
EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY IN IRELAND: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATIONAL DISABILITY SURVEY

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Non-Technical Summary

Background

People with a disability are at higher risk of poverty and deprivation. Analyses showed that adults with a disability in 2011 depended on social welfare payments for just over half of their income.¹ In the same year, the income poverty rate among people with a disability was 45 per cent compared to 13 per cent of people without a disability.

For some, poverty and deprivation are made more likely by difficulty in gaining employment; having a job helps prevent poverty and can help poor households move out of poverty. A person's employment prospects are affected by many individual characteristics, but his or her level of education is particularly important. In addition, disabled people who wish to work may face additional costs of working due to their disabilities or require services or aids to be able to take up employment. For policy makers to help improve well-being of people with a disability, it would be useful to know more about what factors help or hinder people with a disability who wish to gain employment. In this paper, we used data from the 2006 National Disability Survey (a survey with a large sample of working-age people with a disability) to examine this question.

Our research questions were:

1. How did disability affect their education? Past research shows that having a higher level of education tends to make it easier to get work, so if disability led to lower education this might also make it harder to gain employment. What factors make it harder or easier for people with a disability to reach their desired level of education?
2. How did employment prospects vary with the age a person became disabled and other individual characteristics? There might be different factors at play for people who have early-onset (during school years) disability and those whose

¹ Watson and Maître (2013).

disability emerges after the school years. For example, early-onset disability might reduce educational opportunities and thus limit future employment prospects, but later onset might present particular challenges for those wishing to remain in work.

3. Did access to services and aids for people with a disability have significant effects on whether they could gain employment? Were there links between the availability of aids and services and the level of wage subsidy people felt they needed to be able to take up employment?

In the final section of the report, we consider how policies may help address the issues identified in the analysis.

Data and methods used

The study drew on the 2006 National Disability Survey (NDS), which included over 7,000 working-age people with a disability. The NDS contains detailed information about nine different types of disability (seeing, hearing, speech, mobility & dexterity, remembering & concentrating, intellectual or learning, emotional, psychological & mental health, pain and breathing) and on several aspects of the person's life, including whether they were affected while in school or college, their work situation and their need for services and supports.

We used statistical models to examine the impact of disability on educational and labour market experiences and outcomes, taking other socioeconomic factors into account where possible (e.g. type of disability, age group, gender, marital status and region). Because the data did not allow us to track people over time as their circumstances changed, we could not always be sure which factors caused particular outcomes. For example, being in employment may help people gain access to services and aids, but having appropriate access to services and aids may also help a person take up employment. Nevertheless, sometimes the timing of events (e.g. age of onset of disability) helped provide information on the likely direction of causes and effects.

Disability and education

It is widely recognised that education is a key influence on life chances including job prospects, earnings and risk of poverty. Research shows, however, that children with disabilities and special educational needs face considerable barriers in engaging in school.² They are more likely to dislike school.³ In addition, they are more likely to have fewer friends and more negative peer relations. Academically, these students are greatly at risk of poorer academic outcomes⁴. People with disabilities have fewer educational qualifications than non-disabled people when they leave school. This leads to a double disadvantage, where economic prospects are reduced both by

² Douglas et al. (2012).

³ McCoy and Banks (2012).

⁴ Humphrey et al. 2013).

disability status and by lower levels of education.⁵ As a result, research consistently shows that young people with disabilities have poorer post-school outcomes (e.g. independent living, employment and attendance in further education) compared to their non-disabled peers.⁶

Most disability is acquired through the life course rather than being present at birth. As a result, most people with a disability were not affected by the disability in their school years. Just 30 per cent of working-age people with a disability were affected by the disability while in education; 17 per cent of disabled people missed some time in school because of their disability and 15 per cent left school sooner than they would have liked. However, people with certain types of disability were more likely to have been affected while in school or college, particularly those whose main disability was intellectual disability (92 per cent) or learning disability (80 per cent).

