and suitability of courses on offer and the requirements to enter a course of study. The data from the focus groups represent the variation across the further and higher education sectors. The following quote summarises both the practice and an evaluation of what might be beneficial to students with SEN in relation to access:

> We should go forward [but] sometimes it is best for individuals to take a sideways route from time to time and even though progression isn't always linear, it shouldn't always actually be linear because every person is an individual. [FE1, disability support officer]

While the individualised approach in the above quote has advantages, this is not without its unintentional barriers. Its success, as the same disability support officer remarked, depends on students receiving the appropriate guidance earlier in their education, so as to make the most suitable choices:

> The whole transitioning process and the whole career progression and development is very, very difficult particularly if they have chosen the wrong subjects, moving from junior to senior cert cycle; it is very, very difficult then to make the right choice in relation to further or higher education. So, it is very complicated and the whole process needs to start a lot earlier with parents, young people and schools being a lot more informed as to what is what out there and I don't think it is something that is going to be solved very quickly. [FE1, disability support officer]

While in some cases suitability referred to the content of the course in relation to the student's SEN, in other cases access depended on whether the institution was able to make decisions independently from the entry points necessary. Thus:

> [W]e are first choice for students with disabilities as well. They would see that access to here they would have a far higher chance of getting in here than getting in to a university because of the points. The point[s] system is relevant for us. If you have Leaving Cert, Leaving Cert Applied, Level Four or even if you are lucky enough and you applied; 95 per cent of people who apply here before the closing date get an offer. Almost everyone gets an offer. [FE2, vice-principal]

However, the process of access, transfer and progression can be far from smooth. A vice-principal from a college of further education explained the system and the possible barriers that students, both in general and those with SEN, can encounter:

> The first thing being points, the second thing is the number of places that they [*higher education* institutions] make available to students who don't have the points unless they have specific needs. [FE2, vice-principal]

The specific requirement of institutes of technology that students attain the requisite FETAC award in one sitting was also considered a barrier:

> ITs and universities may have a requirement that they get their FETAC award in one sitting. So that's a major barrier because in this case here, even this girl who is very good may have got her full award over two years but she can't use that award for progression because she hasn't got it in the one sitting. [FE2, vice-principal]

Thus, it was suggested that a way to ensure access and progression would be to develop:

[a] specific scheme for access from further education courses into third level courses for students with disabilities. [FE2, vice-principal]

The importance of ensuring that course information is correct and truthful was also highlighted:

The image they [further and higher education colleges] give on courses is not correct; they give the glossy image of our courses. They don't tell them the truth about what the course is like [...] I don't think admissions or prospectuses or whatever else are telling the truth about the difficulties that students will have – any student – I am not talking about just the disabled students. [HED1, disability support officer]

4.1.2 Resources and support

Ensuring smooth and effective transition experiences is complex and requires an integrated approach. As already mentioned, issues about applications, disclosure of disability, and the consequent subsequent offers of a course placement are closely related to ensuring that support and guidance at pre- and post-progression phases are made available. Support includes: academic and funding support following the assessment of needs and disclosed disability; removing barriers to physical access; personal and emotional support; establishment of multi-agency networks including close collaboration with post-primary schools and further and higher education colleges where appropriate; and development of institutional policies aimed at promoting an inclusive ethos.

With regard to academic support, the professionals acknowledged that a variety of practices are offered, although not all might be present in the same institution, including: use of assistive technology; use of websites and online repositories of study materials; individualised learning support provided by a personal assistants and/or scribes; group study and peer support; and mentoring.

The following quote exemplifies how participants across the focus groups engaged with the task of providing support for students with SEN:

It depends obviously on the student's difficulty. What we do is we have a needs assessment which involves [the disability officer] and myself and the learning support tutor and we look at [...] the tasks the student has to do in their course and we look at the difficulties that they have with different learning tasks and look at the access type difficulties they might have in each classroom or social communication difficulties and then we would look at how we would deal with those difficulties through the use of whatever is the most appropriate intervention like learning support or assisted technology or whatever so if I see an assisted technology solution that might be better or might be a new solution other than the human support. [IT1, disability service assistive technology]

In addition to the provision highlighted above, some institutions supported learning by making use of e-learning technologies (e.g. Moodle), and/or peer support groups and personal assistants. While the first ensured that the students with SEN had access to lecturers' notes and lessons, peer support also ensured that students with SEN were socially included and part of a community of students. The use of personal assistants seemed to be widespread and professionals were aware of both the positive and the negative impact additional personnel can have on the wellbeing of the students with SEN. Thus, while in certain cases it is, as one education support worker suggested, *'really necessary to be sitting beside someone'* [IT1], it was also acknowledged that:

> You don't need to have that [a personal assistant] thrust upon you in first year when you are trying to meet new friends and then there is someone sitting there typing away. [IT1, education support worker]

Thus, the presence of additional adults isolated the student with SEN by drawing attention to the disability and to the additional support that students with SEN were receiving. This, in turn, gave rise to other students questioning the fairness of the system, as the following quote shows:

> I was sitting in the canteen with a student with disabilities and his classmate started slagging [teasing] me because of the amount of help that the guy with the disability was getting. [IT1, access officer]

Besides making use of personal assistants and assistive technology, other practices were also listed, such as out-of-class support hours, or drop-in sessions to keep track of students' progress, which aimed to improve their retention and completion rates. In the end, however, it was acknowledged that the support provided needed to take into consideration that the students were now adults and should be treated as such, as the following professional remarks:

> Students may often access the curriculum quite easily, at the junior cycle level, that won't successfully do it at the senior cycle level because certain supports are withdrawn actually because the whole policy is towards enabling the student to actually become more independent so that they progress through the system. [FE2, vice-principal]

In relation to in-class pedagogical support, professionals listed a number of pro-active initiatives, such as sharing vital information with lecturers, providing them with training and support since *'There is a probably a huge lack of awareness around it [disability]'* [IT1, Access officer]. Participants in the focus groups also suggested that personal perspectives on disability, and lecturers' self-efficacy could be unintentional barriers to effective pedagogical support. Providing support for both the students and the lecturers, however, was seen to be problematic since:

> every single lecturer is completely different. Some of them will know absolutely everything and do everything they can and some just don't want to know you. [IT1, education support worker]

Supporting access, transfer and progression was achieved prior to students starting their study at further and higher education through a number of other practices, which included outreach activities, web-based information about the further and higher education college, and induction and orientation days. Participants also stressed the importance of collaboration with: other colleges and disability services; guidance counsellors in schools – including training opportunities on the application process – disability associations, and other professionals; and the local community, primary schools and post-primary schools including school visits. They also highlighted the importance of partnership with parents. There were examples of innovative practices to help students make appropriate course choices and/or familiarise themselves with the new institution such as taster or summer courses and co-teaching practices. For example:

> We would visit all of our hundred schools in the immediate catchment area and also out in the wider catchment area, so we would do a lot of work with schools. [FE2, disability support officer]

> I have a student who is on the autistic spectrum who was given core sampling before he went in [progressing to *higher education]* because social skills would be a huge issue. He went […] down there on work experience and he has achieved a place on the course and did an interview successfully with them, so I was very pleased with that experience. [FE3, guidance counsellor]

> We are definitely reaching out to secondary schools an awful lot. And they would come in regularly for training and we would link in with groups such as the Dyslexia Association of Ireland and maybe the National Council for the Blind and things like that. And we would get, you know, training requests from them and we would facilitate that. [IT2, disability support officer]

4.1.3 Student experience

How students experience the transition to a new institution, with its culture and organisation, can have an impact on any student regardless of whether they have SEN. The findings, therefore, evidence both common traits but also specific issues which might be more relevant to students with SEN. As a disability officer in an institute of technology remarked, students *'get a bit of a shock'* once they move into the new environment. Therefore, considerations about the students' experience and their wellbeing were central to the professionals' discussion about how they facilitate access, transfer and progression. While for some students with SEN leaving schools was a positive new start (as discussed in Section 4.2.3), for others the transition process was problematic. Issues were raised about the possible relationship between the students' disability, their perception of it, including the aforementioned issues about disclosure, and difficulties students may have in socialising, making friends, dealing with isolation, and in some cases, being the victim of bullying. This social and personal aspect of wellbeing overlapped with their experience of transition from post-primary to further and higher education.

With regard to the personal and emotional aspect, while wishing to be treated as 'normal', it was suggested that some students were isolated, lacking friends and the support needed:

> If you are having any difficulty and you are aware that you are the only one or two in the class and often issues to do with forming friends and levels of intimacy and all of that come with it. [FE1, guidance counsellor]

> They tend to be very much an isolated group so if you haven't made friends in your group it exacerbates that dimension. [FE1, principal]

However, this was not seen to be the case for every student. Some might actually:

> have disabilities and maybe very severe disabilities, who would be very involved, you know, with their groups and their classes ... [HED2, disability support officer]

Nonetheless, one college principal suggested that lack of friends and social isolation was a wider issue:

> It is very much an individual thing. [...] We support and deal with the students when they come in here as best we can but then you must look a lot wider than that. It is about the family experience, it is about everything when they come in here. We are dealing with a tiny part of it. [FE1, principal]

In other cases, it was a lack of learned coping skills that was seen to be a barrier to students' wellbeing and ability to adapt to the new environment:

> The coping mechanisms then, sometimes that is just washed away when they come to third level because what they have established all through second level is not working here. [IT1 FE, student representative]

According to the professionals, not only lack of coping skills, but also lack of knowledge and understanding about the nature of the new courses and awareness of what is expected of them as students, impacted on the students' self-determination, confidence and self-efficacy. In some instances, the wellbeing of the students was perceived to be compromised when the college to which they finally transferred did not reflect their first or even second choice. Some students only stayed on the course 'for something to do' [IT1, disability support officer] and were therefore demoralised and de-motivated.

The following quote shows that in some cases, the support provided – such as a scribe – had the negative consequence of making students the target of bullying. This was in part due to a perceived inequality of treatment, but also related to other students' perception about disability:

> Bullying would have been a bit of a problem as well down through the years, on a small scale or a larger scale. When I started working with a student, I was note taking with her and she asked not to sit beside me. I said that is absolutely no problem. She was absolutely out of her mind with happiness. [IT1, disability support officer]

The participants proposed a number of ways in which they supported the students' wellbeing. For example, they provided informal drop-in opportunities; avoided drawing attention to the student with disability in the classroom; established communication and support with the students prior to transition; and provided mentoring sessions. Being approachable and reassuring and establishing a supportive network could also, as the example below shows, ensure the student stayed on course:

[S]ometimes it's just to listen, it's to reassure. I had a student who was dropping out this year, and he rang me, and it started on a Friday evening, and it went on all weekend, and he was getting very distressed – a mature student who had vision difficulty – and I linked in then to his tutor, his co-ordinator in the college and everything, and he was doing really well, but he hadn't had any results back, and in his own lack of confidence in his tutor, he was convinced he wasn't making the grade. [HED1, disability support officer]

4.1.4 The views of professionals: summary

The processes of facilitating and ensuring access, transfer and progression are complex and dependent on a number of variables. While there were commonalities across the various institutions represented in the focus groups, practices also varied; they were responsive to, and dependent on, local needs and opportunities. This is especially the case for further education colleges. Ensuring access, transfer and progression is a multi-dimensional process which starts prior to the students progressing to further and higher education colleges and continues while they are at college. A number of interlinked factors impact on the smoothness of the process, such as application requirements, allowances for disability (e.g. DARE), entry point requirements, assessment of needs, and availability of funding and training to provide the support required. These factors, at policy, systemic, and practice levels, can facilitate or create unintentional barriers for students with SEN. They are mainly related to the ways in which SEN and disability are perceived by the students themselves and by others, both lecturers and peers, as well as the development of a habit of dependency on support and the need to develop more skills and self-reliance during the school years. Much discussion centred on the usefulness of the DARE scheme. The general view was that while DARE is useful, it can also be cumbersome, and while the service providers might be positive the service users are less enthusiastic, according to the professionals interviewed. DARE is also not appropriate or relevant to mature students or students who do not come through directly to higher education.

4.2 The Views of Students and School Professionals: Pre-Progression

This section reports the findings from data collected from students in the period when they had the aspiration of making the transition to further and higher education (n = 42, including one parent who was interviewed as a proxy for one student who had severe and profound disability). It also presents findings from data from associated school professionals (n = 28) involved in the process of helping these students access post-

compulsory education. It explores practices and protocols that can exert an influence on how students make their choices, the supports they receive, and the resources are made available to ensure a smooth and effective progression to further and higher education. These findings are presented under the key research questions posed, focusing on: access, progression and pathways; guidance and support; and the student experience.

4.2.1 Pathways, making choices, access and progression

Factors relating to access, progression and pathways for students with SEN emerged through the interviews with school professionals and the students themselves. The most important of these, described in this section, were:

- making choices: entry (examination) points system, qualifications and access routes
- practical matters such as transport, accommodation and college design.

Table 10 reports students' choices of courses and colleges at the pre-transition stage and it shows that such choices were varied, reflecting the diversity and uniqueness of each individual's aspirations and expectations in relation to both course and institutional destination.

