Progressing Accessible Supported Transitions to Employment

Navigating the transition from school:
Voices of young people and parents

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August 2018

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CEF	Career and Employment Facilitator	NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy	NIDD	National Intellectual Disability Database
CSO	Central Statistics Office	NIID	National Institute for Intellectual Disability
DCU	Dublin City University	NQAI	National Qualifications Authority Ireland
DFI	Disability Federation of Ireland	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
EADSNE	European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education	PEER	Providing Equal Employment Routes
FE	Further Education	QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
FETE	Further Education, Training or Employment	WHO	World Health Organisation
HE	Higher Education	WALK	Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability
IEP	Individual Education Plan		
NDA	National Disability Authority		
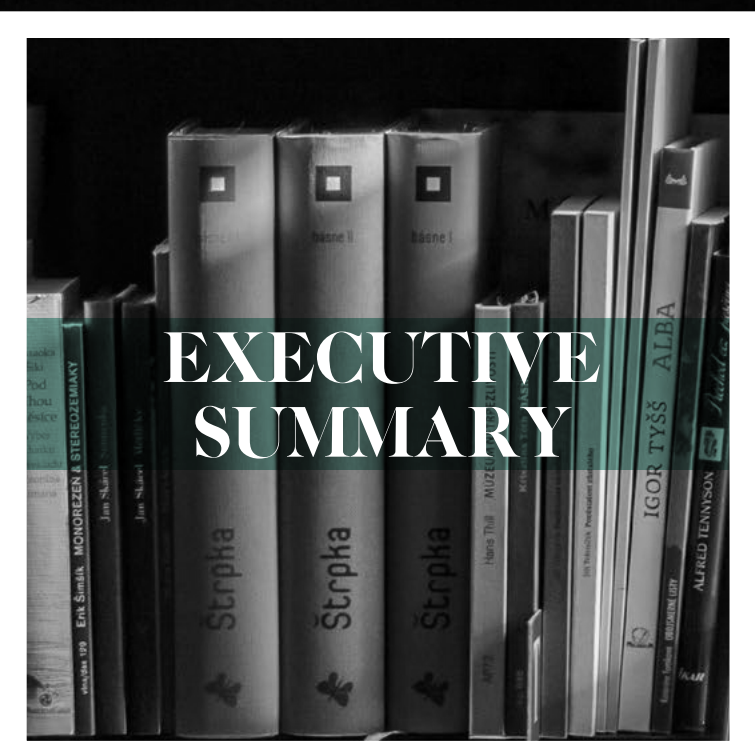
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I think my daughter is entitled to choices. Of course she is. And like, all of our kids are, so why shouldn't they have them the same as anyone else. They can contribute to society if they're allowed to.

Background

In Ireland, the concepts of access and transition are linked to the provision of educational opportunities that are appropriate to the *"ambitions, commitment and abilities"* of an individual throughout their lifetime (NQAI, 2009, p. 3).

Admittance to such opportunities is facilitated through the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), a hierarchical system that specifies the entry requirements for education and training programmes, transfer between programmes of education, and progression from one programme to another programme. In this context, young people with disabilities are at a disadvantage, and face many more barriers to accessing the same opportunities in further / higher education, training, or employment, than their non-disabled peers (Doyle, Mc Guckin, & Shevlin, 2017; Gillan & Coughlan, 2010; Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013). Those who succeed in overcoming such barriers, often experience interrupted educational pathways, as a function of *"taking courses that did not always match their interests or prior experiences or that provided a 'back door' to where they aspired to be"* (Scanlon and Kamp, 2015, p. 9).

Being in employment is the principle marker of transition to adulthood, and the primary driver of economic success in the developed world. The ladder of qualification represented by the NFQ presupposes that higher levels of educational achievement lead to greater career and employment choices. In 2016, the youth unemployment rate was 25.6% in Ireland (CSO, 2017), highlighting the significant hurdle that young people with a disability must overcome as they compete with an increasingly over-qualified peer group (McGuinness, Bergin, & Whelan, 2016). Thus, greater efforts are required to support young people with disabilities in their transition from education to the labour market.

Article 23 (i) of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: *"Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment"*[1]. In 2012, the European Social Fund in partnership with the Department of Social Protection, funded a number of initiatives under the Disability Activation Project (DACT), with the remit:

> *"to provide people with disability with the appropriate progression, education and development opportunities to enhance their access to employment. The project will also be aimed at promoting and supporting, amongst employers, the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities"*

One of these initiatives, the WALK PEER (Providing Equal Employment Routes) programme, is a *"supported transition"* model which is the focus of this current study.

The Progressing Accessible Supported Transitions to Employment (PASTE) project investigated the concept of supported transition for school leavers with intellectual disabilities, as a means of accessing mainstream opportunities in further / higher education, training, and employment (FETE). The study was undertaken by two researchers from Dublin City University, Ireland, across 2017 and 2018. This study investigated outcomes for school leavers with Intellectual Disabilities, who engaged with the WALK PEER supported transition model during their final two years in school. The research process focused on: a) capturing the viewpoints of students attending two special schools, their parents and carers, recent school leavers, and education professionals, and b) measuring employer viewpoints and engagement with the WALK PEER model between August 2015 and February 2018.

Observing post-school transitions can guide future thinking and actions around the efficacy and sustainability of a supported transition model.

Thus, the aims of the PASTE research study were:

- To examine the concept of 'supported transition' for young people with intellectual disabilities to determine its efficacy and suitability to inform the development of a national framework of transition for all young people with disabilities moving from compulsory education to FE/HE or employment.

- To document and identify the critical elements within the Irish context that are necessary to develop a system of seamless support to facilitate transitions for career progression for young people with disabilities.

- To explore the effectiveness of current national policy pertaining to the practice for young people with disabilities entering mainstream HE/FE and the labour market.