Because disability can reduce the likelihood of staying in education, people who were affected by their disability during their school years tended to have lower levels of educational qualifications than the wider population. This group had only about three quarters the odds of completing second-level education compared to people with a disability who were not affected until later in life. Also, people with intellectual or learning disability had lower levels of educational achievement than other people with a disability.

Females, younger people and those with lower levels of disability were more likely to have completed second-level or third-level education than males, older people and those with more severe disabilities. Over time the share of people reaching each level of education has been rising, so one would expect younger groups to spend more time in education on average. It is also possible that this age pattern reflects the significantly increased investment of resources in supporting children with special education needs from the mid 1990s.⁷

Of course, many other factors may help or hinder people with a disability who wish to reach higher levels of education. These include parental social class and education, level of family financial resources, and parental expectations. All of these factors are known to affect educational participation in the wider population. We do not have such detailed information in the *National Disability Survey* on the family background of the people with a disability during their childhood years. However, future research on the experiences of children with a disability, drawing on sources such as the *Growing Up in Ireland Survey*, will begin to address these issues.

Disability and employment

Most people with a disability have worked in the past, are currently working or want to work. While only 29 per cent of our (working age) sample was currently in employment, 85 per cent had worked at some point. In addition, nearly half of those

⁵ NDA 2012.

⁶ Bouck (2012).

⁷ NCSE (2013)

not currently in employment said they would be interested in working if the circumstances were right.

Likelihood of working

We used statistical methods to discover how the likelihood of working varied across many characteristics of working-age people with a disability. Married men were more likely to work than married women, younger adults more than older adults, those with sensory disability more than other disability types, those with a moderate level of difficulty more than those with greater difficulty, those with good health or stamina more than those with health problems, those with higher levels of education more than those with less, and those living in Dublin more than those living elsewhere. On the last item, the regional pattern refers to where the person currently lives, and people may have moved to Dublin in order to take up employment.

One surprising result was that after we took account of all these characteristics, those who had been affected by their disability during their school years were slightly more likely to be currently at work than those whose disability had emerged later. In essence, if two people are identical (including having the same level of education) but one has experienced disability since the school years and other became disabled later, the person who has had a disability since childhood is more likely to be employed. We had expected that people who had a disability for longer would find it harder to gain employment, but the data indicate a more complex picture. This suggests that people whose disability emerges later in life are likely to face particular challenges in remaining in employment or finding more suitable employment.

Interest in working among those not currently employed

Of those with a disability and not currently at work, younger adults showed particularly high interest in working. Interest was also higher among adults with third-level education, those with lower levels of difficulty associated with their disability and among married men. We might think of this as an unmet demand for employment. Not surprisingly, the level of current interest in work was higher among those who worked in the past compared to those who never worked.

Men and women with a disability were equally likely to have been in employment at some point in the past and were equally likely to have left employment because of a disability, but women were more likely to have left for other reasons, so that fewer women were currently in employment.

Labour market exclusion

People who have never been in employment or have left a job because of a disability can be described as suffering from “labour market exclusion”. This group is of particular concern for policy makers, because people in this position may find it particularly difficult to get work. We used statistical models to characterise those experiencing labour market exclusion, taking account of a range of personal characteristics including level of education, with a view to isolating the characteristics most closely associated with it. Our results showed that the greatest level of labour

market exclusion was among those with bad health, bad stamina or with emotional, psychological and mental health (EPMH) disability. The level of exclusion was lowest among those with third-level education and those with a hearing disability. People with intellectual disability experience a relatively high level of labour market exclusion, which is partly due to their lower levels of education.

Within the group experiencing labour market exclusion, we could identify a subgroup for whom the main challenge was in getting the first job i.e. younger adults, people with intellectual or speech disability, and people affected during their school years. Another subgroup consisted of people for whom the main challenge was connected with having left work because of their disability: older adults, people with an EPMH disability, pain disability and those with health or stamina problems. These challenges will require different policy responses.

Factors facilitating employment

In this section, we examine the links between employment of people with a disability and their access to disability-related services and aids.