Table 10: Choice of Courses and Levels for Transition Pathways Recorded at Pre-Transition Interviews

School	Student code with associated SEN / disability	Choice at pre-transition	Type of course chosen	Level of course
School A	A1 ADHD	Public relations, event management or business	PLC	5
School A	A2 ADHD / speech and language	Fitness instructor course	PLC	5
School A	A3 Apraxia / schizophrenia	Pre-arts course linked to university	PLC	5
School A	A4 ADHD	Fitness instructor course	PLC	5
School A	A5 Multiple disabilities (dyslexia / anxiety / borderline MGLD)	Ambulance or fire service course	PLC	5
School B	B1 Dyslexia	Animal care course	PLC	5
School B	B2 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Art course	PLC	5
School C	C1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Maths and physics	University	9
School D	D1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Music technology	Institute of technology	8
School D	D2 Dyslexia	Engineering	Institute of technology	7
School E	E1 Dyslexia	Psychology	University	7
School E	E2 Dyslexia	Beauty therapy	PLC	5
School F	F1 MGLD	Nursing	UK FE	2
School F	F2 MGLD	Hairdressing	NLN	2
School F	F3 Dyslexia	Music technology	University	8
School F	F4 Dyslexia	Health or forensic science	PLC	5
School G	G1 Physical disability	Computer skills	PLC	5
School H	H1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Business	PLC	5
School I	I1 MGLD	Catering	PLC	5

School	Student code with associated SEN / disability	Choice at pre-transition	Type of course chosen	Level of course
School I	I2 MGLD	Childcare (to go on to teaching eventually)	PLC	5
School I	I3 ADHD, MGLD	Forklift truck driver	NLN	2
School J	J1 Dysgraphia	Arts degree (to go on to teaching eventually)	University	8
School J	J2 Dyslexia	Marketing	Institute of technology	7
School J	J3 Dyslexia	Not decided at time of interview	University	8
School K	K1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Information technology	PLC	5
School K	K2 Hearing impairment	Social care	PLC	5
School K	K3 Dyslexia	Engineering	University	8
School L	L1 MGLD	Agriculture	Agricultural college	6
School L	L2 MGLD	Agriculture	Agricultural college	6
School M	M1 MGLD / cerebral palsy / epilepsy	No expressed choice		-
School M	M2 MGLD / speech and language	Hairdressing	HSE Adult / Community	2
School N	N1 Speech and language	Event or marketing management	Institute of technology	6
School N	N2 Acquired brain injury / MGLD	Sport and recreation or radio broadcasting	PLC	5
School O	O1 ASD	Vocational training course	Adult training services	3
School O	O2 Spina bifida / epilepsy / neural tube defect	Vocational training course	Adult training services	3
School O	O3 Moderate learning disability /cerebral palsy	Vocational training course	Adult training services	4
School O	O4 Cerebral palsy / non-verbal quadriplegia	Staying in current placement	Special school	4
School O	O5 Physical disability (spina bifida)	Special needs assistant	PLC	5
School P	P1 Asperger's syndrome / EBD	Humanities	University	8
School Q	Q1 Physical disability and learning disability	Computers	Institute of technology	5
School R	R1 Severe and profound learning disability [parent interviewed as proxy for student]	No expressed choice	–	–
School S	Visual impairment	Computers	Institute of technology	7

The data show that the majority of the students, that is 17, were planning to move to a PLC course. A further six planned to attend an institute of technology, seven planned to

attend university, while the remaining opted for different progression routes, including adult training services.

School professionals and students were aware that entry to further and higher education was a competitive process and it was recognised that meeting entry requirements was a particular challenge for many students with SEN. For some students the entry requirements can become a barrier to their aspiration to progress into further and higher education; as one guidance counsellor observed *'He wasn't ever going to get the points'.* Another guidance counsellor commented, *'So the biggest barrier, I think, is getting the points'.*

One student with dyslexia expressed the impact of the points system on their aspirations as follows: *'And it's sad because I feel like some people, I'm even scared myself that it's sort of like maybe this is the end of the line then'.* As further suggested by a SEN coordinator, the current system was seen by some professionals also as distracting them from educating young people with SEN in relation to their more holistic needs:

> I mean we were only doing two subjects at the time at foundation level. And I thought, 'I don't think this is right. This is just like forcing information in to them to pass an exam.' But isn't the Leaving Cert that, getting points, the system is all wrong! We should be educating children for full lives when they leave. But my kids went through the system of points, points, points and they didn't know what they wanted to do when they got out. [School I, SEN coordinator]

While for some students the prospect of not gaining the necessary points was, as the student claimed, *'scary',* for other students the response to the mismatch between aspirations and entry point requirements was to persevere and be content with a less direct pathway to immediate personal achievement. As one student remarked:

> I mightn't do as well as I probably can do but there still are ways, like there's back door entrances, it might take longer, but with luck and perseverance I'll get there in the end. [A3, student with apraxia and schizophrenia]

Together with the need to meet the necessary entry points, another possible challenge was to make a choice between what students were good at and could gain good results in, and what they also enjoyed doing, or planned to do after leaving school or college. In some cases, frustration was compounded by the aspiration to go to college alongside the inability to make a focused choice, as shown in the quote below:

> I do want to go to college; I just don't know what I want to do. [K3, student with dyslexia]

While this lack of certainty would be expected to be valid for all students at this stage of transition, it also appears to be heightened by what the young people perceived to be barriers related to their SEN. While some students were aware of the limitations that their SEN placed on them, especially in terms of achieving the required grades and entry points, others, particularly those with dyslexia who were already receiving support at school, did not feel their SEN would limit their aspirations:

Definitely no way would I ever let it [dyslexia] hold me back. So I don't even think about it. [J3, student with dyslexia]

Some professionals described mock exams as a 'reality check'. This notion was often accompanied by a value judgement, not just about factual evaluations regarding which route to further and higher education was available on the basis of predicted grades, but also about the quality of young people's aspirations. As a result, while some professionals gave central focus to young people's aspirations in determining their progression route, others felt they were unrealistic. In some cases, such realism seemed to lead to, and further support, a deterministic view about students' intellectual abilities and their chances of progressing to third level.

There was some evidence that guidance counsellors and students with SEN strategically choose the further education option, viewing this as a possible 'safety net' and also as a confidence building option:

Sometimes, some of our students would have the PLC option in the bag as well. And that gives them a real boost as well. Because they can go 'Okay, that's still there'. [School E, guidance counsellor]

Although the PLC option may offer some strategic advantage, some students with SEN perceive it as lowering their expectations and life aspirations; as one student with dyslexia remarked:

It's a back door way in, if I don't get to a real course, I don't want to like go through the back way in … I wouldn't even attempt a PLC, I think the PLC is like what the LCA do. You don't want to be thinking like I'm an LCA. I don't want to be saying that I'm smart or nothing, just they're not capable. I know a few people, even my brother has to do an LCA because he's autism, but I just don't want that for me. I want something better. [D2, student with dyslexia]

Choosing to do the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) course has implications (i.e. it is not accepted for university entrance in Ireland) for a student wishing to enter higher education directly as expressed by the following student:

There's no chance of me getting in to [name of college] from doing the Leaving Certificate Applied, so I'll have to do something. I'll just go to the foundation college first and try and work my way up so I can get in. [B2, student with Asperger's syndrome / neurological condition]

This process is not straightforward however, and at times students' ideas about the nature of the course they aspired to are not based on informed evidence. In this case new decisions have to be made:

You'd actually go through the course content and then they [the students] might realise then, 'Oh God, that isn't what I thought that course would have been like.' [School E, guidance counsellor]

Some guidance counsellors viewed an indirect pathway to higher education as a positive alternative for those students who were not expected to gain the necessary academic level to access the course of their choice:

> So, you know, I was saying to them [the students who were unlikely to make the points] about the alternative. So, we found kind of a few different things, so, they will go to [name of college] or they will go to whatever and they'll do the certificate. I have the progression route that if they wanted to, because they could be brilliant at whatever and they can kind of meander up towards it if they did want. [School L, guidance counsellor]

For those students with, for example, intellectual disabilities, the NLN also plays a role by providing an interim transition before transfer to further education. The NLN may also provide a support net for those who would not be able to cope with the transition to higher education or the transition straight to employment. One school coordinator explained that:

> we thought he needed the support of the National Learning Network. He would not be able to go out on his own. He's happy with that, he's been up, his family are very supportive. [School I, school coordinator]

DARE, as a supplementary scheme, has been designed to facilitate access routes for students with SEN wishing to enter higher education directly from schools. Some guidance counsellors were concerned about the effectiveness of the DARE scheme:

> There isn't enough reduction [in points] to give them major incentive to go for it then, almost. And then you still need the six subjects requirement in [name of university] and that's a problem. [School E, guidance counsellor]

Some school professionals were also concerned about the requirement, availability and cost for up-to-date SEN assessments in order to qualify for consideration under the DARE scheme:

> I think it's a bit mean that DARE are not accepting assessments that are five years old. And because we can only get four children a year assessed here, unless you have [€]500 to pay for that assessment you're kind of stuck. [School L, resource teacher]

There was even more pressure to get the forms submitted for an earlier date and to make sure that up-to-date disability assessments were in place. There was evidence that some students had fallen foul of this and missed vital deadlines:

> I only got assessed after the date the DARE had to be ticked. You had to do it by a certain date to get the DARE. Well I'm not too fussed, but it would have been helpful if I had of got it. [K3, student with dyslexia]

There is a possibility of applying to higher education using the CAO system and at the same time applying for a further education course. Some school professionals explicitly

talked about supporting students to work out a variety of plans depending on their examination results. This student explained that:

> If I don't get the points and I don't get to do the psychology, the four years degree, I'll do two arts [modules] with the three year. If I don't get arts then I'll do a PLC. You need to do arts to do sculpting. [E1, student with dyslexia]

Although the literature suggested that practical factors such as travel, building design and suitable accommodation would be important in making pre-transition choices for students with SEN(Lewis, Parsons and Robertson, 2007; McGuire, Scott & Shaw, 2006), there was relatively limited discussion with regard to practical factors influencing progression and access to further and higher education. However, transport was identified as a factor in decision making. The vicinity of the institution played an important part in how students talked about their choices:

> Well, if I go to [name of college], it is close enough from home so I would be able to commute up and down. [L1, student with MGLD]

> I decided to pull out because I think it is too far: where if I could get a local PLC it would be a lot handier. [P1, student with Asperger's syndrome / EBD]

For others there was evidence that the physical design of a college or university could have a negative influence in the individual student's decision making:

> [It] feels real impersonal, concrete and plastic and everything. So I didn't like it at all. [E1, student with dyslexia]

For some students an offer of accommodation, either official or unofficial, was definitely a positive incentive to choose a particular institution. For example, one young person with Asperger's syndrome was attracted to the possibility of sharing a living space with a social contact:

> Because I've a friend up there and he said I could stay with him if I got in. [K1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

The following guidance counsellor assumed that choices were limited to institutions that would allow the young person to remain in their home area:

> It will be a case of me going right what, what's in our [area] … because she probably won't move outside the Dublin 15. [School K, guidance counsellor]

While non-academic factors were less prevalent in the narratives of young people and adults, nonetheless these findings show that transition to further and higher education is the result of academic, practical, and emotional factors.

4.2.2 Resources and support

All study schools helped students with SEN by providing support, guidance and resources and activities. Guidance counsellors played an important role in providing support

for students with SEN as they made critical decisions regarding post-school choices. Guidance counsellors and students reported that fundamentally, guidance counsellors worked with students to plan a 'progression route' [School L, guidance counsellor], which strategically mapped out different options and pathways. Specifically, then, they were responsible for helping students choose their post-school options, by guiding them through the variety of available further and higher education provision; helping them with completing application forms; organising visits to further and higher education; and organising open days and speakers from further and higher education to talk to the students.

In particular, students valued the individualised support provided by guidance counsellors in relation to improving their knowledge and understanding of options by directing them, for example, to web-based information related to career progression:

> Our careers guidance teacher ... He just showed us all the sites and different careers. What jobs you'd be after, so. [K1, student with acquired brain injury]

They also offered easily accessible personalised help:

> 'Yes, that's the guidance counsellor. She really helps. She shows me that I don't have to look on my own, like there's people out there to help me. [I1, student with MGLD]

Furthermore, students particularly appreciated targeted support for completing application forms. The following young person with dyslexia, which can involve difficulties with time management, appreciated being 'chased-up' to complete their applications:

> Every time I see her she's always like, 'Do you have your forms ready? Do you have this ready?' She's always on top of me to make sure that I've sent them in. You get loads of help, it's really good. [E1, student with dyslexia]

However, school professionals identified a number of crucial areas that needed to be addressed in order to improve existing access, transfer and progression pathways for students with SEN. For example, a resource teacher highlighted the need for a regularly updated assessment of SEN in order to ensure access to appropriate support in post-school placement:

> It has tended to be left till sixth year and – but it has it started earlier than sixth in that when I had a meeting with some parents, for example their assessment was done before they came into first year so their assessment was out of date. So we started to get procedures in place where we said – look, if you're going to get these supports in college you need an up to date assessment. [School L, resource teacher]

School professionals in general, such as the resource teacher quoted below, suggested the importance of having adequate time for planning access and progression pathways,

and supporting students through this process, whilst at the same time becoming more independent:

> I think we probably could do more. Now from the point of view of the LCA we would link in with the careers. And we've always had the policy of encouraging them to apply for PLC courses or whatever. And a few of them have been successful but some of them like that when they leave and they go in to the colleges it doesn't happen for them because maybe the learning support isn't, maybe we gave them too much support here. We probably could do more here to create an independence in them. [School C, resource teacher]

One school coordinator from a special school reported that ensuring that appropriate support was available in the post-transition stage for their cohort of students was essential to enable smooth progression:

> A lot of ours would do FÁS courses. See, further education PLCs are great but they generally speaking don't stick it out. They'll do a year, maybe two and I suppose the reason they need extra supports … colleges need to acknowledge firstly that they need to be supporting kids with needs. [School I, school coordinator]

All the schools in the study provided students with additional academic support, but there were also variations between schools. Support for fostering academic outcomes included special considerations in examinations, which allowed students to demonstrate achievement, and broaden the range of courses to which they could apply. In addition, there was evidence of schools providing additional support hours and/or students with SEN studying a reduced curriculum; as one guidance counsellor remarked:

> And the extra hours the school will give them, extra one-to-one or small group work. Or if necessary withdraw them from Spanish and Irish if … you know for the extra. So that they would have a shortened curriculum, they wouldn't have as wide a curriculum. And then really we would be just looking at what is accessible for them. [School G, guidance counsellor]

Furthermore, progression and access to further and higher education also required collaboration and sharing of information about available support between all the professionals involved; as one resource teacher commented:

> So it would be nice if there was an agency out there that would pool that information, train up our guidance counsellors and give us that early warning with what's available for those students. [School K, resource teacher]

Collaboration and multi-agency partnership between health, education and social services are important means of supporting access and progression, as the mother of a young person with severe and profound disabilities observed:

[C]ommunication is the key for these children. [...] Realistically I want the services to work under the same umbrella and not be fighting with each other. [Parent of student with severe and profound general learning disability]

In addition to collaboration amongst professionals, support also involved parent-school partnership. For example:

I would have had a lot of contact with [name of child']'s parents, as would [name supplied] and the special needs department as well and [name of child]'s parents would have come to any meetings we would have had and would have made an appointment to come in and meet me to discuss his progress even last year. [School N, guidance counsellor]

The previous quote underlines the importance of parental support. The next quote supports this and also stresses the role of ongoing family support during and after transfer further and higher education:

But his parents, now, would have been very involved with him and filling out his forms and they drove it all for him. So they would have been ... And they will continue to support him. And his sister's in Leaving Cert and she's a high achiever as well so, he'll get huge support. [School E, guidance counsellor]

This theme of informal support from non-professionals is discussed again in the following section on the experiences of students with SEN.