Method and Data Collection

This report presents the subjective experience of supported transitions using a mixed methodology, arising from a review of the literature conducted through academic databases such as PubMed, PsycInfo, ERIC, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The review encompassed research published between 2000 and 2017, using the keywords *'special educational needs', 'disability', 'transition', 'further education', 'training' 'employment'* and *'geographies of disability'* in the Abstract. Full-text articles, written in English, were extracted from peer reviewed publications, and a search of relevant publications from national and global policy was also completed.

Qualitative data was collected from semi-structured interviews with 31 students with Intellectual Disabilities, 18 parents and / or carers, special school staff, and two Career and Employment Facilitators from the WALK PEER programme.

The interview schedule developed for the study addressed five inter-related themes:

1. **Dreams and Aspirations**

2. **Post-school Pathways and Options**

3. **Access to Information About Choices, Options, and Pathways**

4. **Essential Factors in Successful Transitions**

5. **Expectations**

In Phase One: Pre-transition - Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with students in senior classes attending special schools, their parents or carers, and educational professionals working within the school (March / April). Participants in focus groups were interviewed for approximately 40 to 60 minutes, and their parents were interviewed simultaneously but as a separate focus group. In Phase Two: Transition - Individual interviews were conducted with 6th year students, and their parents or carers were interviewed simultaneously in separate interviews, immediately prior to leaving school (June). Participants self-selected for interview, each interview lasting approximately 30 – 40 minutes. In Phase Three: Post-transition - Students who had transitioned from school in the previous two years and who had engaged with the WALK PEER Supported Employment programme, were interviewed in a neutral and easily accessible setting within their local area (September / October).

Transcripts were thematically analysed, categorised and re-categorised on three separate occasions. Post-transition data for school leavers was gathered from the WALK PEER Supported Employment Programme, who provided detail on destinations such as 'day services' provided by the HSE, further education and training settings, and employment. This data was mapped against interview transcripts with individual students, and individual pathways, and outcomes for some of the young people are reported as vignettes within the findings for each theme presented in Section 4 of this report.

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey to n = 56 employers in the local area who had engaged with the WALK PEER programme by providing work experience opportunities to students in senior classes across the period August 2015 to February 2018. The survey captured demographic data (respondent role, size of business, enterprise type), and quantitative data measuring experience and awareness of intellectual disability, and the impact of engaging with the WALK PEER programme. Three open-ended questions examined viewpoints on the benefits of involvement for participants and employers, and how the service could be improved.

Key Findings

Dreams and Aspirations

For many young people, strengths and interests provide a foundation for building future hopes and ambitions. Engagement with the supported transition programme increased levels of self-awareness and self-determination, meaning that ambitions were included in plans for life after school. Students were more aware of the possibilities that further education and training could bring, and that this might be a necessary part of building a future. Work experience provided knowledge about the necessity of a part-time income in order to support ambitions.

Parents shared the aspirations of their children in both education and training, and their belief in the independence that employment would bring. However, there were significant levels of uncertainty about how this might be achieved, and those parents with children approaching the end of formal education, evidenced a growing awareness of the mismatch between aspirations and real choices. Concerns around transition into employment were associated with personal vulnerabilities, and the fragility of personal economies for young people with disabilities and their families, where economic disadvantage, unemployment, the potential loss of Disability Allowance, ancillary benefits, transport and medical cards, are a significant risk factor.

Post-school Pathways and Options

Knowledge and understanding of the range of post-school pathways and options are a fundamental factor in planning for post-school transitions. Uncertain outcomes and unanswered questions were the strongest sub-themes arising from parent interviews, pointing to a dearth of basic information to enable informed decisions, such as student loans and funding for FE courses, and entitlements connected to part-time work and Disability Allowance. Parents firmly believed that successful FETE pathways were dependent upon ongoing support, whether that be from supported employment programmes, employers, or institutions, in the shape of informal mentoring and guidance, or structured input through a transition programme that bridges the first year of transition. The move to HSE Adult Services was the least favourable option for many parents, and comments alluded to the fact that this option was a by-product of lack of choice.

By contrast, many students demonstrated more certainty about how they envisaged life after school, in particular in terms of what they did not want to do,

including a rejection of the product offered through HSE Adult Services. From a school perspective, pathways and options are perceived to be limited, drawing attention to the difficulty of bridging the gap between a QQI Level 2/3 programme in school, and the QQI Level 5 courses in further education. School staff spoke highly of the benefits that the supported transition programme had brought to students in terms of structured opportunities to complete work sampling. Adult Services were viewed as appropriate for only a few young people, based primarily on a perceived lack of opportunity for growth and skills development in current models of provision. Having gained confidence, determination, and communication skills through supported transition work experience, these assets should be nurtured and extended by services.

Access to Information About Choices, Options, and Pathways

Ease of access to information about pathways and options, was a recurring theme. Significant gaps in knowledge were highlighted by parents in connection with rights and entitlements after leaving school, and this was of particular concern for parents of students approaching the end of formal education. Parents acknowledged the improvement in access to FETE advice through the WALK Career and Employment Facilitators, but equally, pointed out that this function should be provided by a Guidance Counsellor in school. Failure in this provision was perceived to be a reflection of the lack of prioritisation of transition planning for young people with special needs and disabilities.

Students were aware of the range of FE and training options, and how these had been facilitated by the supported transition programme but were not always clear about how these choices contributed to their personal pathway. For this reason, many parents reluctantly conceded that transition to Adult Services seemed to be the safest decision. In this regard, a formal, written Personal Transition Plan would assist with: a) clarifying the implications of pursuing specific options, b) identifying goals and targets, and c) providing an opportunity for all stakeholders to discuss these via a transition planning meeting.

The need for more detailed information is strongly correlated to the uncertainty of adulthood; as the end of formal education approaches, so does the realisation that the routines and structures of the previous 13 years, will simply disappear. Parents, carers and young people need to know the shape of the hours, days, weeks, months, and years that make up their future. Ultimately, school staff believe that there is a need to provide face to face opportunities for parents and carers to pose these detailed questions but acknowledge that there is a blurring of roles in terms of who is responsible for this communication.