Unmet needs – services or aids

Some people with a disability may require services or aids to make it possible for them to take up employment. To investigate how employment prospects are related to an individual's access to services and aids, we focused on working-age people with a disability who were currently in employment or who would be interested in a job if the circumstances were right. Since the aids and services people need may be specific to their type of disability, we looked separately at groups of people with four major types of disability: mobility and dexterity, EPMH, pain and intellectual disability. Nearly nine out of ten working-age people with a disability has one of these types of disability.

The services that were most frequently used by people with disability included physiotherapy (mobility & dexterity), psychiatric and counselling services (EPMH disability), pain management (pain) and psychology services (intellectual disability). The devices identified included walking aids (mobility and dexterity), heated massage or muscle stimulation devices (pain) and educational technology (intellectual disability).

One straightforward way to compare the need for services or aids across disability areas is to count the number of items people say they need but do not have. This is a simplified comparison, of course, because it does not take account of the strength or importance of needs for particular items. But it does allow a high level comparison of the levels of “unmet” needs for different disabilities.

We constructed indicators of the number of aids used and the number of aids people felt they needed but did not have, i.e. “unmet need”. Each of these indicators was set to a range of zero (no items) to five (for five or more needs). In our statistical model of unmet need, we found that the level of difficulty arising from the disability was a

particularly important explanatory factor. Education also mattered. Contrary to expectations, people with higher levels of education did not have fewer unmet needs, but they did use significantly more services and devices. We had thought high levels of education might reduce unmet needs by improving a person's ability to gain access to services in various ways. However, it may be that the actual relationship between education and unmet needs is more complicated than this simple notion suggested. Highly educated people may tend to have more resources to get the required aids and services (reducing their unmet needs), but they may also have a higher level of expectation about what they need because they have more information on the range of services and devices available (increasing the unmet needs they report).

The analysis suggested that unmet needs for services or devices were a barrier to employment, but their significance as a barrier varied by type of disability. Focusing on those currently at work or who would be interested in work if the circumstances were right, unmet needs were found to be associated with non-employment for people with mobility and dexterity disability and those with pain disability but not for people with EPMH or intellectual disability. This pattern suggests there might be a link between unmet needs and difficulty in entering employment, but with the data available to us we cannot be sure to what extent unmet needs hinder employment.

Self-Reported Unmet needs

We also examined a number of general requirements people reported needing in order to be able to work. These have implications for public policy on the employment of people with a disability. Respondents were asked to select items from a list. Requirements included flexible work arrangements such as reduced hours (identified by 46 per cent), modified job tasks (29 per cent) and accessibility modifications (32 per cent). These requirements, especially the need for flexible working arrangements, were correlated with the self-reported need for a wage subsidy, identified by 24 per cent.

Wage Subsidy

A statistical model indicated that people were more likely to say they needed a wage subsidy if they also reported unmet needs for services or devices, if they had lower levels of education and if they had a higher level of difficulty associated with the disability. The link between reported need for a wage subsidy and unmet needs was significant for those with mobility & dexterity disability, EPMH disability and pain disability. This link was similar in magnitude for those with an intellectual disability, but was not statistically significant.

There may be a common factor behind the self-reported need for a wage subsidy and the presence of unmet needs: both of these could arise because there are additional costs of disability that are not fully covered by existing supports. People with lower levels of education probably also have lower than average earnings, which could make the need for a wage subsidy more apparent if these people face similar additional costs of disability to their better-off counterparts or they may not earn enough to offset the loss of means-tested social protection payments or related benefits.

Limitations of our analysis due to available data

As noted earlier, we do not have information about how individuals' circumstances changed over time or in relation to changes in their disability status. Information on preferences toward working, level of difficulty and the nature of the person's need for services and devices all relate to the same point in time. When modelling these relationships we have tried to disentangle overlapping factors as far as possible. These include factors which may both increase the need for services and reduce the probability of employment, such as the person's health, stamina and difficulty associated with the disability. Nevertheless, in the absence of data showing how individuals' situations changed over time, we must be cautious about drawing strong conclusions about which causes were most important in driving the effects we would like to analyse.

Policy implications

There are a number of policy implications arising from the findings in this report. The main ones concern the situation of people affected by their disability during their school years, the distinct challenges faced by people with early and late onset disability and the need for supports to help with the additional costs of disability.