4.2.3 Student experience

The fourth aim of this study requires an exploration of the experiences of students with SEN in accessing and progressing to further and higher education. This part of the analysis examines the students' personal experiences by focusing on the positive and negative feelings reported by the students in relation to their coming transitions, their own aspirations and ambitions, and the roles of receiving third level institutions in facilitating this process. The role of families as supporters is also illustrated.

There was evidence that some students had a positive view of the process of transfer into a new institution, as shown below:

Just looking forward because it is a new time. [M1, student with MGLD / cerebral palsy and epilepsy]

For me the kind of loss of familiarity might be ... does daunt me a bit but at the same time on a more optimistic level I think if I went to anywhere outside of here [it] is better because it's a new start, it's probably a chance to ... starting over is rare, and because they're rare, they're valuable and I think if I went to ... if I went anywhere, it could be probably ... join the army or run away to New York or wherever. It would have been the same because no-one knows me so therefore I can ... nobody knows my mistakes or my whatever they may be and so therefore they ... I can start again, I can be anyone. Of course I can be myself

but I can have the chance to bloom in a better way. [A3, student with apraxia and schizophrenia]

The quote above shows that progression is also an emotional period in a young person's life. Furthermore, for this student with SEN, progression was an opportunity to shed a label or persona bestowed upon him by others since going to college was a 'new start'.

For another student, it was an opportunity to take on adult rights and responsibilities, but also authority and control over one's life, as this quote elucidates:

Just to grow up a bit more. Just to go on and do what you want to do. [F4, student with dyslexia]

In contrast, this resource teacher showed concern about their student's capacity to cope with the relatively challenging life ahead of them:

You really fear for them going out. They probably just get so comfortable with that idea, that the school is so safe for them and they're really, really looked after. You really fear for them going out. [School E, resource teacher]

However, another resource teacher expressed the dilemma of wishing to promote self-determination and independence and ensuring that students are given adequate support:

There is always the danger of a learned helplessness though and dependency so there is always the fine line between, the balance between too much and too little, you know. But as they get on in senior cycle we are aware of that within our own system you know. And we are looking for more independence from them. [School K, resource teacher]

Transfer and progression to further and higher education was also a stressful and unsettling period for the following student who was unsure how to access support in the new institution:

I've been in school, like I've been here for six years and then going out in to a completely new place. Not seeing the same faces, not knowing the same teachers that I know should help me if I had a problem. [E2, student with dyslexia]

The student's concern about the new environment was echoed by a learning support teacher quoted here:

They [students] will miss the system where everything is kind of supporting them in their learning and they are afraid that won't be there. Even though they would be told – we would be aware of how well established it is at third level, so it's much better even than, you know, than we would have it. But I think it is the fear of change you know. [School K, learning support teacher]

For many school professionals the issue was that of raising students' aspirations about what they could achieve. In doing this, as the guidance counsellor below explained, it was important to help students to overcome their fear of failure:

> In one case a student who had aimed lower because he was afraid, a fear of failure almost and I was just wondering why his expectations were much lower than what he was aiming for. [School E, guidance counsellor]

However, this resource teacher recognised that the effects of dyslexia have resulted in a lowering of aspirations:

> Students, who have more, take dyslexia or any learning difficulty like that they more have a negative attitude towards a lot of school because they have a feeling that they are not able to do schoolwork. [School J, resource teacher]

Particular types of SEN can lead to specific areas of worry. One student with Asperger's syndrome described heightened stress levels:

> I am usually under huge – like this year I'm under a huge amount of pressure and the stress will get to me. Like one or two times in the evening I end up going across the road to me local for about an hour and then go home because it's just the stress. And sometimes I'd up going for, hitting, a wall or something with stress. [K1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

In addition, the data revealed evidence that the stress of transition can exacerbate an existing disability, such as a hearing impairment:

> It's just when I get so stressed my hearing just completely goes on me. So, meaning that my hearing's getting worse again. So my hearing's going a bit fuzzy so I'll have to relax what I'm doing. [K2, student with hearing impairment]

It seemed that for students with SEN, opportunities to engage with further and higher education institutions were means of reducing concerns and facilitating a smooth progression and transfer. There were two main discrete aspects of information and guidance to be sought from further and higher education institutions: (a) the nature of the course, and (b) SEN support available. Directed by the professionals in school, students sought information in a variety of ways, such as independent searches through booklets or the internet; visits to colleges; outreach activities organised by the school or college; word of mouth, hearing from friends or siblings; and interviews with admissions officers and/or disability officers.

This diverse process is exemplified by one student's description:

> We got the booklet on all the courses. I looked it up then on the internet, [name of college] and I seen all the courses and I was really interested in that one because we got the books as well and went down on the day trip and I was reading that course. People down there doing the course said they found the course really interesting so. [L1, student with MGLD]

It was clear that pre-course contact was highly significant in influencing the choice of institution by students with SEN, as the following quote illustrates: Because of all the details they give you and the letters and the support. That's why I'm going to [name of *higher education* institution] – because they are really supportive. [E1, student with dyslexia]

As with all students progressing to third level, one common option was to visit one or more colleges, sometimes on a formal open day, other times accompanied by parents. For those students who took the opportunity to visit the colleges there was strong evidence that open days played a useful and productive part in ensuring they had a smooth transition by providing up-to-date and individualised information, thus enabling them to make an informed choice:

And I went to [name of higher education institution] for an open day around dyslexia and how there's different colleges and stuff and DARE and that kind of finalised any queries I had. [E1, student with dyslexia]

One benefit of direct communication received in the form of written or electronic information was mentioned:

Sometimes you're afraid to ask questions. Whereas I wouldn't be afraid to write an email and send it in tonight with a question. [E1, student with dyslexia]

Direct face-to-face contact, either with professionals or with other adults and current students also appeared to be influential. This direct contact allowed for both immediate feedback and exchange of information:

I thought [in] colleges the people were going to be all bitchy and all, but they're actually not. They're pure nice and they talk to you and they involve you. And they actually sit there and they have time for you. But I never thought that, college would be like someone that's very stuck up or they don't talk to you or something like that. I just, it's kind of helped me big time to see that they actually are the same. They're not all the same thing, they all talk to you. [I1, student with MGLD]

Likewise, college staff can make students feel welcome and important:

And one of the girls that works in the disability office in [name of higher education institution] she was giving me loads of information. [E1, student with dyslexia]

In a number of cases a representative of an institution visited the school and talked to prospective students. There was also evidence of opportunities facilitated by access agencies, although it is not clear how many schools and colleges took up this opportunity, as exemplified below:

I certainly have been aware that there have been seminars run by [AHEAD] and so on for students in particular and their parents. [School J, guidance counsellor]

The students' accounts show that the support they receive from parents, siblings and friends was also important in guiding them and forming their views about further and higher education and about their own aspirations. The quote below is evidence that the support of family members, and in particular parents, was important to these students:

My mum was the one to help me and told me everything. [E2, student with dyslexia]

One student shared a sense of confidence that parents would provide consistent and lasting support for these students through the transfer and progression process: As long as I want to stick with something that I want to do, they [my parents] don't mind. They'll stay behind me. [K2, student with hearing impairment]

Siblings were also able to help in practical ways, as in the quote below where the student chose to disclose a disability:

I was applying on the computer, my sister did help me. So it was, we did click in to say that I had a disability. [F4, student with dyslexia]

Peer friendship groups were also a support in terms of offering practical solutions to barriers to access, helping cushion the effects of moving establishment:

All my friends are there and they are there to support me, and I am there to support them, so my friends are a big part of me. [N1, student with speech and language disorder]

4.2.4 Students and professionals on pre-progression: summary

The pre-progression interviews demonstrated that the process of choice making and its final outcome had to take into account a number of related factors, such as the guidance students receive in school and from various further and higher education colleges and the support they receive, whether specifically academic support aimed at raising their exam results, or vocational counselling. As previously mentioned, many of the issues raised by the students with SEN who took part in this study are common to all students progressing to further and higher education. However, similar issues might be perceived and addressed differently by students with SEN.

At this stage, knowledge and understanding of the means of attaining the entry requirements for chosen courses at third level was important, and some students with SEN made strategic choices on the basis of this knowledge and judgment about their own capacities. Clear information about the application process itself, for example applying through DARE, was needed. Factors such as transport were also important. Activities in school or at college, or in collaboration between them, which are aimed

at informing students about the available choices of courses and colleges, emerged as being important at this stage. Direct contact with further and higher education institutions facilitated a smooth progression.

The students' aspirations and expectations, and how these relate to their SEN were influenced and supported by significant others such as parents, siblings, or friends, who provided a 'safety net' during transition when support at third level was not yet in place.

4.3 The Views of Students: Post-Progression

This section completes the overview of the process of access, transfer and progression by reporting the views of students with SEN who progressed to further and higher education. Of the initial sample of 42 students interviewed at the pre-transition stage of the research, post-transition interviews were held with 23 students, 16 of whom had achieved their first choice destination.

The students' accounts of their experience focuses on their responses to the examination results and the decisions made on the pathway to choose; the support and guidance received once in the new institution; and the way they coped with new personal, emotional, social and learning challenges, including new teaching and assessment practices, and a change in the dynamics of the relationship between students and lecturers.

4.3.1 Pathways: making choices, access and progression

Table 11 reports students' choices of courses and colleges at the pre-transition stage and their actual post-transition destinations as reported by the students themselves, or in some cases, by their parents.

Table 11: Choice of Courses and Levels for Transition Pathways and Final Transition Destinations of Young People in Research Sample at Post-Transition Stage

School	Student	Choice at pre-transition stage	Type of course chosen	Level of course chosen	First choice achieved	Destination	Course
School A	A1 ADHD	Public relations, event management or business	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Public relations, event management
School A	A2 ADHD, speech and language	Fitness instructor course	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Fitness
School A*	A3 Apraxia, schizophrenia	Pre-arts course linked to university	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Pre-arts course linked to university
School A	A4 ADHD	Fitness instructor course	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Fitness instructor course
School A	A5 Multiple disabilities (dyslexia, anxiety and borderline MGLD)	Ambulance or fire service course	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Ambulance or fire service course
School B	B1 Dyslexia	Animal care course	PLC	5	No	Job seeking	Unknown
School B	B2 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Art course	PLC	5	No	PLC	Interactive web design
School C*	C1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Maths and physics	University	9	Yes	University	Maths and physics
School D*	D1 ASD (Asperger's syndrome)	Music technology	Institute of technology	8	No	PLC	Photo journalism
School D*	D2 Dyslexia	Engineering	Institute of technology	7	No	Institute of technology	Service engineering
School E	E1 Dyslexia	Psychology	University	7	No	Repeating year at school	Repeating leaving certificate at a private school
School E*	E2 Dyslexia	Beauty therapy	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Beauty therapy
School F	F1 MGLD	Nursing	UK FE	2	Yes	FE (UK provider)	Nursing
School F*	F2 MGLD	Hairdressing	NLN	2	Yes	NLN	Hairdressing
School F	F3 Dyslexia	Music technology	University	8	Yes	University	Music and Geography
School F*	F4 Dyslexia	Health or forensic science	PLC	5	Yes	FE (UK provider)	Health and Science

School	Student	Choice at pre-transition stage	Type of course chosen	Level of course chosen	First choice achieved	Destination	Course
School G	G1 Physical disability	Computer skills	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Computer skills
School H*	H 1 ASD, Asperger's syndrome	Business	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Business
School I*	I1 MGLD	Catering	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Health and science
School I*	I2 MGLD	Childcare (to go on to teaching eventually)	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Childcare
School I	I3 ADHD, MGLD	Forklift truck driver	NLN	2	Yes	NLN then left	Forklift driver
School J*	J1 Agraphia	Arts degree (to go on to teaching eventually)	University	8	Yes	University	English and Greek
School J*	J2 Dyslexia	Marketing	Institute of technology	7	Yes	Institute of technology	Business (incl. Marketing)
School J*	J3 Dyslexia	Not decided at time of interview	University	8	No	PLC	Pre-arts course Linked to university
School K*	K1 ASD, Asperger's syndrome	Information technology	PLC	5	Yes	Training organisation specific for Asperger's syndrome	IT
School K*	K2 Hearing impairment	Social care	PLC	5	No	PLC / (In special school)	Sign language course
School K*	K3 Dyslexia	Engineering	University	8	No	University	Product design
School L	L1 MGLD	Agriculture	Agricultural college	6	No	Employment	Working on family farm
School L*	L2 MGLD	Agriculture	Agricultural college	6	Yes	Agricultural college	Agriculture
School M	M1 MGLD, cerebral palsy and epilepsy	No expressed choice	-	-	-	-	No data post-transition

School	Student	Choice at pre-transition stage	Type of course chosen	Level of course chosen	First choice achieved	Destination	Course
School M	M2 MGLD, speech and language	Hairdressing	HSE adult /community workshop	2	Yes	HSE adult/ community workshop	Hairdressing
School N	N1 Speech and language	Event or marketing management	Institute of technology	6	-	-	No data post-transition
School N	N2 Acquired brain injury, MGLD	Sport and recreation or radio broadcasting	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Sports and recreation
School O*	O1 ASD	Vocational training course	Adult services	3	Yes	Adult services	Vocational training
School O*	O2 Spina bifida, epilepsy, neural tube defect	Vocational training course	Adult Services	3	Yes	Adult services	Vocational training
School O	O3 Moderate learning disability, cerebral palsy	Vocational training course	Adult services	4	Yes	Adult services	Vocational training
School O*	O4 Cerebral palsy, non-verbal quadriplegia	Staying in current placement	Special school	4	Yes	Extra year in special school	Staying in current placement
School O*	O5 Physical disability (spina bifida)	Special needs assistant	PLC	5	Yes	PLC	Special needs assistant course
School P	P1 Asperger's syndrome, EBD	Humanities	University	8	Yes	University	Humanities
School Q*	Q1 Physical disability and learning difficulties	Computers	Institute of technology	5	No	PLC	Computers
School R*	R1 Severe and profound learning disability [parent interviewed as proxy for student]	No expressed choice	-	-	-	HSE Adult Services	Vocational training
School S	Visual impairment	Computers	Institute of technology	7	No	Institute of technology	Marketing

* interviewed at both pre- and post-transition

As outlined earlier, 23 students were interviewed at the post-transition phase (16 of whom achieved their first choice) and the findings reported below are based on this set of interviews.