Essential Factors for Successful Transitions

Substantial national and international research points to the importance of developing self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy as key skills for young people leaving school. Work experience opportunities play a significant role, and students were quick to identify examples of personal growth over the course of the programme, principally in relation to confidence. This personalised development was attributed directly to engagement with Career and Employment Facilitators through the supported transition programme. They provided strong role models and guidance on standards of personal presentation and workplace communication skills, and there is substantial evidence of person-centred planning in the tailoring of work experiences to individual strengths and interests.

School staff emphasised the value of challenging young people to step outside their comfort zone, by providing carefully planned and structured real-world experiences, and many references were made to the positive physical changes they observed in students in terms of personal presentation. Parents valued input from adult role models outside of the home that reiterated their own views on independence and responsibility and acknowledged that their child was more likely to accept such guidance from outside of the family. However, high levels of fear and anxiety were expressed around issues of personal safety and competent social skills, as young people stepped into adult environments.

Expectations

This factor emerged as the most significant of the themes and principally referenced attitudes, stereotyping, and the limited expectations of society, and how these might impact on employment opportunities. Parents expressed outrage at the perceived ability and capabilities of their children, and how such perceptions narrowed choices and perpetuated inequalities. Academic performance as an indicator of ability is a yardstick which arguably determines who should and should not be employed, and the academic requirements to access apprenticeships and further education and training, are an additional barrier.

Education professionals also spoke about the assumptions that are made about attending a special school, and societal preconceptions and judgements around capabilities, based purely on a superficial understanding of specific disabilities. Younger students beginning the supported transition programme, talked knowledgably about access to equal opportunities and human rights, and the need for society to include everyone.

For those approaching the end of their school career, stress and anxiety was evident, despite the groundwork of the WALK PEER programme, and the fragility of tentative and uncertain plans for the future cast a shadow over expectations. Again, in the absence of a concrete Personal Transition Plan outlining destinations and supports, transition to Adult Services may seem to be the safest place to be.

Barriers and Facilitators

All of the narrative corpus from interviews can be observed as either a barrier or facilitator of accessible and supported transition to employment, providing clear pointers to strategies and interventions for agencies and policy makers.

Barriers include perceptions, experiences, and descriptions of negative cultural and societal attitudes; viewpoints on the responsibility of State departments and agencies to provide transition support programmes; limited pathways and opportunities that impact on aspirations and goals; and the lack of continuity between child and adult services, and provision of support to manage this transition bridge. Special schools do not have access to a school-based Guidance Counsellor and teaching staff are not sufficiently resourced to provide this support to students and their families. There is an urgent need for greater clarity around options and financial implications, and more timely communication of same, to alleviate the stress and anxiety described by pupils and parents. However, not all barriers were attributed to policies and procedures, and parents acknowledged the influence of their own worries and concerns around personal safety, affecting the acquisition of independence and new skills, and exposure to new experiences. Employers drew attention to financial and policy restraints in the employment of young people with ID, specifically 'corporate metrics' and 'service providers'.

Transition facilitators are demonstrated in the strong correlation between support programmes and transition planning, their role in realization of goals and successes, and concrete examples of strategies and key people who facilitate these. Parents and students were specific about the growth in personal skills and confidence as an outcome of supported transition, and specifically in relation to work experience. By developing clear goals and aspirations for the future, parents can assist and support their children in achieving their ambitions. For some of the students, the benefits of supported transition and ensuing positive outcomes were seen in offers of permanent part-time employment, and enrolment in FET. For others, an absence of supporters and motivators

to encourage the exploration of alternatives to day services, had predictable outcomes. Examples of these are provided as vignettes in the Findings section.

From an employer perspective, Career and Employment Facilitators were a significant support as the primary channel for learning more about supporting young people with ID, noting that this improved understanding had real benefits for their business. Most employers acknowledged the value of rolling out supported transition programmes nationwide and referenced the need for greater awareness amongst employment providers, and policies or schemes to encourage more widespread adoption of supported transition. Employers are willing and open to providing work experience opportunities to young people with ID but require a structured support programme or mechanism to do so. The input of WALK PEER is essential in this regard, in the sense that not only do they provide a bridge between the student and employer, they represent a bank of knowledge and strategies that an employer can reliably depend on, and a guide and mentor that students, parents, and schools know and trust.

Finally, employability skills are noted as an important factor in engaging young people with ID in work opportunities. Of these, the most important are independence achieved through self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy. There is a proliferation of curriculum packages that could be adapted and utilised to this end. The missing link is a dedicated guidance and counselling professional in every special school, to deliver these essential skills.

within the Irish context also supports many of the issues raised in this regard (for full review see Scanlon and Kamp, 2015) in that: a) planning for transition from primary to post primary school for young people with disabilities should begin as early as possible i.e. fourth class in primary school, or where needs are more complex, in the early years of primary (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Shevlin, Desmond & Vahey, 2013), and b) planning for transition from post-primary to further or higher education for students with Special Educational Needs should be instigated from the age of 15 years (Doyle et al., 2017; McGuckin et al., 2013). Furthermore, the latter study concluded that at post-primary level Guidance Counsellors felt ill-equipped to support young people with disabilities in determining post-school journeys. This pre-planning stage speaks directly to Comprehensive Employment Strategic Priority 1: Build skills, capacity and Independence, in particular to the remit to:

- Develop and foster each student's independence during their school-years,

- Plan young people's transitions from school to training and further education.(CES, 2015, p. 14).

Findings from this current study closely mirror those of the NIID (2011) investigation of transition from post-primary outcomes for young people with Intellectual Disabilities, using data collected across 2008 and 2009. Crucially, in the intervening period of almost 10 years, little about this landscape has changed.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, engaging in the supported transition programme examined in this study has provided parents and young people with access to information, options, confidence, and some of the hard and soft skills required for successful transition into education and employment contexts, even though those pathways are long and circuitous: *"It will take a while for me to get to the top of the mountain."* Arguably, however, there is a need for more focus on the personal and social skills required to navigate not just unfamiliar environments, but unanticipated events and outcomes.