The results indicate that there are two distinct types of challenges to the labour market participation of people with a disability.

- For those whose disability emerges early in life, the challenges centre on remaining in school or college long enough to maximise educational attainment and then, on leaving, getting the first job.
- For those whose disability emerges later, the challenges centre on being able to stay in employment or retraining for a different kind of work.

Of course the two are not mutually exclusive. Most people with a disability have more than one type of disability and those who have a disability that emerges in the school years may go on to develop another disability later in life.

Helping people complete their education

Just under one third of working-age people with a disability were affected by the disability in their school years and half of these left school sooner than they would have liked. Recent research in Ireland has pointed to the fact that students with a disability in mainstream schools are more likely than their peers to report not liking school.⁸ Since school engagement is crucial to helping people stay in education, this issue clearly needs to be addressed. Greater availability of programmes such as the Junior Cycle Schools Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied may provide improved access to the curriculum for students with disabilities/special educational needs (SEN) allowing them to maximise their educational achievement and make the transition to further/higher education or the labour market. Access programmes

⁸ McCoy and Banks (2012).

such as Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) target students with disabilities/SEN and aim to encourage greater numbers of these students to pursue education beyond post-primary school.

The availability of large-scale survey data on children and young people from the National Disability Survey (child questionnaire) and the *Growing Up in Ireland* Survey offers an opportunity to investigate the experiences of young people with a disability as they move through the educational system. In particular, it would allow us to assess the relative contribution to early leaving of health and stamina, accessibility (whether within the school or in getting to school), the suitability of the curriculum, the availability of support services and flexibility around school attendance hours. Better understanding of these factors should lead to more effective policies for helping people remain in school and thus improve the educational achievement of young people with a disability.

Age threshold for disability allowance

Another issue affecting young people with a disability is the age at which students with disabilities/SEN receive disability allowance. This means-tested payment is currently available to young people with a disability from age 16, often while still at school. There have been recommendations to raise the age to 18.⁹ The *Value for Money Review* argued that ‘the case for increasing the minimum age for the disability allowance from 16 to 18 remains compelling’ as it may create a dependence on welfare payments from an early age.¹⁰ However, the impact of disability allowance on whether people remain in school has not been adequately researched. Data from the 17-year olds from the *Growing Up in Ireland* Survey, which is currently in the planning stages, could prove useful in addressing this question.

Support services

We found that people who were affected by disability during their school years were more likely to have never worked (about one-third compared to only 6 per cent of those not affected at this stage). Our models could not fully account for this difference, despite taking into account the level of difficulty associated with their disability, the type of disability, health and stamina or gender.

The findings reported here from the National Disability Survey were based on data collected in 2006, before the start of the recession. The challenge of finding the first job is likely to be particularly acute for people with a disability, even more so in the context of high youth unemployment. The employment support services which are now the responsibility of the Department of Social Protection are likely to be especially important to this group.

Although only a small proportion of people with a disability identified a need for human support services in order to be able to work, these are likely to be crucial for those whose disability causes most difficulty. This would include services such as

⁹ Government of Ireland (1986).

¹⁰ Department of Social Protection (DSP) (2010).

those provided by the Department of Social Protection's EmployAbility programme, which includes job coaching.

Adult education and training

The issue of adult education and training is likely to be important to people with early onset disability and later onset disability, though for slightly different reasons. Adult education is important to people with early-onset disability because this group tends to have left school with a lower level of qualifications than those whose disability does not emerge until later in life. Among those with later onset disability, the high proportion leaving a job because of their disability suggests that at least a proportion of this group will need retraining for a different line of work. The recent focus by the National Council for Special Education on the needs of adult learners with a disability is likely to be very important in this regard.¹¹