A number of possible pathways were open to them. The majority of students interviewed were able to access their chosen destination, and reported their happiness and relief on hearing their exam results:

> I was quite happy with my results actually because I was quite nervous about what I was going to get and I was kind of thinking 'I'm not repeating my Leaving Cert again', but I got in there and I walked into the room and the principal and vice-principal were sitting there and they told me I got the highest result in English in the school. Which was a good way to start off. [J1, student with dysgraphia]

However, this linear process was not common for all students. For example, one student had returned to a private school to retake exams and try again for his chosen course: a psychology degree. Others had been able to find a course at the same level, but which did not match their original aspirations, as shown in the example below:

> I checked the CAO website at random … and like some other … some college gave me an offer and I just waited to see if any others would come out and like nothing did. [D2, student with dyslexia]

The above student accepted a place offered by the same university he had originally applied to, but to study a different course: service engineering. He described this course as a very different subject from the one that he was interested in and had been looking forward to taking. However, despite it not being what he wanted to do, he had preferred to take a place following a different course at the same university rather than re-sit examinations and re-apply because, as he said:

> I just want to get in, get it done, do a job and lead my life. I don't want another challenge. [D2, student with dyslexia]

Another student with physical and intellectual disabilities had wanted to go to 'a college' (institute of technology), but seemed to be content, or resigned, with his place on a local PLC course as an inevitable step in his progression pathway:

> I would prefer to be in college but it's not the worst thing like. I kind of always knew I'd end up doing a PLC. [Q1, student with physical disabilities and learning difficulties]

4.3.2 Resources and support

The students reported some activities that enabled them to settle into their new environment and meet other students, but these did not seem to be linked to access for individuals with SEN or disability. Reports of 'ice-breaker' type activities were common in settings where students were organised into relatively small teaching groups. Other

students seemed to have had tours of their new establishments and opportunities to meet professionals working there:

> Just seeing around the course, meeting your advisors and ... getting settled in. [C1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

Of key importance to these students was accessing the support that was available in their receiving institution. Unlike their previous experience in school, seeking support once the students progressed to further and higher education required a new approach including independence and disclosing their SEN or disability if they had not done so already. This self-disclosure was a major change encountered in the progression into further and higher education since it involved making decisions and taking on independent responsibilities, and could result in a decision not to seek support. For example, this student suggested:

> It [support at school] was kind of forced upon me really... I didn't think people were ... believed in me, so much as my abilities. So kind of disheartening really, that people would feel that you needed this help. [D1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

Making the progression was thus more than accessing new courses and gaining a future qualification. It also enabled these students to reflect on their previous experiences in ways that were not evident in the pre-transition interviews. Students made their own decisions on how and where to access support, and learned to become more independent and self-reliant, as explained by this student who became proactive in engaging with her college to sort out her own support:

> I'm not in school anymore. It's kinda me on my own. [E1, student with dyslexia]

However, for other students the transition from dependency to independence was not fully achieved yet. For example, one student with physical disabilities recounted that he could now achieve independence in performing everyday physical tasks at college where he could widen his opportunities for self-direction, whereas at home he would be more ready to accept help:

> I'm really good at it in here eh ... but at home I'd be ... get my Ma to do it. [O2, student with multiple disabilities]

For other students in this study with physical disabilities, total independence was not a feasible option. In this very specific individual case, the parent described how the 'basic' needs of her son were being met, if minimally:

> His basic needs being his washing and his nappy and his feeding. If he's not getting fed he's going to get nutrition protein drinks: they won't let him go under weight. [Parent of student with severe and profound general learning disability]

However, the contribution to wellbeing provided in the form of mental stimulation and communication with others was of major concern to this parent. This involved him being '[s]*timulated on a day-to-day basis because if not, he's going to back in on himself and he's going to lose weight and he's going to get sick.'* This example demonstrates how issues of access and progression are closely related to the availability and continuity of services which were an integral part of provision at the pre-transition stage.

There were a range of responses to the change in the dynamics of the lecturer–student relationship in further and higher education, which impacted on the process of learning and academic success. In some cases, the change was a cause for surprise:

> I thought they'd be like an actual normal secondary school teacher: a bit strict and all that. It's just like talking to any person with them. [I2, student with dyslexia]

Continuous assessment seemed to be a favoured way of working. The following student with dysgraphia generalised from his own experience:

> I think once you've got everybody who is diagnosed with a disability, continuous assessment is the best way to go in my opinion anyway. I just think it's much fairer. [J1, student with dysgraphia]

For this student the flexibility of continuous assessment seemed to be particularly liberating because they were freed from the constraints of fitting in to a very structured system:

> I like how 'freeing' it is compared to school. You know I'm definitely someone who cannot be a slave to the clock. I cannot sit and go nine to five every day. I cannot just be asked to work on the spot. I need, you know, someone telling me, 'You've an essay due; it's due in one month and seven days' or something. And that gives me time to think, 'Okay I can get this perfect'. And it's something I wouldn't say that I'm a perfectionist in any sense but I think it gives me the time to work on everything properly, you know. [J1, Student with dysgraphia]

In some cases, the provision of continuous assessment was one of the reasons why students did not seek formal support, as one student with dyslexia explains:

> [I] don't think you need the support – I'm not doing exams, as I keep saying like. [F4, student with dyslexia]

Although she would require a reader for examinations, as long as she could complete assignments in her own time, she was able to achieve a higher level of independence and still fulfil course requirements.

However, the importance of and need for keeping up with work was also recognised. For one student, quoted below, it was the length of the assignment that could cause stress:

For some, for 1,000 word assignments I get pressurised. Like I have to do 2,000 words for communications – it's supposed to be simple. [H1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

Expectations of independent work and the development of a self-disciplined approach towards academic work were also identified as a challenge, as this quote demonstrates:

It was more responsibility on me. Like they'd say, 'You have to go there and look at it yourself'. They're not going to push you like secondary school did like, 'You're homework is … '. It's not like that and it's very different. It kinda, it took me about a month to really get used that kind of side of it. [E1, student with dyslexia]

One student with Asperger's syndrome described the increased demand on academic writing skills: It's just how to write them and how to write them perfectly and all that's a … problem and how to lay it out. Some people can be … can lay out their answers but I can't. And I have a big problem with understanding how it all works. [H1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

4.3.3 Student experience

Choice of course or college is certainly not the end of the process of transition which must also take into account how students deal with new challenges, environments and situations. In this respect, any transition is to some extent a 'leap into the dark':

I knew it wouldn't be like [name of school] but I didn't quite know what we'd be doing or how things would be done. [A3, student with apraxia and schizophrenia]

For some young people, one cause for reflection was their ability to keep up with the level and volume of work now demanded of them. Alongside this issue, they had to cope with new class sizes, and a different way to relate to lecturers. Inevitably, due to a variety of destinations, class sizes reported by students varied from small classrooms to big lecture halls. Each individual student appreciated the changes in class sizes in different ways and this is not necessarily specific to students with SEN only. For example, one student with a hearing impairment had moved into a much smaller class to study a business PLC for students with hearing impairment. Talking about his experience, he noted:

I'm grand with just four instead of 28 people in the class with me. [K2, student with hearing impairment]

If smaller class size suits some students, others in university settings were getting used to being taught in large lecture halls and found having lectures in large, impersonal groups to be an advantage:

> I think, in my English lecture there's … it could be up to 500. It's better. My mistakes are anonymous. I'm hidden by others. [J1, student with dysgraphia])

This confirms findings from both pre- and post-transition analysis which showed that a change of educational institution could be construed as an opportunity for a new start for students with SEN. However, this is highly individual and clearly related to a specific disability. So, for example, moving from classes of ten at school to a class of about 30 on a PLC course in a further education college was challenging for this student with Asperger's syndrome, a disability which involves particular difficulties in social interactions:

> At the beginning 'Oh my God' I didn't know we were going to get this many people. There weren't that many people at the interviews for [name of *further education* college]. [H1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

Another factor that impacts on transition is the course curriculum, as each course varies in the number of compulsory or elective modules, some of which can be more or less motivating than others. The students' approach at this early transition stage was still one of 'testing the waters' and, understandably, focused on their likes and dislikes. While this factor is common to all students, those with SEN seemed to be more inclined to weigh their own achievements against the new demands put upon them. If their previous experience had been based on diagnosis and individual need, those students who were able to meet the challenges offered by post-secondary education took the opportunity to respond to the work involved on their courses in the same way as other students.

In general, the young people reported that the work was challenging or hard, mainly in relation to the volume of work to be done, rather than in terms of the difficulty in understanding. Students were less keen in expressing their success in terms of grades, as was the case for this young person:

> I'm doing very well so far … I won't go into grades or anything, but I am doing quite well. [J1 student with dysgraphia]

Grades, of course, are an important measure of whether the transition had been successful in terms of academic success. Grades are also a self-assessment measure and part of the transition to further and higher education is the ability of students to adapt to different kinds of assessment practices. The following section shows how students with SEN showed their responses to a change in the tools used for assessing their progress as they made the transition from compulsory to post-secondary education.

Along with studying new subjects, one major difference between compulsory education and further and higher education was shown to be the systems of assessment. The change in assessment style was a key element in transition for students with SEN. For most of these students the final year of school, as evidenced in pre-transition accounts, was focused on the Leaving Certificate, which was:

> … was just one big culmination of things. [A3, student with apraxia and schizophrenia]

Whereas, as this student continued:

> This is kind of, whereas this is, 'You did this and you also did that'. It's continuous assessment. It's kind of like, if you manage to – it's not a … it goes as the overall mark I guess. But it's not really … I think it kind of contrasts with the Leaving Cert. [A3, Student with apraxia and schizophrenia]

The following list summarises the variety of assessment methods mentioned in the post–transition interviews:

- assignments
- observations
- work experience
- team projects
- presentations
- online discussions
- essays.

The more regular and varied assessment methods used in further and higher education seem to be not only a contrast to what students had been used to, but also a relief. For some of the students, for example, continuous assessment seems to be a more interesting, challenging and fairer way of working because it takes some academic pressure off the individual.

Continuous assessment can also boost students' self-confidence and self-efficacy as evidenced by the comment of a student who was very optimistic about her future end of year exams, feeling 'grand' about them, as she had already obtained good results which would count towards them:

> We had that practical skills one which was 30 per cent, so she [tutor] said, 'If you pass that you're halfway to a distinction. [I2, student with dyslexia]

For students with dyslexia, low self-esteem, linked to academic under-achievement, can often be a barrier to successful educational outcomes (Burden, 2004). Therefore, this sort of encouragement can be interpreted as having boosted her motivation and application for the course.

Whilst the assessment of their skills and knowledge was one element of these students' transitions, new subject areas can cause particular challenges for certain students with SEN.

At the same time as these young people were experiencing a new educational environment, with its novel styles of organisation, learning and assessment, other aspects of the transfer to a new institution also had an effect on their transition experiences. One of the key findings was a change in the students' approach in relation to their disability and learning. The interconnection between a variety of factors, such as support and new learning experiences, influenced how students talked about their experience at this early stage. The key factor in the experience of these students, as had

been anticipated in the pre-progression interviews, was their response to the changes involved:

> It's a new start as well ... a fresh start. [Q1, student with physical and learning difficulties]

Making the transition to further and higher education also allowed students to develop as an adult through the opportunity to 'act like one', as this quote illustrates:

> Third level's when you have to act like an adult. [H1, student with Asperger's syndrome]

Access and progression, especially at the early stages, were closely linked to the experience of 'settling' into the new environment where they had lost many of their points of reference, such as teaching and learning, physical surroundings and personal contacts with teachers and peers. The responses varied. In some cases settling in was achieved after some initial 'confusion':

> I was kind of a slight bit nervous like asking different questions before the day came and stuff. But after that, after that, I kind of, I was alright. I kind of settled in. [O2, student with multiple disabilities]

In other cases, there was nostalgia for the security of the school left behind:

> ... the comfort of being in school, knowing exactly what room you're going to have class. [E1, student with dyslexia]

Other factors that influenced the students' process of settling in were the availability of accommodation and transport. Suitable accommodation was listed as being of importance for students with particular disabilities such as Asperger's syndrome, although the majority of students still lived at home. The distance of the college and the quality of the transport network also had an impact on the students as these involved changes in routine, often with early mornings and long days:

> I normally get one bus to town and one bus out, which can take forever at times. [J1, student with dysgraphia]

Where transport was available, the location and timing of services did not always match the needs of the students, thus adding a further burden:

> I'm really kind of tired after it ... See I leave here about, I think we leave at half four and I don't really get home till half five. [O2, student with multiple disabilities]

Besides accommodation and transport, students also discussed the issue of finance. The financial circumstances of the students were varied which, once again, reiterates the very individual nature of access and progression for students with SEN. Some students, for example, had a desire to earn money to enable them to participate in a social life and fund leisure activities. However, students with SEN found that managing money was a

challenging task. Inevitably, transport and living costs, including food and the freedom of post-secondary education opens all young adults to more temptations for spending money. The potential to begin to manage their budgets independently represented added value to the post-secondary education experience; it meant developing an essential life skill. The comment below shows how one student was taking responsibility for his own savings:

> What I do is I save a bit of my money … I just throw it into the bank for … eh … kind of next year. [Q1, student with physical and learning difficulties]

For most of the students interviewed there were concerns around keeping up old relationships and making new ones. The following examples showed that friendship groups from school were still important:

> The friends and stuff but I get to see them on weekends. [E1, student with dyslexia].