The recent review of supports available to people with disabilities transitioning from education or training into employment conducted by the Oireachtas (2018) highlighted the complex issues that people with disabilities encounter in their endeavours to engage with education and employment. Previous research

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Recommendations

Qualitative findings from this research suggest the following recommendations in support of the concept of supported transition from school for young people with Intellectual Disabilities.

6. Transition Planning

Conceptually, transition planning is a longitudinal strategy in which early implementation is vital, thus this process should begin in the junior cycle of education and continue until the transition to post-school destinations. Best practice advises that transition planning should focus on self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy, and the acquisition of essential functional skills. A dedicated transition programme should focus on acquiring these skills, developing independence and autonomy through age-appropriate activities, increasing opportunities for personal development within the community, and enabling students with disabilities to progress towards their personal goals. This can best be achieved through provision of:

- **Transition Module**

Dedicated curriculum time for transition planning module which should take place at least two years prior to leaving school, drawing together life skills, communication, work experience, and links with local community

- **Personal Transition Plan**

Person-centred Transition Plan setting out the specific, realistic and achievable pathways that have been planned; linked skills, targets and activities; key people and key timelines.

- **Career and Employment Facilitator**

Access to career guidance and employment professionals with the remit to organise, manage and facilitate supported transition planning.

7. Transition Tools

Equal access to information, irrespective of geographical location, is a cornerstone of transition planning. Providing young people and their families with the tools to consider all of the available options, make person-centred decisions, and plan for positive futures, is essential. These tools inform and support the transition planning programme by providing education on important topics related to transitioning into adulthood, connecting service providers, and sharing information on local community resources. This can best be achieved through:

- **Transition Information Portal**

Creation of an online repository of transition information for students and parents, to include modelled pathways and options using real world examples, application forms, decision timelines, advice guides, key contacts, and student stories. These materials to be fully accessible (WCAG 2.0 compliant) to all members of the community.

- **Parent Information Programme**

Provision of a parent transition programme including information sessions, advice clinics and workshops in advance of key decision timelines, for example: Timepoint 1 before commencement of 5th year, Timepoint 2 before commencement of 6th year.

- **Transition Fair**

Development of an annual transition event for special schools at which agents and agencies can explain choices, options and aspects of transition, such as college application, grants and finance, personal support and care workers, and HSE options.

8. Access to career guidance information and support

Young people in special schools and their families need access to career guidance information to make an informed choice about their future and should be supported accordingly. This can best be achieved by appointing Careers and Employment Facilitators with a remit to:

- **Work regionally with a cluster of schools, and on a full-time basis.**

- **Provide first-hand knowledge of further education and training opportunities in the local area and create working relationships with a network of local employers.**

- **Liaise with parents, carers, employers, and training staff where appropriate in respect of supporting young people with disabilities.**

- **Connect the transition planning programme provided in school, with real world opportunities.**

9. Accreditation

Findings from the study draw attention to a lack of continuity in further education and training opportunities, and specifically, to gaps in accessing progression through the National Framework of Qualifications. Provision is often geographically restricted (i.e. not all QQI levels are offered in all locations) and does not take into account practical considerations that are a distinct feature of disability. The development of a national transition framework to facilitate progression from school to further education, training, and employment, will ensure positive futures for young people with disabilities. This can best be achieved through:

- Nationwide rollout of the Walk PEER programme as a pilot for the Supported Transition model.

- An integrated curriculum in special schools which equips young people with the soft and hard skills necessary to achieve and retain employment. Such a programme to be commenced at least two years before school completion.

- A staged transition programme in Rehab and Adult Services that recognises current levels of achievement and experience in the work environment, and which progresses these forwards to real and permanent employment opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context

All schools, including special schools, have a remit to provide Guidance Counselling as stated in Section 9 of the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998, revised 2017) which stipulates that schools must *"ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices"* and should formulate this in a school guidance plan.

Unlike mainstream education where teachers are subject specialists and are timetabled to provide guidance throughout the school, logistically, it is almost impossible to provide this model in special schools which are organized on a 'one class one teacher' structure. Young people with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) face discrete employment challenges in terms of educational qualification, pathways and choices, work experience, and independence skills. Consequently, it can be assumed that receiving guidance and counselling to address such challenges in the senior years of formal education, is essential. There is *"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"* (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, and Devecchi, 2013, p. 6).

Data from the National Disability Survey (2006) indicates that 17% of children with disabilities attend special schools, children with ID account for 37% of this cohort, and 24% of children with ID attend special schools at post-primary level (Banks, Maitre, McCoy, 2015). Therefore, there are considerable numbers of young people in special schools who would benefit from the type of individual guidance provided to their peers in mainstream education. The NCSE have recently published a suite of transition planning advice guides for parents and students (NCSE, 2016) referring students in post-primary schools to discuss post-school choices with a guidance counsellor. Students attending special schools are directed to the HSE Training and Occupational Support Service, a service provided to people with disabilities aged from 18 – 65 years. The service does not engage with students across the final two years of school (i.e. senior classes) other than to work with schools and school age teams to identify and plan for young people leaving school who require

an adult HSE funded day service. This illustrates the very narrow perspective and indeed expectations of service providers and does not therefore represent an equivalent model of the school-based guidance provided in mainstream education.

Difficulties with gaining work experience are encountered by all young people and these are exacerbated by lack of employer confidence and engagement. Therefore, greater efforts must be made to encourage collaboration with employers – and especially with the local community of the young person with ID - as a resource for opening up employment pathways. Students with ID require a supported transition which bridges post-primary and post-school settings, and whilst personal skills such as self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy are essential, these need to be matched with realistic and achievable aspirations and expectations. This is the value of real world experiences based on individual strengths and challenges, particularly as some of the most challenging behaviour observed in young people engaging with services, is a product of frustration and lack of purpose within day to day life.

Legislation and policy are more concerned with protection by services and this does not provide young people with experiences that can foster coping strategies. Education and training post-school does not provide realistic scenarios: the experience of being in work is fundamental to development of skills and dispositions. Other barriers to transition include financial penalties associated with being in employment and entitlement to benefits such as Disability Allowance and the medical card, and anxieties associated with economic factors which are expressed by families.