Flexible working conditions

For the group whose disability emerges later in life, amounting to 70 per cent of working-age people with a disability, the challenges centre on either staying in employment or, where this is not possible, retraining for a different type of work. If people with a disability are to be retained in employment, the results here suggest a strong need for flexibility, such as reduced hours. Other requirements include accessibility-related modifications, modified job tasks or devices for people with mobility and dexterity or pain disability. There is clearly a role for employers here, and policy makers can facilitate this process by providing information on the range of strategies which would enhance employment opportunities for people with a disability and, at the same time, widen the pool of potential workers from which employers might draw. However, given that a need for a wage subsidy and a requirement for flexibility in working conditions tend to be reported by the same people, there may also be a role for public policy to act to bridge the gap between the person's required level of income and what they are able to earn. Some form of supplemental income is likely to be particularly important to people with lower levels of education. In this regard, the Partial Capacity Benefit and the earnings disregard for people on Disability Allowance are schemes which could fulfil this function.

Private sector employers have an important role in promoting employment of people with a disability, but policy needs to remove some of the perceived risk and uncertainty involved. For example, the report has shown that a large percentage of people with disability wishing to work would need flexible work arrangements to take employment. The current legislation offers a Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) for employers when employees work a minimum of 21 hours per week. This threshold may be too high and demanding for some people with disability. The Quarterly National Household Survey contains some information on whether the unemployed or those seeking an alternative job are looking for part-time or full-time work and this information may throw some light on this question.

¹¹ Department of Education and Skills (DES) (2012).

Aids, supports and wage subsidies

People reporting that they need financial support are also more prone to report the need for disability-specific services and aids. The fact that unmet needs were associated with being outside employment for people with mobility and dexterity or pain disability points to the potential role of these services and aids in enabling people to seek and take up employment. Not all of the unmet needs were clearly of this enabling type. Some might enhance the person's quality of life without necessarily bringing about enough of an improvement in capacity for people to enter the workforce.

The data available to us was not sufficiently detailed to allow analysis on the level of wage subsidy that people with a disability report that they would need in order to be able to take up employment. The need for a wage subsidy is clearly linked to the level of unmet need for services and devices, however, as well as to a reduced earning capacity arising from lower levels of qualifications.

Whether the issue of unmet needs for services or supports is best addressed through direct provision of these services and devices or through financial support to people with a disability (which may take the form of a wage subsidy) remains an open question. Providing a financial supplement can be enabling, in that it gives people some choice, control and influence over the service provider. However, this also depends on the availability of high quality services and devices in the market at an affordable cost.

At present, a diverse range of service benefits or supplementary financial assistance is available through different schemes and from different authorities. These include tax relief for those who are ill or have a disability, the Long Term Illness Scheme, medical card, GP Visit Card, grants and specific tax reliefs for drivers or passengers with a mobility disability and local authority grants for disability-related modifications to the home. More work is needed in order to understand the extent to which these schemes meet the needs of people with a disability and the extent to which they are useful in promoting participation in work and in society more generally.

Models of good practice

This report highlights the need to identify models of good practice for the reasonable accommodation of people with disabilities in employment. Evidence from EU research across a range of countries highlights, for example, practical methods being used in supported employment, the outcomes of the supported employment processes and the satisfaction for both the employer and employee.¹² International examples of good practice offer a combination of benefits and employment making it possible and more attractive for people with a disability to work. Supports, such as the Partial Capacity Benefit and income disregard for recipients of Disability Allowance, support the option for part-time work without loss of economic

¹² European Commission (2011).

security.¹³ This kind of ‘flexicurity’ is highlighted in the 2008-2009 EU Disability Action Plan.

Summary of policy issues

In summary, a number of policy areas are important to the employment of people with a disability.

- Helping those whose disability emerges in the school years to stay in education.
- Provision of lifelong learning opportunities geared to the needs of people with intellectual or learning disability – the groups most likely to be affected in the school years – and also to the needs of people whose disability emerges later in life.
- Helping people whose disability emerges after their working life has already begun to stay in employment. Employers are the key actors here, but there is a role for public policy in providing information, training and, where needed, supplements to income.
- Income supplementation to compensate for the extra costs of services and aids needed by people with a disability and to compensate for the reduced earning capacity linked to low levels of education or to the need for reduced working hours.

¹³ Greve (2009).

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