> I'd be kinda thankful I did have them [my old school friends] … because it would be harder to be on your own. [F4, student with dyslexia]

Relationships with peers had a mitigating effect on the difficulties faced by these students:

> Obviously, if you have friends, it makes everything easier and everything will go a bit smoother. [K3, student with dyslexia]

It seems that the existence of old friends could have a buffering effect, by providing a temporary social group to fall back on whilst new relationships were being made. Yet, the main finding remains that such activities were not designed especially to meet the needs of students with SEN, but were designed for all students.

There was recognition of the opening up of new possibilities for forming relationships. One student highlighted the cultural and leisure aspect of university, which was appreciated as a way of meeting like-minded individuals. There was also evidence of students trying a variety of activities and rejecting some, which might be expected, or sometimes deciding to stay at home and work:

> I think you can very easily make friends in university. I've no doubt about that, because there's interests for everything. There is a juggling society, there's a society just for people who want to drink. [J1, student with dysgraphia]

As for all students, these relationships take time to develop. One student recounted a story that summed up this typical trajectory in the development of relationships:

> I found it a bit nervous starting and then – on the first day I found it nervous, on the second day I got talking to one of the girls and we swapped numbers that day. And then the following week we had a full week and we were talking, we were all talking as if we knew each other. And there a couple of weeks ago

there's a girl that I have been seeing going in and out on the bus. And there, last week or the week before, we became best buddies. [I2, student with dyslexia]

In the contemporary world this is often augmented by contact on web-based social networks, and there was evidence of this in the data:

I seen her and I said, 'Hello' to her and then she said, 'Hello' and we started talking. And then that night we swapped mobile numbers on Facebook and we've been talking since. [I2, student with dyslexia]

However, the data did show that certain disabilities became a barrier for the establishment of friendships and relationships, especially when the SEN involves barriers to oral face-to-face communication. One student had moved into a specialist educational setting for hearing impairment. However, after attending mainstream school where she had not yet mastered sign language, this became a barrier when placed in a position of socialising with others who could already sign:

I was sitting there going, 'Oh my god, I feel like an outcast, I want to go home'. … So I was talking with people that could talk but they were signing at the same time and I'm like, 'Oh I can't do this, I can't sign'. [K2, student with hearing impairment]

She was able to overcome this barrier and was becoming more comfortable with the unfamiliar means of communication, now being studied as part of her course:

I was with them, I had fun but I knew some of them, I still talk to some of them now … to this day on Facebook … just to get used to it because it's like for me, I'm in a part of a hearing and a deaf world. [K2, student with hearing impairment].

4.3.4 Students on post-progression: summary

The students' account of their transition to further and higher education colleges centred around three main themes: (i) a reflection on whether their aspirations were met; (ii) their experience of the new environment; and (iii) the changes in the academic work and support. Settling into the new further and higher education environment was, for the students, a cause for reflection on their ability to keep up with the level and volume of work now demanded of them. It also required considering whether or not to disclose their disability, deciding on the quality and quantity of support they wanted to receive and involved issues related to making new friends and participating in the social life of the new establishment. In all cases, the students' comments were generally positive, although there were individual variations.

It is important to note that the students' accounts point to the fact that access and progression to further and higher education is not just about gaining access to the course or institution of one's choice. Rather, moving from one sector to the other is a 'life' experience, which for some students is a 'fresh start'. Thus, the difference between second and third level education is not simply academic. Rather, the students perceive it

as a developmental progression into adulthood where adulthood means to learn coping skills to survive and thrive independently.

4.4 Best Practice: Case Examples

Within this study, there were many examples of good practice at practitioner level. Documented in the findings were a number of initiatives at an institutional and systemic level that are worth considering in greater detail.

4.4.1 National Learning Network (NLN) and City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC)

Promoting access for students with SEN, particularly those who have general learning disabilities, to further and higher education is facilitated through a systemic partnership between the NLN and the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). The NLN works through partnership arrangements that provide institutions with additional expertise to allow students with SEN to access and, ideally, complete programmes in further and higher education (Duffin & Sax, 2009; Duffin, Sax & Scherer, 2007). Since 2001, the NLN and CDVEC have provided a 'whole college' service (three disability officers) for students with SEN within eight designated FE colleges (Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010). Through this association, a manual for principals (prepared by Duffin & McCarthy, 2006) has been developed to provide readily accessible information on the services available to students with SEN through the disability service. The manual includes guidance on completing funding application forms, provision of guidance and support services for students and staff, recruiting support workers and personal assistants and meeting financial and auditing regulations. In addition, a study skills manual (prepared by Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010) has been developed to support students with SEN in their engagement with the curriculum. The NLN and CDVEC have also worked since 2003 in partnership with an institute of technology to facilitate the provision of educational assessment, screening and student support (Delahunt & Duffin, 2009; McCarthy 2007; McCarthy & Nolan, 2007).

4.4.2 Pathways to Trinity College Dublin

The Disability Service in Trinity College Dublin has developed the Outreach, Transition, Retention and Progression Plan 2010–13 which provides clear and effective support systems at all stages of the student higher education journey. Each stage of the student journey is aligned to the strategic objectives of Trinity College Dublin 2009–14 (Trinity College Dublin, 2009) and national targets for students with disabilities, set out by the HEA (2008). They are also linked to recommendations from the OECD (2011) report on students with disabilities in higher education. Stage 1 focuses on pre-entry, admission and the first year experience, Stage 2 supports students in building and maintaining a college career, and Stage 3 addresses progressing through college to employment. Stage 1 is serviced by Pathways to Trinity, which supports the access and progression needs of second level students with disabilities via three strategies: the Pathways to Trinity website, Pathways Transition Workshops, and the Pathways Transition Tool.

The website provides information on access programmes, course information, college supports for students with disabilities, study skills, assistive technology and peer mentoring. The transition workshops provide learning experiences and guidance for students in their Leaving Certificate year of study and the transition tool is a web-based assessment and planning resource structured into five modules: Preparing Myself for the Future, Independent Living, Academic Skills, College Application and Course Choices, and Identifying and Using Reasonable Accommodations. Each of these research-based transition initiatives are informed directly by the 'student voice'.

4.4.3 The personal experience

Jo (real name disguised for anonymity) is a 33 year old undergraduate student undertaking a second degree. Jo was diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of eight. Jo encountered issues with teachers in school regarding dyslexia. Before diagnosis, teachers would reprimand Jo for not knowing how to spell (e.g. her own name). Jo had to repeat fifth class as the teacher did not believe in dyslexia. Jo felt that this had an effect, more socially than academically.

Professionals at Jo's school played a major role in Jo's decision to apply to study at university. The expectation of continuing to university was so engrained that not going to college was seen as almost a failure. The school held information sessions for parents and students regarding what subjects to choose for a given career, exploring any questions around career choices, and day trips organised to various college open days.

Dyslexia did not influence Jo's career choice. By the time it came to choosing a career, dyslexia was no longer an obvious problem, as Jo was compensating.

In studying for the first degree, Jo did not register with the disability services until third year as the compensatory methods employed by Jo were working well. Unfortunately, Jo did not find the examination support mechanisms beneficial. Hence, Jo did not avail of the service in the final year of study.

Jo decided to change career and move toward a more caring profession. Once enrolled for the new course, Jo registered with the disability services. Jo found the extra time allocation for examinations a big help as it was organised in a way to minimise distractions, which was an issue that Jo had when at college previously.

Jo reported contentedness in both the course and personally, believing that life taught Jo to know the level of personal limitations and how best to care for oneself while still achieving desired goals. Part of that support, Jo believed, came from the disability services.

Upon reflection, Jo considers that an opportunity to talk to someone similar, currently in third level, would be hugely facilitative for others with dyslexia, or any SEN, to access third level. Jo feels that the drawback with disseminating information through written materials such as leaflets and emails is that someone with dyslexia is less likely to notice the written information. Hence, Jo thinks that talking directly to someone, or meeting someone in their school, would make a big difference.

4.4.4 My PAD

'My PAD' is a positive aims diary, which was designed with input from student participants through the pupil voice research study, 'I'm Me', in response to students' aspiration to be 'noticed' and 'acknowledged' in their positive efforts and good behaviour. The participants were students in mainstream primary and post-primary schools who had been identified with emotional and behavioural difficulties and many had co-morbid learning difficulties or SEN.

The language of the diary was negotiated with the students and written from the perspective of the young person to the teacher(s). When using My PAD, three positive aims for one week are agreed upon between a coordinator and pupil, of which one should be easy for the young person to achieve, one more challenging and one particularly challenging. The justification for this is to ensure that the student will realise success and acknowledgment while at the same time strive to address the target behaviour, attitude or issue which has been identified as problematic by the student themselves.

The data from the participating students were very positive. They pointed out that having a 'record of good behaviour' had encouraged them to make more effort to meet their set goals and they had been pleasantly surprised by the positive impact it had on their relationships with teachers, as well as the response from parents/ guardians who were encouraged to sign the diary weekly and include an encouraging acknowledgement of effort. Teachers and year heads in participating schools were also very pleased with the impact of My PAD (Flynn, Shevlin & Lodge, 2011, 2012).

In terms of self-efficacy this approach has much that is transferable to transition planning. With its simple approach to positive reinforcement, it facilitates the development of a student-centred approach that takes the student through three critical steps of recovery: I know, I can, I do. Empowering students in this way has delivered many benefits in other educational settings (e.g. the KIVA anti-bullying programme in Finland, see Farrington & Ttofi, 2009).

[My PAD and I'm Me: both copyright Trinity College Dublin and Paula Flynn]

5 Discussion and Recommendations

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings of this research and the recommendations based upon them. As noted in the report, this study accessed a limited sample of students with SEN and support professionals in schools, further and higher education institutes. As a result, it is not possible to generalise the findings without consideration of the inherent limitations to the study.

5.1 Pathways: Access and Progression

Highly developed policies aimed at widening societal participation for people from marginalised groups are an established feature of the international landscape (Council of Europe, 2006; United Nations, 1993). Irish policies, in relation to access to education for people from marginalised groups, have developed rapidly over the past couple of decades. Access initiatives for post second level education that were initially targeted at people from socio-economically disadvantaged groups have been extended to include people with SEN (Government of Ireland, 2001). Internationally, there is considerable evidence that there has been a significant increase in the number of people with SEN participating in higher education (OECD, 2003; Wagner *et al*., 2006). Participation rates in higher education for students with SEN have also increased in Ireland (AHEAD, 2005, 2010). However this increase has not been evidenced in each category of SEN and some categories, such as sensory and physical impairment and mental health, remain seriously under-represented (AHEAD, 2010; HEA, 2008; University College Cork / Cork Institute of Technology, 2010). Despite this, as noted in an OECD report (2011), Ireland does not have an established national policy on access, transfer and progression for students with SEN to further and higher education. In addition, there are no overall data source on the numbers of students with SEN accessing further education.

In the review of access, transfer and progression policy within this study it was evident that access to higher education constituted the predominant focus of targeted national access initiatives in relation to students with SEN. Progress has been made in establishing an infrastructure within higher education to support access and participation for students with SEN (HEA, 2008; OECD, 2011). A supplementary admissions system has been developed (DARE) and a network of access and disability officers has been established across higher educationinstitutions. While there have been worthwhile initiatives promoting access to further education for students with SEN (e.g. Duffin & McCarthy, 2006; Treacy, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010), there is little evidence of a coherent, sector-wide approach (Trant, 2011 [conference paper]). In this study, support professionals in further and higher education perceived that it would be beneficial to establish a specific pathway for students with SEN within the existing further and higher education links scheme.

Support and administrative professionals in further and higher education in this study acknowledged the progress achieved in facilitating participation by students with SEN within higher education, in particular. However, the DARE scheme, while generally welcomed by professionals as a structured national-level approach to accessing higher

education for students with SEN, was perceived to contain a number of problematic features. In particular, some of the requirements to qualify for consideration under the DARE scheme were perceived by professionals to be an unintentional barrier to access. The requirement for a recent psycho-educational assessment for the student with SEN was a potential source of difficulty, as there appeared to be limited availability of school-based psycho-educational assessments. In the absence of school-based assessments, students with SEN and their families had to fund this assessment, which proved costly. Completing the DARE application form required additional and sustained support from a guidance counsellor for the student with SEN. There was also a perception among some school professionals that there was an insufficient points reduction within the DARE scheme to encourage students with SEN to apply for higher education through this scheme.

5.2   Recommendation on developing national policy

1.   A key recommendation from this research, aimed at developing a national policy on access, transfer, and progression to further and higher education for students with SEN, is that an expert group be convened to:

   1.1   Co-ordinate and develop national policy advice on transition from school to further and higher education for students with SEN.

   1.2   Consider the development of targeted access initiatives for further education provision (as happened for higher education) to increase the capacity of further education to support the academic and social needs of students with SEN making the transition to, and progressing through, further education.

   1.3   Review the DARE scheme to ensure that policy and criteria adopted are appropriate and, in particular, examine the requirement for a recent psycho-educational assessment. The feasibility of extending the DARE scheme to all higher education providers should also be explored.

   1.4   Examine the feasibility of establishing a specific pathway for students with SEN within the existing Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS).

5.3   Resources and Support

Schools play a critical role in preparing young people with SEN for passage to adulthood and in helping these young people to acquire the necessary life skills to make a successful transition (OECD, 2011). Within this study, schools were generally regarded by students with SEN as positive environments, with teachers who were open and approachable. This finding coincides with those of international research studies which show that positive school environments are a major factor in facilitating successful transitions to adult life for students with SEN (Dee, 2006; Phillips & Clarke, 2010).

There was considerable evidence within this study that the support provided by guidance counsellors was highly valued by students with SEN, and regarded as pivotal in enabling them to make informed choices about post-school options. This finding concurs with both Irish and international research in relation to supporting decision-making processes

for all students, including those with SEN (Marriott, 2008; OECD, 2011; Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011). A small number of students with SEN in this study specifically commented on the value of individualised sessions with their guidance counsellor, a finding also reported by Smyth Banks & Calvert (2011) in relation to all Leaving Certificate students in their study. While students in Smyth, Banks & Calvert's (2011) study would have preferred more individualised support than was available, participants in this study who commented on this issue were happy with the level of individualised support offered, particularly in relation to completing CAO and DARE application forms. The critical importance of an individualised approach to transition planning has been highlighted in a number of studies (Dee, 2006; Marriott, 2008; Wagner *et al.*, 2003). Guidance counsellors in this study reported that, taking into consideration the individual needs of students with SEN, it was appropriate to make a strategic choice for further education provision or engage with more indirect pathways to higher education through further education.