Cost-benefit analysis is the most significant impediment to supported transitions. Unofficially, schemes and initiatives are wholly dependent upon financial resources of government. At a grass roots level, salient information and transition support is only provided to students who are overtly perceived to be likely to benefit from same. Arguably, there is a lack of acknowledgement, understanding or willingness to investigate the potentially more advantageous cost-benefits of a supported transition strategy, over the significant costs associated with provision of long term 'services' to people with Intellectual Disabilities.

A core element of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015) has identified the necessity for cross-collaboration of key departmental personnel to effectively support young people with disabilities making the transitions from compulsory education to further/higher education, training and or employment. The WALK PEER model was developed to engage young people with ID whilst they are in school, to support them to develop their

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career aspirations, explore mainstream opportunities, and implement ambitious transition plans. The WALK PEER model facilitates collaboration between the individual student, their families and teachers, and the wider society in further / higher education, employment, social services, and disability service providers, to maximise progression in mainstream society, thus avoiding lives in institutional day services.

Employer identification and selection is based on the employment interests of individual students, which evolve through the WALK PEER model of *"Explore, Experience, Evaluate"*. This information, together with knowledge of the student's support needs, enables the Career and Employment Facilitator (CEF) to research appropriate local employer options, to engage directly with key decision makers within the business, and ultimately to present the concept of Supported Employment. Once an agreement in principle is reached with the employer, the CEF develops a Placement Plan which includes details on the introduction, induction, tasks, hours, term, communication, support, training, supervision, and review period. Once agreed by all stakeholders, the CEF supports the student and the employer to develop the employment opportunity through appropriate communication, training, and review. Support from the CEF decreases gradually once the student and employer become confident in their working relationship. Recruitment of employers is an on-going activity of the WALK PEER model, as initially, most employers are uncertain about their level of knowledge. Therefore, the process needs to inform, empower, and support them until they are confident and experienced enough to recruit students with ID independently.

While WALK has clear evidence to demonstrate how the WALK PEER model supports successful transition to mainstream opportunities, compilation of data and evaluation against national progression statistics is required, together with a cost / benefit analysis for replication as a national *"supported transition"* programme for young people with disabilities. This would allow WALK to further develop the model in line with national policy and continue to support the implementation of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES).

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The purpose of this report is to contribute to the development of the supported transition concept by researching the transition experience of students

and their parents or carers, the viewpoints of school staff, and observations from WALK PEER Career and Employment Facilitators. Additionally, it captures the viewpoints of employers who engaged with the WALK PEER supported transition programme between in the provision of work experience opportunities for young people with ID attending special schools.

Therefore, the principle aims of the PASTE study were to:

- • Examine the concept of 'supported transition' for young people with intellectual disabilities to determine its efficacy and suitability to inform the development of a national framework of transition for all young people with disabilities moving from compulsory education to FE/HE or employment.

- • Document and identify the critical elements within the Irish context that are necessary to develop a system of seamless support to facilitate transitions for career progression for young people with disabilities.

- • Explore the effectiveness of current national policy pertaining to the practice for young people with disabilities entering mainstream HE/FE and the labour market.

Consequently, the researchers identified the following objectives for this project:

- • To build on the six strategic priorities underpinning the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015, p. 3).

- • To promote inclusion in society for young people with disabilities by contributing to the development of a model for transition that can be replicated nationally.

- • To develop a national steering group to promote collaborative practices amongst key policy makers.

- • To inform the development of public policy in *"Managing Transitions"* for young people with disabilities (CES, 2015, p. 16).

METHODOLOGY

2.1. Qualitative Methods

Data collection and interpretation was based upon a phenomenological perspective, and both content and thematic analysis were selected as methods of measurement. Thematic analysis is a sub-set of content analysis and is a common approach to data analysis where a flexible theoretical approach is required as the research is question-driven, rather than theory-driven. This structure is used in many phenomenological studies (e.g. Growing Up in Ireland) and is a useful method for: a) capturing real experiences, meanings and understandings expressed by participants, and b) examining how these discourses are observed, interpreted and manipulated within near and far social contexts.

Cohort studies are observational in their purpose, as this is the most practical method for studying the incidence, causes, and outcomes of specific events, and can be used to determine cause and effect if the investigation takes place chronologically. The purpose of the study was to identify enablers and barriers associated with FETE transition outcomes. Exploring these factors across three different student cohorts (pre-transition, transitioning, and post-transition) facilitated the generation of hypotheses that can be further investigated using a larger population sample. Each of the cohorts were attending or had attended two special schools in County Louth. A purposive sample for each of these three groups were recruited through the WALK PEER programme, a transition facilitation initiative provided in both schools since 2011. Semi-structured interview questions covered five inter-related and complementary themes:

1. Dreams and Aspirations

2. Post-school Pathways and Options

3. Access to Information About Choices, Options, and Pathways

4. Essential Factors in Successful Transitions

5. Expectations

Analysis of interview transcripts was undertaken by hand and using a commercial software package, and this process is described in the Data Analysis section. Responses from three open-ended questions in the survey to employers investigated employer learning, benefits of involvement for participants and employers, and how the supported transition programme could be improved.

2.2 Quantitative Methods

Quantitative data was collected through an online survey to n = 56 employers in the local area who had engaged with the WALK PEER programme by providing work experience opportunities to students in senior classes across the period August 2015 to February 2018. The survey captured demographic data (respondent role, size of business, enterprise type), and quantitative data measuring experience and awareness of intellectual disability, supporting and accommodating young people with ID, and the impact of engaging with the WALK PEER programme. Open-ended questions examined opinions around: a) benefits of involvement for participants and employers, b) essential factors in the recruitment, selection and progression of a young person with an Intellectual Disability, and c) potential changes or enhancements to the supported transition programme.