Since the research was completed, the allocation of ex-quota guidance counsellor positions in second level schools has been removed, with guidance planning in schools from 2012–13 to be a local decision for school management (see DES, 2005b, 2012). Considering that the research has highlighted the important role played by guidance counsellors in planning for effective transitions, it will be important to ascertain how school communities organise guidance in the future. There was also little evidence, within this study, that schools were proactive in developing transition planning at an early stage in the school career of students with SEN, a finding that coincides with much international practice (OECD, 2011), though in direct contrast to the mandated stipulation within the US that transition planning begin at age 14 (Newman *et al.*, 2009). Early transition planning, as documented by Cameto, Levine and Wagner (2004), enables young people with SEN to consider course options over an extended period, and facilitates active involvement in the process by students with SEN and their families. Within the Irish context, early transition planning for students with SEN is particularly crucial considering Smyth, Banks & Calvert's (2011) finding that guidance support for all students needed to be provided much earlier in the junior cycle of post-primary school when students were making choices around subjects and subject levels. In addition, transition planning for students with SEN had been envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004) as a crucial component of an IEP. This aspect of the EPSEN Act (2004) has not been implemented to date. This failure to commence the IEP component of the EPSEN Act presents substantial difficulties in developing a viable framework for transition planning.

It has been widely acknowledged that young people with SEN, in common with their peers without SEN, require particular life skills to make a successful transition to further and higher education (Harrison, 2006; OECD, 2011). Preparing students with SEN to become more autonomous and develop self-determination skills should constitute a core goal within school provision for students with SEN (OECD, 2011). Guidance counsellors in this study were conscious that students with SEN were moving from a highly supported and structured school environment to a more challenging situation that demanded a higher degree of self-reliance. Within this study, there was evidence that students with SEN were not particularly aware of the personal, social and academic

demands required to participate successfully in further and higher education. However, school professionals were concerned about achieving the balance between delivering appropriate support for academic attainment, while encouraging the development of greater autonomy, and the practical life skills required for active engagement in further and higher education.

The provision of detailed information regarding supports available in further and higher education to students with SEN is critical to enabling informed decision making and avoiding poor course choice (OECD, 2011). Guidance counsellors in this study were concerned that they were not fully aware of supports available in further and higher education , and professionals in further and higher education shared this concern, despite the existence of useful supporting documents and guidelines (e.g. AHEAD, 2011a; AHEAD & HEA, 2009b; Tracey, McCarthy & Richardson, 2010). As a result, guidance counsellors identified the need for continuing professional development (CPD) on the structure of supports and entitlements for students with SEN in further and higher education, and the establishment of a central point to access relevant and regularly updated information regarding support provision in further and higher education. In fact, a case example was identified in the study of how information is being collated and made available at one central point regarding accessing provision in an Irish higher education institution (see Section 4.4). Guidance counsellors also focused on the importance of earlier and updated assessments for students with SEN rather than waiting until the final year of schooling. In addition, concerns were expressed about the cost of private assessments in cases where school-based assessments were not available.

The establishment of collaborative relationships between post-primary schools and further and higher education institutions has been demonstrated to be very effective in facilitating successful transitions for students with SEN (Dee, 2006; OECD, 2011). Within this study there was some evidence of structured links between schools and further and higher education institutions (University College Cork & Cork Institute of Technology, 2010), though these types of programmes appear to be emerging rather than established features of the transition process. Perceptions of further and higher education institutions are known to be highly influential in shaping choices taken by students with SEN (Elliott & Wilson, 2008a). Students with SEN in this study reported that pre-course contact with further and higher education institutions was highly significant in influencing their course choices. Approachable personnel in further and higher education institutions were particularly valued. In particular, direct personal contact with students with SEN, who had already made the transition to further and higher education , was very important as they could hear from a 'peer' rather than a 'professional' first-hand about the issues to be considered. Similar findings have been reported by Elliott and Wilson (2008b), where positive role models had a powerful effect on supporting the aspirations of students with SEN. Open days were considered useful and productive.

Parents and families play a crucial role in supporting all students with decisions regarding post-school options (Smyth, Banks & Calvert, 2011), and this has also been reported to be a critical factor for students with SEN in facilitating their post-school choices. It is generally accepted as good practice that parents and carers of young people with SEN should be fully involved with the transition process (Aspel *et al.*, 1999;

Blalock & Patton, 1996; Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004) though this may be difficult to achieve in practice (Phillips & Clarke, 2010). In this study, students with SEN reported that their parents and families were very involved in supporting their decisions regarding post-school options though there was limited evidence of formal engagement by parents with school professionals in this process.

Providing appropriate individualised support in further and higher education for students with SEN is evidently critical to ensuring an effective transition process and progression (Dee, 2006; OECD, 2011). In this study there was evidence that further and higher education institutions had a wide range of supports available for students with SEN, and the use of a needs assessment on entry, in particular in higher education, facilitated the establishment of individualised supports. Students with SEN generally appreciated when support professionals were proactive and initiated the first contact, which reassured them that any difficulties would be appropriately addressed. Taking into account that students in this study were at an early stage of transition, there was generally a positive reaction to the supports made available to them in further and higher education. However, a number of issues for students with SEN emerged in relation to support structures, including the requirement for self-disclosure of SEN, the late delivery of supports and the type of support offered.

While disclosure by the student of their SEN to the receiving institution is highly recommended to ensure appropriate supports and structures are in place (OECD, 2011), this is not always clearly understood or conveyed to the student concerned, their families or the professionals involved (Goode, 2007; Jacklin, 2011; Stanley *et al.*, 2007). However, in this study there was little evidence that self-disclosure in further and higher education was a major difficulty for the students with SEN. Some students, in fact, viewed self-disclosure of SEN as an opportunity to become more independent and make choices about their lives and, in one case, not to avail of support. For other students with SEN, accessing support through disclosure was a pragmatic decision designed to acquire the appropriate support in a timely manner and the decision was not regretted. There was some evidence in the study that accessing funding for student supports could be problematic, resulting in a delay in delivery of supports. Given that lack of appropriate support can be a contributory factor in a decision by a student with SEN to withdraw from further or higher (Thomas, 2010) this delay could have significant consequences for the progress of students with SEN in the context of a one-year further education course. This type of delay would also be a concern in higher education as an Irish study documented that the highest rate of withdrawals of students with SEN in higher education occur in the first year of study (Pathways to Education, 2010).

Support professionals were aware that the support offered needed to be designed to ensure that it did not become a barrier to social interaction between students with SEN and their peers. There was some evidence that the visibility of support offered could feed a perception among some students without SEN that those with SEN were receiving an unfair advantage.

Institutional readiness to facilitate access, transfer and progression for students with SEN is considered a critical factor in ensuring successful transition and progression within further and higher education (Marriott, 2008). When further and higher education

institutions conceptualise transition as an essential element in the lifecycle of students with SEN through to course completion (Thomas, 2010), then it is more likely that structures are established to support the incoming student. Institutional culture needs to be characterised by an inclusive ethos that promotes openness to diversity and pedagogical, social, psychological and physical accessibility (OECD, 2011). There was evidence within this study that support professionals recognised the need to develop an inclusive ethos through establishing effective outreach strategies, and where necessary, terminology in institutional literature referring to supplementary access routes. There was also awareness that comprehensive information on further and higher education courses should provide a realistic appraisal of course content and requirements. In addition, further and higher education professionals recognised the need for ongoing professional development for staff in relation to creating accessible courses and modes of assessment, a finding reported in other research (Stanley *et al.*, 2007).

5.4 Recommendations on facilitating effective access

The following key recommendations from this research are aimed at facilitating effective access, transfer and progression for students with SEN to further and higher education:

1. School professionals should begin the process of transition planning for students with SEN in junior cycle, and parents should be facilitated to become active participants in this process, while at national policy level, the individual education planning process as envisaged in the EPSEN Act (2004) should be commenced to provide a structured framework of support for this transition planning process.

2. It is essential that guidance counsellors are afforded the opportunity to further enhance their knowledge and skills regarding critical aspects of transition planning through appropriate continuous professional development.

3. One central point of information, in relation to access, transfer and progression pathways across all further and higher education institutions, needs to be established.

4. In addition, targeted funding should be provided to enable the development of structured partnerships between schools and further and higher education institutions.

5.5 Recommendations on ensuring the delivery of appropriate support

The following key recommendations aim at ensuring the delivery of appropriate support for students with SEN in further and higher education, and enabling these establishments to develop an inclusive ethos:

1. Further and higher education institutions need to ensure that accessibility procedures and funding and support mechanisms are regularly reviewed and audited to enable students with SEN to avail of appropriate supports.

2. Support services for students with SEN need to be conceptualised as a core element in a continuum of support for all students in further and higher education;

3. Within this context, disclosure of SEN should continue to be promoted by support professionals, and actively facilitated at multiple points in the transition process.

4. Opportunities should be made available for CPD for staff in further and higher education in the establishment of accessible courses and modes of assessment.

5.6 Student Experience

Generally students with SEN in this study were looking forward to their post-school education and the opportunity to have a 'fresh start' involving more adult responsibilities. Students with SEN recognised that they were moving from the certainty of support within the school environment to a new setting where they had some understandable concerns about accessing appropriate supports to enable them to succeed. School professionals shared some of the student concerns, particularly the ability of students to cope with academic and social demands in the new setting. Some students with SEN felt particularly stressed about the impending transition to further and higher education. Pre-course contact with professionals in further and higher education, combined with comprehensive information on available supports, allayed many of the fears expressed by students with SEN.

Establishing supportive learning environments in further and higher education is one of the key tasks for institutions in ensuring successful transitions for students with SEN (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). On transition to further or higher education, students with SEN generally welcomed the opportunities for developing independence skills, though some encountered initial difficulties in accessing support. One of the biggest challenges facing all students on transition to further and higher education concerned the significant changes in teaching, learning and assessment encountered (Yorke, 2007, Yorke & Longden, 2008). Students with SEN in this study were no different in that regard, and were understandably anxious about their ability to keep up with the level and volume of work expected in the new setting. Some found larger class sizes particularly daunting, while others welcomed the anonymity provided, which ensured that their difficulties in learning were not publicised in front of their peers and tutors. Students particularly welcomed the opportunity to establish working relationships with tutors and lecturers who were approachable and treated them like adults, a finding reported in other research (Gibson, 2012). The multiple modes of assessment used in further and higher education were viewed by a number of students with SEN as a fairer way of assessing their subject knowledge and understanding than that represented by Leaving Certificate examinations.

Social integration into further or higher education environments is recognised as a critical factor in ensuring successful transition and retention for all students including those with SEN within the educational setting (Harrison, 2006; Hultberg *et al*., 2009; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Losing established friendship groups and social networks was perceived to be a major challenge in transition for students with SEN (Cameto, Levine & Wagner, 2004). Students with Asperger's syndrome are generally considered

particularly vulnerable in this regard, and are perceived to need individualised support to facilitate social integration (Broderick & Mason-Williams, 2008). However, within this study there was little evidence that social integration posed a major barrier to participation for students with SEN, including those with Asperger's syndrome. The majority of students in this study continued to live at home so, perhaps, existing friendship groups and social networks had been retained. There was a variety of responses to the challenge of social inclusion for those students who had moved away from home. Students were particularly appreciative of social events organised as an induction for all students and 'ice-breaker' activities within their class groupings ensured that they had opportunities to meet their peer group within a supportive environment. The concept of a 'fresh start' was very strong for students with SEN and this extended to developing their friendship groupings within what they perceived to be a supportive environment. Stereotypical reactions to SEN reported as a major fear for students with SEN (Marriott, 2008), however, did not appear to be a major issue in this study, though one example was reported.

5.7 Recommendations on enabling students to adapt to new demands

The following two key recommendations from this research, and reflecting best practice internationally, are aimed at enabling students with SEN to adapt to the academic and social demands of further and higher education:

1. Course literature should be designed to provide comprehensive information about available supports for students with SEN in adapting to the academic requirements of the course.

2. Specific information should be provided on teaching, learning, and assessment strategies pursued in the institution.

6 Conclusion

Students with SEN, in common with their peers without SEN, face many challenges in accessing further and higher education provision. Students with and without SEN can experience difficulties in obtaining appropriate support for transition planning and decision making within school, and may encounter further difficulties in making a successful transition to further and higher education. However, it is explicitly acknowledged in national access policies that students with SEN can face additional difficulties in accessing school curricula, appropriate assessment procedures, and in negotiating access, transfer and progression to and within further and higher education. In response to these difficulties, a supplementary pathway has been designed to address the particular problems experienced by students with SEN in higher education, and a support infrastructure has been established within schools and some further and higher education institutions to address their academic and social needs. Despite this progress, challenges remain in policy and practice including: ensuring that individualised transition planning is in place early in the student's secondary school career; enabling informed decision making with the support of knowledgeable professionals; developing collaborative relationships among schools, health professionals and further and higher education institutions; establishing a more cohesive support infrastructure within further education; and enhancing and refining existing support structures in schools and further and higher education institutions to provide flexible and individualised responses to meeting the academic and social needs of students with SEN.

Enabling students with SEN to participate in education on an equal basis alongside their peers without SEN represents the goal of national access policy and practice within schools and further and higher education institutions. While there has been undoubted progress, targeted support for policy and practice is required to fully achieve this goal.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Members of the Research Advisory Committee

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Miriam Hillard, Senior SENO, NCSE

Peter Brown, National Access Office, HEA

Andrina Wafer, FETAC

Dr Peter Cullen, HETAC

Dr Gerald Craddock, NDA

Rory O'Sullivan, NCSE Council member

Dr Joe Travers, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin

Mary Quirke, AHEAD

Kevin Hogan, Further Education Section, DES

John Walsh, Post Primary Principal

Patricia Mc Donagh, Post Primary Special Education Coordinator / Deputy Principal

Valerie Monaghan, Special School Principal

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Dr Conor Mc Guckin, Research Team

Dr Michael Shevlin, Research Team

Sheena Bell, Research Team

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Appendix 2: NCSE Request for Tenders Document

The National Council for Special Education

Request for tenders to:

Conduct a study of the access and progression experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) moving from compulsory education to further and higher education, with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression to further and higher education.