2.3. Recruitment

Students, parents and school staff

Access to participants for the purposes of this study was requested through WALK PEER Careers and Employment Facilitators working in two schools. The criteria to participate in the study were:

1. Students must be participating in, or have participated previously participated in, the WALK PEER programme within the school, with the purpose of transitioning from education to further training or employment.

2. Parents or carers must be supporting a young person participating in the WALK PEER programme within the school, with the purpose of transitioning from education to further training or employment.

In keeping with the ethics as process approach, the recruitment of participants was developed under a staged approach. Information about the project was presented to students, parents and education professionals at a school event arranged by WALK PEER; ethics documents were then provided to both student and parent cohorts by the WALK Careers and Employment Facilitators.

Completed forms were submitted to the researchers and an interview schedule was arranged for visits to both schools in February 2017. A final cohort of 58 participants took part in the study (Table 1).

School 1	Students	Parents	School Staff	WALK Career and Employment Facilitator
Senior Class 1	7	5	2	1
Senior Class 2	9	4		

School 2	Students	Parents	School Staff	WALK Career and Employment Facilitator
Senior Class 1	7	5	5	1
Senior Class 2	4	4		
School Leavers (2016)	4	0		

Table 1. PASTE Research Sample 2017

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Employers

All employers who had engaged with WALK PEER as employment partners (n = 56) between August 2015 and April 2018 were sent an invitation to participate in a survey via the WALK PEER offices.

2.4. Ethical Procedures

Students, parents and school staff

Prior to the interviews, each participant was provided with a plain language statement and consent or assent form. On arrival at the interview, participants were further briefed about what their involvement in the research study would entail. Participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions and, once their queries were answered, they signed a consent form.

Both researchers maintained a duty of care towards all participants throughout the research, in that they:

• Used language that recognised and supported the participant's autonomy.

• Made clear the voluntary nature of participation and the right of the participant to opt out of the research.

• Checked understanding by encouraging participants to summarise information in their own way and check interpretation of data.

• Provided time to allow participants (if they wished) to discuss the project in more detail.

• Provided contact details for the research team so as to facilitate opportunities for the participant or their supporter to contact at a later date should they require further information.

Within the ethical principles of conducting research with vulnerable populations, an 'ethics as process' approach was employed throughout the research project. This particular process was central to the methodology employed for the research. This approach allowed participants the ongoing opportunity to negotiate their consent to participate, to take breaks when and where was required, and also the opportunity to withdraw from the interview process at any stage they wished.

Employers

Employers were notified that survey responses did not require any company or personal data input, and that individual responses would not be examined for identification of sources. Employers were notified that they could withdraw from the survey at any point.

2.5. Research Procedure

Both members of the research team attended a community event arranged by WALK PEER in order to introduce themselves and speak directly to potential participants about the project, the nature of their participation, and to answer any queries that they may have. Subsequently, the Career and Employment Facilitators provided student and parent participants with a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent / Assent documents.

Student and parent interviews were conducted by two researchers visiting two special schools at two different time points, and these were conducted on the school campus to minimise travel distance and expenses and to ensure a comfortable setting where each participant felt at ease. In Phase 1 (March / April 2017) a focus group of students attending two senior classes from each of the schools were interviewed for approximately 40 minutes, and their parents were interviewed simultaneously but as a separate focus group for approximately 50 minutes. In Phase 2 (May / June 2017) students from the final year senior class self-selected to interview individually, each interview lasting approximately 40 minutes. Parents of this student cohort were invited to a group interview lasting approximately 40 - 60 minutes. Students who had transitioned from school in the previous two years were also interviewed in a neutral and easily accessible setting within their local area, for approximately 40 minutes (June 2017). Finally, educational professionals including School Principal, teachers, and SNAs were interviewed across both schools, each interview lasting approximately 50 minutes.

All participants were provided with a copy of the interview questions in advance to alleviate any potential anxiety and to help them prepare, and additional support for student participants such as a Special Needs Assistant, was also identified. The researchers made contact with the Career and Employment Facilitators and School Principals the day before the agreed interview to confirm arrangements. Semi-structured interviews were guided by the interview questions and participants were also provided with the opportunity to elaborate on various points at any stage of the interview. Each interview was audio recorded on a Dictaphone and later transcribed and analysed by the research team.

Employers who currently or historically had provided work experience opportunities to young people through the programme, were contacted by the WALK PEER office and invited to complete an online survey to ascertain their experience of participation in the supported transition programme. WALK PEER staff followed up on survey completion on two separate occasions to encourage participation.

2.6. Data analysis

Students, parents and school staff

Qualitative data was thematically analysed through structured / focused coding by reading and annotating interview transcripts using a priori codes defined within a codebook, consisting of a list of anticipated codes based upon findings from previous, related research (e.g. Barnes-Holmes, et al, 2013; Mc Guckin et al, 2013; Scanlon and Kamp, 2015). In the first instance, researchers systematically read and re-read the interview transcripts and referred to any accompanying fieldnotes or observations recorded at or post-interview. This data was reviewed for patterns and themes relating to research questions, and re-categorising of codes was discussed at the conclusion of each phase.

Subsequently, a more in-depth analysis was conducted for each emergent theme using initial codebooks containing definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria. A second coding pass was conducted using an open coding approach, capturing emerging sub-themes and permitting a closer inspection of the data by adding new codes and continually expanding the coding framework. Thereafter, the data was condensed and re-coded in a third and final coding pass using merged and condensed a priori and new themes (Figure 1, overleaf).

02

Student viewpoints
Parent viewpoints
School viewpoints
→ **Dreams and Aspirations**

Education, employment services
Outcomes from work experience
→ **Post-school Pathways and Options**

Personal development and Independence
Transition planning
Supports and Resources
→ **Essential Factors in Successful Transition**

Format and delivery of information
Quality of communication to students and parents
→ **Access to Information about Choices, Options and Pathways**

Worries and concerns
Limited futures
Work experience opportunities
→ **Expectations**

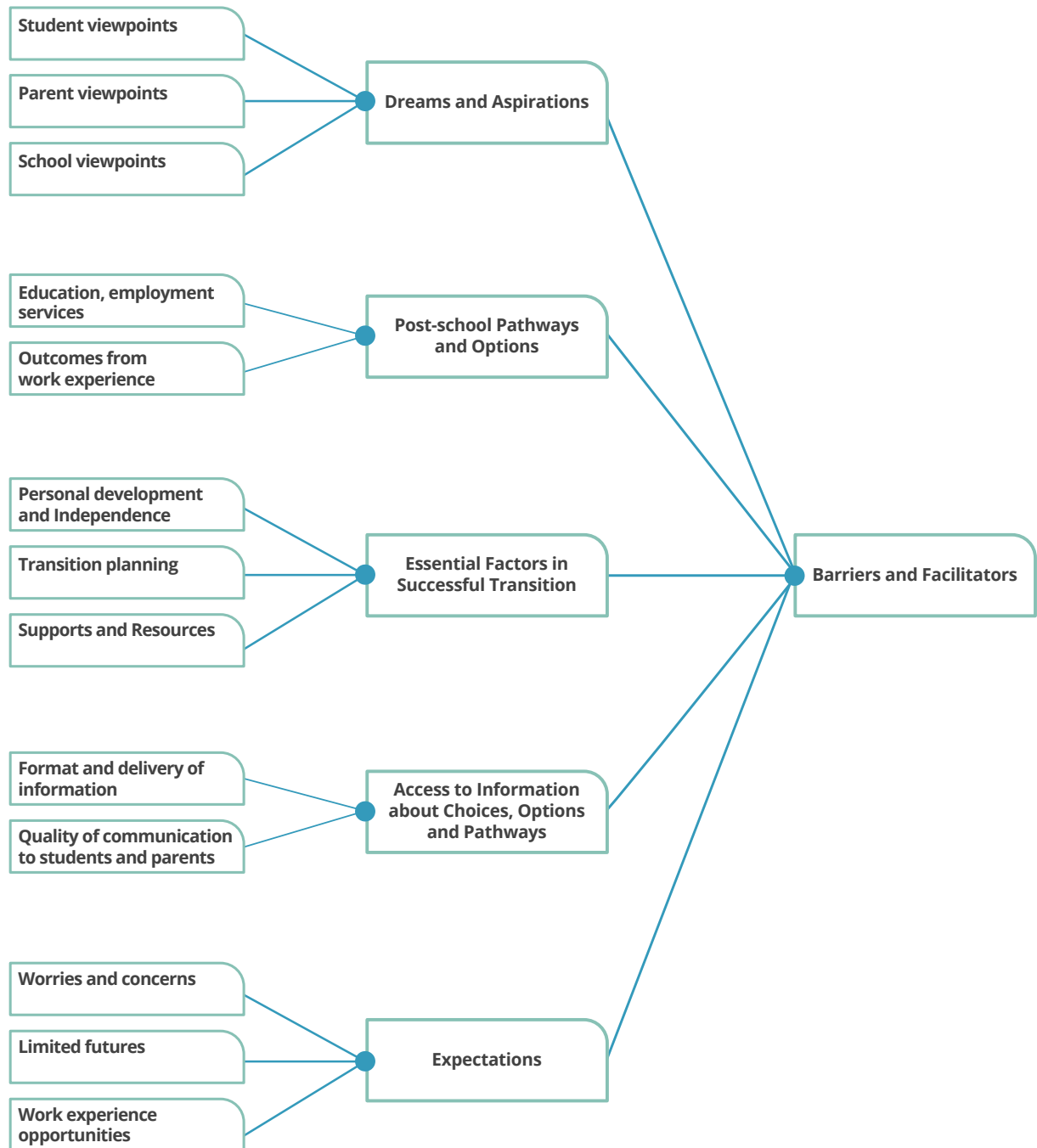→ **Barriers and Facilitators**

Figure 1. Merged and condensed themes

This inductive and deductive approach to analysis results in a more detailed and nuanced description of the data-set in its entirety, resulting in a more precise understanding of leitmotifs, causes, or explanations (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

To enhance thematic descriptions, vignettes of individual journeys are provided in the Findings. These stories include data covering the post-transition period received from the WALK PEER programme, who provided detail on destinations, for example:

- Adult Services provided by the HSE

- Further Education full-time or Further Education part-time in an FE institution or Education and Training Board location

- Further Education full-time or Further Education part-time through Rehabilitation Services e.g. National Learning Network

- Employment part-time

- Employment full-time

This data was mapped against interview transcripts with individual students, and individual pathways and outcomes for some of the young people are reported within the findings for each theme.

Employers

Qualitative data from open-ended survey questions to employers was coded under five themes: important factors in supported employment programmes, benefits of engagement with the WALK PEER Programme, suggested improvements to the programme, continuing and future support requirements for employers, and future opportunities for young people with an Intellectual Disability. Quantitative data was extracted from survey software.

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LITERATURE
REVIEW

3.1. The role of transition planning in post-school outcomes

Transition is a subjective experience, and for vulnerable young people, leaving school may be experienced as *"a change in self-identity born out of uncertainty in the social and cultural worlds of the individual"* (Crafter & Maunder, 2012, p. 10). For parents too, the end of formal education brings new uncertainties and worries, so access to timely and accurate information about future options, is essential. However, national and international research suggests that post-school options for students with ID are limited (Davies & Beamish, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2011), and that young people rarely take an active role in planning for life after school (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). A longitudinal study of post-school destinations for young people with ID in Ireland (2004 – 2014) established that the majority of school leavers transitioned to training or care centres, with few accessing employment (McConkey, Kelly, Craig, & Keogh, 2017). These narrow transition choices may have been exacerbated by a reduction in spend arising from the economic recession but are also a product of lack of parental and school awareness of alternative pathways (2017, p. 171). Despite a restructured model which promised 'New Directions' for adult services including *"seamless pathways and effective linkages between the educational services and HSE funded support services"* (Health Service Executive, 2012, p. 28), seemingly, little has changed.