Date: May 2009

Issued by:
Research and Development Unit,
National Council for Special Education,
1-2 Mill Street
Trim
Co. Meath

Section 1

Background Information

The National Council for Special Education

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities with particular emphasis on children.

The NCSE was formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act) on 1st October 2005. That Act sets out both the general functions of the Council and its specific functions in relation to the provisions of the Act. Full details of the Council may be viewed on its website www.ncse.ie.

Undertaking research to provide an evidence base to support this work is a key function of the Council. This research will assist in the development of policy advice on special education matters to the Minister for Education and Science. It will also contribute to identifying and disseminating to schools, parents and other appropriate persons, information relating to best practice concerning the education of children with special educational needs.

Invitation to Tender and Background to the Research

The NCSE requests tenders for a research service to:

> Conduct a study of the access and progression experiences of students with special educational needs (SEN) moving from compulsory education to further and higher education, with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression to further and higher education.

Participation rates for students with disabilities in higher and further education in Ireland continue to be low despite efforts made by many institutions in recent years to accommodate students with disabilities and the plethora of legislative developments which require educational institutions to do all that is reasonable to accommodate students with disabilities (Equal Status Acts (1998 to 2004), EPSEN Act (2004), the Universities Act (1998) and the Disabilities Act (2005)). Figures are not available for the further education sector but in the 2007–08 academic year, only 4.2 per cent of all new entrants to higher education indicated that they had one or more disabilities (HEA, 2009). These participation rates are well below the current national entry rates of 60 per cent and lower than the entry rates of any socio-economic group (2009 figures recently supplied by the HEA National Access Office). People with sensory disabilities, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities are particularly under represented. Based on a comparison of relevant students enrolled in higher education with Census 2006 data on the numbers of people with disabilities (aged 18 to 20) in the population, current participation rates are estimated at 15 to 17 per cent for people with sensory disabilities and 14 to 16 per cent for people with physical disabilities (HEA, 2008).

The National Access Plan has set a number of targets relating to participation rates for people with disabilities in higher education and plan to double the numbers of people with sensory, physical and multiple disabilities in higher education by 2013 (based on the 2006–07 number of students who are in receipt of supports under the Fund for Students with Disabilities (HEA, 2008, p 65).

Students experience significant changes in their learning environment, teaching approaches and peer and social networks when they progress to further and higher education. For students with disabilities, this experience is fraught with additional challenges such as a change in the organisation of special education resources and supports, and the need for collaboration and coordination between schools and further and higher education institutes to ensure effective and appropriate information sharing and a continuum of support to address their needs. These challenges can have significant implications for participation and continuity rates for people with disabilities in further and higher education.

One of the objectives laid out in the NCSE's Implementation Report is that

> … children with SEN will achieve outcomes from education which will facilitate them in transferring to the workplace, progressing to further education and lifelong learning, participating meaningfully in economic, social and cultural activity and, in effect, in living fulfilled lives independently in the community. (2006: 12)

The NCSE is enabled to advise in this regard under Section 20 (1) of the EPSEN Act (2004) that outlines our functions and two of these relate specifically to this topic:

(h)   to review generally the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of higher education and adult and continuing education, rehabilitation and training

(i) to advise all educational institutions concerning best practice in respect of the education of adults who have disabilities.

Aims of the study

The NCSE wishes to commission a study of the access and progression experiences of students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education, with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression to further and higher education. The experiences of individual students are central to a better understanding of these issues. Key research questions include:

1. What are the access and progression pathways for students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education institutes?

2. What are the roles of educational institutes, individuals and health services in the preparation of students with SEN for this progression?

3. What resources and supports are available to students with SEN to accommodate them making this progression?

4. What are the experiences of students with SEN in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

5. What are the views of educational and health personnel involved in supporting students in accessing and progressing to further and higher education?

6. What major issues and barriers arise with regards to access, progression and transition?

7. What best practices/strategies in relation to access, progression and transition exist?

Key tasks are to

1. Locate the study in an appropriate empirical and policy context.

2. Develop a comprehensive methodological framework encompassing study sample and selection, the management of ethical issues, methods of data collection, and the management and phasing of the distinct components of the research, noting key milestones and reporting schedules.

3. Survey the experiences and views of a representative sample of students with a variety of SEN from a variety of compulsory educational settings prior to progression to further and higher education and after transition to a variety of further and higher education institutes and explore the views of some in more detail.

4. Document the experiences and views of relevant individuals and services that have a role to play in the progression of these students (e.g. special educational needs organisers, teachers, principals, disability officers, lecturers and professionals in education and health services).

5. Identify the access and progression pathways for students with SEN moving from compulsory education to further and higher education institutes.

6. Describe the roles of educational institutes, individuals and health services in the preparation of students with SEN for this progression and identify the resources and supports available to accommodate students with SEN during this period.

7. Identify and analyse the barriers to, and the factors contributing to positive access and progression experiences.

8. Identify models of good practice for access and progression.

9. Identify the key issues arising and possible implications for local and national practice and policy.

Expected outputs

The key output from this study will be a publishable report which should:

*   be accessible to a wide audience

*   withstand peer review

*   comply with NCSE report structure guidelines.

Progress / interim reports will be expected and these will be scheduled on the basis of a formal work plan agreed with the successful tenderer.

Checklist for tenderers

The format for tenders is outlined in detail below. However tenderers are advised to ensure that submitted proposals contain all the relevant information required and are reminded that:

*   The NCSE application form must be used to submit a proposal and all the required information should be provided in the correct format by the tender deadline.

*   Joint tenders are welcome, however, the lead supplier must be clearly identified and lines of responsibility and roles must be clearly outlined.

*   Proposals should clearly outline how the tenderer understands the aims of the research, how the research questions will be addressed and the key tasks undertaken. This should be done in the context of a clear description of the proposed methodology which should be both robust and transparent.

*   Detailed costings are required on a per diem basis for each of the personnel involved in the study and detail should be provided on the number of days each member of the research team will contribute to the study.

*   The estimated budget for this project is exclusive of VAT. Costings provided should be exclusive of VAT, though VAT costs (where applicable) can be indicated separately.

*   Relevant experience in undertaking similar studies should be clearly identified.

*   Relevant knowledge, expertise, skills and qualifications among the proposed researchers must be clearly identified and CVs for all personnel who will be involved in the project must be attached to the application form.

Appendix 3: Work Package Overview

Work Package	Work Package Focus
WP1	Desk based literature search and review.
	Interviews with nominated individuals from statutory and non-statutory bodies.
WP2	Experiences of students with SEN who have successfully transferred to further and higher education.
	Interviews with relevant personnel from further and higher education providers.
WP3	Field work: identifying and accessing the sample (students and schools).
	Interviews with pre-transition students and identified professionals and services.
WP4	Audit survey of secondary schools (including special schools).
	Audit survey of further and higher education institutions.
WP5	Interviews with post-transition students.
WP6	Project management.

Appendix 4: Questions for Interviews with Nominated Individuals from Statutory and Non-Statutory bodies (WP1)

List of questions for Work Package 1(b) interviews

Considering the wider ecological context of education and SEN provision

- What are the 'broad issues' in this area?

- Macro level issues (at the world / EU level)?

- Macro level issues (at the country level)?

- Micro level issues (at the individual, family, locale, school, further and higher education level)?

- Are transition issues different for different 'categories' of students with SEN?

- Is co-morbidity of SEN categories a problem in transition?

- Is co-morbidity of SEN category(ies) with other mental health issues a problem in transition?

Considering the statutory, policy, and practice issues regarding transitions in an Irish context

Secondary school

- What is the 'normal' / 'standard' / 'official' transition pathway to further and higher education?

- Is there a 'scenic route' for 'regular' students?

- Is the pathway different depending on whether the transition is to further or higher education?

- What are the important documents in this area?

    – at a legislation level

    – at a policy level

    – at a practice level.

- How does this 'normal' pathway differ for students with SEN?

- Is there a 'scenic route' for students with SEN?

    – information and guidance

    – availability of choice

    – stakeholders involved in process

    – potential barriers

    – potential good practice.

Special school

- What is the 'normal' / 'standard' / 'official' transition pathway to further and higher education?

- Is there a 'scenic route' from special school?

- Is the pathway different depending on whether the transition is to further or higher education?

- What are the important documents in this area?

  – at a legislation level

  – at a policy level

  – at a practice level.

- How does this 'normal' pathway differ for students with SEN?

  – information and guidance

  – availability of choice

  – stakeholders involved in process

  – potential barriers

  – potential good practice.

- Do students with SEN take longer to access and make the transition to further and higher education?

- Do students with SEN 'dip in and out' of the transition pathway?

Further education

- What are the distinct phases in the transition process to further education?

- What are the critical points in the transition process to further education?

- What does 'post-transition' look like?

Higher education

- What are the distinct phases in the transition process to higher education?

- What are the critical points in the transition process to higher education?

- What does 'post-transition' look like?

Exploring school and further and higher education linkages

- Is there a 'formal' link between (i) post-primary schools, (ii) special schools, (iii) further education and (iv) higher education in relation to planning for transition?

- Is there an 'informal' link between (i) post-primary schools, (ii) special schools, (iii) further education and (iv) higher education in relation to planning for transition?

- What are the 'attitudes' at second level regarding the transition of students with SEN to further and higher education (e.g. a positive commitment to accessibility of the receiving institutions; the difficulties of gaining relevant information)?

- What are the 'attitudes' at further and higher education level regarding the transition of students with SEN from secondary schools or special schools (e.g. potential students with SEN are well informed and prepared for study at this level and make a positive contribution to the receiving organisation; potential students with SEN are a drain on resources)?

Who else is important in the transition process?

- Who are the key people in the transition process (e.g. family, teachers)?

- Are there other key influential people? (e.g. community, charitable organisations, support groups)

Training, support and development

- Can you tell us about training and support for staff involved in transition planning?

- Are there differences in relation to training across disciplines?

Location of services

- Are there further and higher education institutions offering realistic choices to students with SEN in your area?

- Is there a regional disparity in service provision / supports at special / post-primary level (e.g. careers advice, specialist teachers, courses offered)?

- Is there a regional disparity in service provision / supports at further and higher education level (e.g. careers advice, specialist teachers, courses offered)?

- Is there an urban / rural divide?

- Is 'travel' an issue?

- In terms of 'environmental issues', what is/are the environmental issues that may have a disproportionate effect on these young people (e.g. SES, urban / rural)?

Logistical and resourcing issues

- What funding and resources are available specifically for students with SEN?

- Is 'money' an issue (e.g. are there problems of 'eligibility' for funding)?

- Are there any issues regarding when and how a student can apply for financial support?

- Are there any issues regarding when and how a school or receiving further and higher education institution can apply for financial support?

- Are there any 'resource' issues for the student and / or their family (e.g. grants, technology)?

- Are there any 'resource' issues for the student's school (e.g. are schools adequately supported to help students plan for the transition)?

- Are there any 'resource' issues for the receiving further and higher education institution?

- Does increasing access to transition result in a further division of resources and financial support to the students (i.e. competition for finite resources)?

- Does increasing access to transition result in a further division of resources and financial support to the further and higher education institution (i.e. competition for finite resources)?

- Are students required to undertake disability assessments on transition to further and higher education in order to access support / resources? If so, how is information about this made available to students with SEN and how are assessments funded?

Personal experiences of students

- In your opinion, what are the 'system' experiences of students with SEN in their attempts to further their aspirations to make the transition to further and higher education? (E.g. prejudice or discrimination, good support from school, access to disability support in further and higher education.)

- In your opinion, what are the 'personal' experiences of students with SEN in their attempts to further their aspirations to make the transition to further and higher education? (E.g., stress, coping, psychosomatic complaints, teasing, bullying, opportunities to become more independent, welcoming social activities or opportunities in further and higher education.)

- In your opinion, is the academic examination system in special / post-primary schools 'fair' to students with SEN (E.g., can they demonstrate knowledge and have this assessed in a fair manner in order to gain access to further and higher education courses)?

To conclude

- What is/are the main facilitators to aid transition from secondary and special schools to further and higher education?

- What is/are the main barriers that inhibit transition from secondary and special schools to further and higher education?

- If you had a 'wish-list', what would it include?

- Is there anyone else, or any other organisation, to who you think we should also talk to in relation to this research project?

Appendix 5: Questions for Student Focus Groups and Interviews (WP2)

Demographics

Age: ....

Sex: Male [   ]   Female [   ]

Urban / Rural: ....

SES: ....

NCSE category: ....

Mode of participation: Full-time [   ]

                                     Part-time [   ]

                                     Scenic [   ]

                                     (if so, details required)

Course being studied: ....

Can we access your college details? ....

Current supports: ....

....

....

....

Current experience

Note: These questions are designed to elicit issues that are pertinent to the respondent and their circumstances – not those that are applicable to the general student body.

- How are you getting on? How do you 'feel'? (I.e., the emotional side as opposed to the practical side)

- Is college what you expected?

- What are the highlights of being at college (I.e. personal – not those that are applicable to the general student body)

- What are the challenges of being at college (I.e. personal – not those that are applicable to the general student body)

- Do you receive any support *within* college? If so, what type of support do you receive? If so, who provides the support?

- Do you receive any support *outside* college? If so, what type of support do you receive? If so, who provides the support?

- What are your own thoughts on your disability? (Link to NCSE category and entitlements)

- Level of access to the curriculum and assessment.

- Responsibility for 'own independent learning' at college – were expectations of what would be available realistic?

- What are your thoughts about your future in college?

- Are there any outstanding issues for you at college?

- What subject(s) are you studying? Why these?

- What are your long-term course / study aspirations?

- What are your long-term career aspirations? (Employment planning)

- Housing – what are your living arrangements? Any problems?

- Transport – what are your travel arrangements? Any problems?

- How are you getting on with your peers at college? Are they 'supportive'? (facilitator) Are they 'hassle'? (barrier)

- How are you getting on with your lecturers at college? Are they 'supportive'? (facilitator) Are they 'hassle'? (barrier)

- Are you involved in any clubs or societies at college? If so, which?

- Do you see any problems on the horizon? If so, can you get through this / these?

- What is the best advice that you could give to someone with a disability coming to college?

Linking back to school

- Is this what you always wanted to do?

- When did you know that you wanted to go to college?

- Did you believe it was possible for you to go to college?

- Did you envisage any problems with you being able to move to college?

- Did you experience any problems with you being able to move to college?

- What sources of information to you have for planning to attend college?

- People – were your *parent(s) / guardian(s)* supportive of your plans to attend college?

- People – were your *friends* supportive of your plans to attend college?

- People – were your *teachers* supportive of your plans to attend college?

- People – was your *guidance teacher* supportive of your plans to attend college?

- People – were '*others*' (e.g. SEN teachers, health professionals) supportive of your plans to attend college?

- Was there any link between your school and the college in terms of planning your move from school to college?

- Was there any other support available to you at school in terms of planning your move from school to college?

- How did you get on with your peers at school? Were they 'supportive'? (facilitator) Were they 'hassle'? (barrier)

- How did you getting on with your teachers at school? Were they 'supportive'? (facilitator) Were they 'hassle'? (barrier)

- When you left school, was there a 'continuation' or a 'truncation' of support?

- How did you 'feel' at the time of transition (i.e. emotional aspects)?

Feelings and emotions

- Feelings

- Emotions

- Sense of self

- Self-esteem / self-worth.

- Health and wellbeing

- Robust or vulnerable?

'Rights'

- Aware of the Equal Status Act? If so, what does it mean to you?

- Aware of the Disability Act? If so, what does it mean to you?

- Aware of EPSEN? If so, what does it mean to you?

- Aware of NCSE? If so, what does it mean to you?

To conclude

- Are there any questions or issues that we forgot to ask about?

- Do you think that this research will be useful?

- In terms of the transition from school to college, what are the main things that need to be tackled / changed / brought in etc.? (I.e. what the main 'facilitators' and main 'barriers' to transition?)

Questions for student interviews A

Policy

- What career advice have you received to date?

- Have you received any more/less advice than your peers?

- From whom/where? (statutory/voluntary bodies)

- Have you made an application through DARE?

- Have you declared that you have a disability on your CAO or further education application form?

- Have you identified any gaps in the advice that you have received?

- On a scale of one to ten how do you perceive the support that you have received to date?

Provision

- Who has assisted you in your exploration of choices for third level/further education?

- Are you aware of what services you are / will be eligible for at your choice of college?

- How much has this information influenced your choice of college?

- How did you access information? (voluntary / statutory / school / self)

- Have you identified any barriers during this process?

- Taking into account the support that you have received at second level, how do you envisage this support continuing at college?

- What type of activities have you been engaged in to assist you in your decision (i.e. what has the school provided? voluntary / statutory bodies provided? what have you done yourself?)

- What will you miss?

Outcomes

- What plans have you made for your move to college / further education?

- What will you do if you do not get your first choice?

- Do you have a back-up plan?

- Has anybody else at home gone to college?

- What are your expectations of the college?

- What are your expectations of yourself?

Experience

- When did you start the planning process for your future?

- What assistance have you received so far throughout the process?

- What have you found to be helpful?

- What have you found to be unhelpful?

- Has you experience to date been positive / negative?

- Compared to others how do you think you are doing?

- What are you looking forward to?

- What are you anxious about?

- How do you feel you are coping with the process?

- Compared to your peers do you think your experience is different?

- On a scale of one to ten how confident are you about your future?

- Do you think that you have the same choices as everybody else?

- What determines your choice?

- How did you make your choice?

- What were the primary reasons for choosing your course?

- How does this make you feel?

Questions for student interviews B (special schools)

Policy

- What choices or advice have you received to date?

- Where do you hope to go when you finish here?

- From whom/where? (I.e. statutory/voluntary bodies)

Provision

- Who has assisted you in your exploration of choices for training / further education?

- Are you aware of what services you are will be eligible for at your choice of college / training centre?

- How much has this information influenced your choice of college/training?

- How did you access information? (voluntary / statutory / school / self)

- What has been helpful?

- Taking into account the support that you have received at second level how do you envisage this support continuing at college/ training centre/day centre etc.?

- What type of activities have you been engaged in to assist you in your decision? (I.e. What has the school provided? Voluntary/statutory bodies provided? What have you done yourself?)

- What will you miss?

Outcomes

- What plans have you made for your move from this school?

- What will you do if you do not get your first choice?

- Do you have a back-up plan?

- What are your expectations of the college / centre? / What do you think it will be like?

- What are your expectations of yourself?

Experience

- When did you start the planning process for your future?

- What assistance have you received so far throughout the process?

- What have you found to be helpful?

- What have you found to be unhelpful?

- Has you experience to date been positive / negative?

- What are you looking forward to?

- What are you anxious about?

- How do you feel you are coping with the process?

- Compared to your peers do you think your experience is different?

- On a scale of one to ten how confident are you about your future?

- Do you think that you have the same choices as everybody else?

- What determines your choice?

- How did you make your choice?

- What were the primary reasons for choosing your course?

- How does this make you feel?

Appendix 6: Questions for Focus Groups with Educational Professionals from Further and Higher Education Providers (WP2b)

Overview

- In this College, how do you define 'Access', 'Progression', 'Transfer' and 'Transition'?

Thematic areas to be explored

1. Outreach
2. Admissions
3. Progression – resources / supports
4. Teaching, learning and assessment
5. Experiences
6. Transfer / pathways
7. Roles and responsibilities
8. Best practice(s).

Thematic area	Prompts
1: Outreach	What type of outreach activities are engaged in by your college?
	What types of linkages exist between the college and (i) schools, (ii) professional bodies, (iii) health services, (iv) community/voluntary support agencies, and (v) other?
	Are any of these outreach activities/linkages specifically designed to engage with students with disabilities and/or SEN?
	Do you believe your college is an attractive option for students with disabilities and/or SEN?
	What do you believe are the greatest difficulties facing students with disabilities and/or SEN in accessing your college?
	• Physical environment
	• Location
	• Programmes available
	• Accommodation
	• Transport
	• Support services
	• Clubs/societies.
	• Do you believe students with disabilities and/or SEN have been properly prepared to make the transition from school to your college?

Thematic area	Prompts
2: Admissions	What are the admissions procedures of the college? Do you believe these procedures, as they stand, facilitate ease of transition for students with disabilities and/or SEN? Do you believe there are any unintentional barriers to access for students with disabilities and/or SEN? Your institution is currently operating the DARE scheme – do you think this is an improvement on the previous procedures? What are the advantages/disadvantages of the DARE scheme? What happens when an application made under the DARE scheme arrives in the college? Is there a link between admissions and support services in the institution? • What do you do in terms of admissions to facilitate students with disabilities and/or SEN to progress through their chosen course?
3: Progression: resources and supports	What resources and supports are available for students with disabilities and/or SEN in relation to: • Accessing the curriculum • Teaching approaches • Assessment methodologies • Physical environment • Life in the college • Careers services • Health services • Accommodation services? How adequate/appropriate are these resources/supports? What resources and supports are available to staff in relation to supporting students with disabilities and/or SEN in the College? What are your views about supporting students with disabilities and/or SEN in teaching, learning, and assessment? What needs to be done, if anything, to make the institute a better experience for students with disabilities and/or SEN? In terms of attrition, is there a difference in the figures for students with disabilities and/or SEN compared to other students? Are there supports available for staff in relation to working with students with disabilities and/or SEN?
4: Teaching, learning and assessment	How are accommodations made in relation to: • Teaching • Learning • Assessment? What resources and supports are available to students with disabilities and/or SEN to accommodate them making this progression?

Thematic area	Prompts
5: Experiences	How are the experiences of students with disabilities and/or SEN (i) the same, (ii) different as other students without disabilities and/or SEN? What resources and supports are available to students with disabilities and/or SEN to enable them to have a positive educational and social experience in the college? • Do you feel that students with disabilities and/or SEN have good experiences in this college? • What needs to be done, if anything, to make the system and process a better experience for students with disabilities and/or SEN?
6: Transfer/ pathways	Do students with disabilities and/or SEN have access to a guidance counsellor in college? Do students with disabilities and/or SEN generally (i) advance to other courses provided by the college, (ii) exit after their course to another college, (iii) exit to the world of work, or (iv) other?
7: Roles and responsibilities	In terms of 'access', 'progression', 'transfer' and 'transition experience' for students with disabilities and/or SEN, what is the role, if any, of: • Government (HEA, DES, NCSE etc.) • College • You/your work area • The student/their supporter(s). That is, do any of these have a role in terms of resources and supports to enable students with disabilities and/or SEN to make this transition?
8: Best practice(s)	Can you identify any best practice(s) in college or your own work that facilitates the successful transition of students with disabilities and/or SEN?

Appendix 7: Questions for Pre-Transition Interviews (Students and School Professionals) (WP3)

Interview questions: students pre-transition

Pathways: making choices, access and progression

- Who has assisted you in your exploration of choices for further/higher education?

- Are you aware of the services available to you at your choice of college?

- How much has this information influenced your choice of college?

- How did you access information? (Voluntary / statutory / school / self?

- Have you identified any barriers during this process?

- What career advice have you received to date?

- Have you received any more / less advice than your peers?

- From whom? Where? (Statutory / voluntary bodies?)

- Have you made an application through DARE?

- Have you identified any gaps in the advice that you have received?

- What determines your choice?

- How did you make your choice?

- What were the primary reasons for choosing your course?

- How does this make you feel?

- Have you declared that you have a disability on your CAO or further education application form?

- Do you think that you have the same choices as everybody else?

Resources and support

- Taking into account the support that you have received at second level, how do you envisage this support continuing at college?

- On a scale of one to ten, how do you perceive the support that you have received to date?

- Who have you received the most support from, in relation to helping you to make decisions about your future?

- When did you start the planning process for your future?

- What assistance have you received so far throughout the process?

- What have you found to be helpful?

- What have you found to be unhelpful?

- Have you experience to date been positive / negative?

- What type of activities have you been engaged in to assist you in your decision? I.e. what has the school provided / voluntary / statutory bodies provided / what have you done yourself?

- What plans have you made for your move to college / further education?

- What will you do if you do not get your first choice?

- Do you have a back-up-plan?

- Has anybody else at home gone to college?

Student experience

- Compared to others, how do you think you are doing?

- What are you looking forward to?

- What are you anxious about?

- How do you feel you are coping with the process?

- Compared to your peers, do you think your experience is different?

- What are your expectations of the college?

- What are your expectations of yourself?

- On a scale of one to ten, how confident are you about your future?

Interview questions: school professionals pre-transition

Pathways: making choices, access, and progression

- What, in your opinion, are the issues for students with SEN accessing further and higher education at a national level / local level?

- Are transition issues / access / progression different for different categories of students with SEN?

- What facilitates/ hinders a smooth progression / transition?

- Is access and progression to further and higher education different for students with SEN?

- How do you manage the career aspirations of students with SEN?

- How do you manage the expectations of students with SEN?

- How do you manage the expectations of parents?

- Do students with SEN have the same choices as their peers who do not have SEN?

- Do students with SEN have sufficient choice for access and progression in your geographical area?

Resources and support

- What is your specific role in supporting SEN students?

- What type of activities do you engage with / promote to support students with SEN in your school?

- What types of links (formal / informal) do you have with higher or further education institutions?

- In your opinion are students with SEN sufficiently supported at a local/national level?

- How would you rate the extent of your knowledge of services and supports for students with SEN at further and higher education?

- Who, in your opinion, are the key people involved in the transition planning for students with SEN?

- What type of support is available to you in your role in assisting students with SEN in their planning / accessing / making the transition to further and higher education?

- Are there issues for students with SEN accessing funding / grants?

- Are there issues for students with SEN accessing supplementary admission routes to higher education?

- When do you start planning with students about their future?

- Is this different for students with SEN?

- Who is included in the process?

- How do you access information for students with SEN?

- Can you identify any gaps at a national /local level?

Student experience

- In your opinion how do you think students with SEN cope with the process of transition, in comparison to their peers?

- What are the personal experiences of students with SEN in their attempts to further their aspirations to make the transition to further and higher education?

Appendix 8: Questions for Post-Transition Student Interviews (WP5)

Course choice

Reaction to their results

- Happy with the outcome?

- Did they obtain the place/course that they wanted?

- Did they make the transition – i.e. to further/higher education?

- If not what are they currently doing?

Transition – settling in

- How did you find the first couple of weeks?

- Sorted out transport and accommodation?

- Did you receive any help with accommodation?

- How are you managing financially?

- Did you participate in any special orientation courses for first years?

- Did you participate in any special orientation courses organised by the disability office?

- Did they find them helpful?

- Have you made any new friends?

- Do you miss school?

- What have you found most helpful?

- What have you found most difficult?

- Have they participated in Fresher's Week / first year college activities?

- What are the facilities like in your institution?

- Are you enjoying yourself?

- Do you see this phase of your life as a new beginning?

Academic content

- Are you happy with their current choice of course?

- Is it what you thought it would be?

- What is the difference between being at school and being here?

- How are you coping with the course content? I.e. practicals etc.

- How are you coping with the different styles of delivery of lectures? I.e. teaching style (higher education)?

- How are you coping with the different styles of delivery of course content (further education)?

- What has been most helpful?

- What have you found difficult?

- If you have difficulties, do you approach their tutor / lecturer / teacher?

- How are you coping with the level of work within your course?

- How have you coped with assessment (if any received)?

Accessing resource

- When you made your application, did you tick the box for disability?

- When you got your place, did you register with the disability office / resource department in PLC?

- How did you find this experience?

- What did you have to do?

- Were people helpful?

- What was the outcome?

- Have you managed to access support?

- If so, what type of support is in place for you?

- How does that make you feel?

- Are you living away from home?

- How are you coping?

- Has the disability office provided you with any specific support to help you settle in?

Looking ahead

- How do you anticipate the year ahead?

- Is there anything that you are particularly concerned about?

- Do you feel you have achieved what you originally wanted?

- How does that make you feel?