Successful transitions are built on strategies that support parents to support their children, grow parental trust and student self-confidence, facilitate bridging activities that introduce new environments and ways of learning, and ensure that students with disabilities and their parents have access to a transition partner. Research has consistently noted the need for specific planning tools (Aston et al., 2005; EADSNE, 2006; Levinson & Palmer, 2005; Mittler, 2007; Newman, 2013; OECD, 2011). Therefore, the dearth of transition planning space in schools in Ireland constitutes a barrier to positive post-school outcomes, even though there are a range of transition models and assessment tools which can provide a benchmark for intervention, and which are widely available for adaptation and modification.

The NDA review of international education plans for children with disabilities (NDA, 2005) stated that *"Transition planning is especially important for post-school outcomes, and as such transition planning should be established at least by the end of compulsory school age, and preferably sooner"* (p. 17), although no guidance is provided on appropriate models, resources or progression of such plans. The NCSE established under EPSEN (2004) provides comprehensive guidelines for transition planning from primary to post-primary environments, however, post-secondary transition within this document is limited to the observation that:

The final steps of transition planning should take place one year in advance of the young person leaving school. It is important that the young person be involved in making these plans. The views of parents and/or an advocate should also be taken into consideration. Transitions can involve working in a multidisciplinary partnership. There is [sic] a variety of pathways that young people might follow upon leaving school and there are professionals with responsibility to assist them along these pathways. (2006, p. 51)

Whilst guidelines advocate for a person-centred strategy *"tailored to individual need"* (p. 52), there is no further extrapolation on format, content or procedure, with the exception of brief examples provided in the Appendices.

3.2. Post-school pathways to further education, training and employment

The principle destinations for school leavers with ID in Ireland are further education contexts principally through providers such as the National Learning Network, or training within adult day services and rehabilitation centres, with a small number of young people transitioning to supported employment options. For young people attending special schools, this is a more likely scenario than for students with ID enrolled to mainstream schools (O'Brien et al., 2011). However, these transitions to FETE are complex and sometimes contrary to their best interests *"providing certain social opportunities while also drawing young people more tightly into systems of inequality"* (Jeffrey, 2010, p. 500).
The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) is mandated to ensure that

people with disabilities who are able and willing to undertake employment, are enabled and facilitated to do so (Government of Ireland, 2015). The CES was developed to address historical barriers to employment arising from inadequate education and skills levels, low expectations, and the loss of disability payments. WALK (2015) identify a number of inherent barriers to participation in FETE for young people with Intellectual Disabilities, citing evidence of attitudes and stigma connected to low expectations of the capabilities of young people, and their capacity to secure and maintain employment. These perceptions result in risk avoidant behaviour from employers - who may feel ill-equipped to offer supported employment - and also from families, who may be reluctant to pursue less economically certain alternatives to adult day services. Whilst students with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment or under-employment (Levinson and Palmer, 2005), those already engaged in some form of part-time employment at the time of leaving school, and those with work experience – particularly paid vocational experience - are 35% more likely to secure employment (Fabian, 2007). Furthermore, there are additional barriers surrounding the infrastructure of further education and training opportunities.

For young people leaving special education settings, participation in further qualification and training under the NFQ means identifying a physically accessible and appropriate course at QQI level 3 or 4. However, such opportunities are geographically contested, and represent an additional barrier to transition. For example, in County Louth, there are 6 courses at QQI Level 3: childcare (2), employment skills (2), general learning (1), and independent living (1). Of the 293 QQI Level 4 courses available nationally, only two – both in employment skills - are available in County Louth. However, at QQI Level 5, there are 63 courses available in the County, in subjects as diverse as catering, childcare, hairdressing, horticulture, languages, IT and media, sports and recreation. In real terms, the gap in providing a bridge from Level 2/3 to Level 5 at a local level, means that there is limited facility for young people with disabilities to progress upwards through the ladder of qualifications. Thus, geographical disparity, where distance, levels of independence, and access to transport are factors in attending further education and training, means that some young people face unequal opportunities to progression.

There are layers of complexity to each of these pathways, so early transition planning must go beyond the teaching of core skills, guiding students through transition tasks, activities, and choices (Doyle, Mc Guckin, & Shevlin, 2017; Mc Guckin et al., 2013; Scanlon, Shevlin, & Mc Guckin, 2014). A senior school programme that acknowledges the 'importance of meaningful workplace learning' (Scanlon and Kamp, 2015) not only builds employability skills, but can result in meaningful choices.

3.3. Children's Geographies: guiding aspirations, options, and choices

Pyer, Horton, Tucker, Ryan, and Kraftl (2010) argue that: "Greater attention should be paid to the geographies of children and young people who are effectively marginalised as a consequence of their 'disability'" (p. 1). Therefore, obtaining first-hand accounts from students and parents is essential to understanding the complexities of planning for life after school, as they are "the most expert, the most capable of telling what it is like to be them, living in their bodies, requiring assistance or accommodation, often on the margins of childhood or young adulthood" (Speraw, 2009, cited by McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2013, p. 65). In particular, young people with Intellectual Disabilities need to be provided with opportunities to voice their dreams and aspirations, which in effect are no different to those of their contemporaries: employment, continuing education, and independent living (Dee, 2006; Dyson, Meagher & Robson, 2002; Scanlon and Kamp, 2015).

According to the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) Report 2007 (Kelly, Kelly & Craig, 2007), 9% of young people attended rehabilitative training, 6% were in supported employment, 2% were enrolled to vocational training, and only 0.9% had transitioned into employment. Data indicates that nobody over the age of 18 years at that time had transitioned to further education. The National Institute for Intellectual Disability (NIID) examined existing practices for preparing students with intellectual disabilities for the

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transition from post-primary schooling to post school options (O'Brien et al., 2011). Data from this study indicated that "Although most schools reported that they had some transition planning in place, this was not systematic and varied according to the type of school and, to a lesser degree, geographical location" (p. 11). Additionally, it is noted that very few young people were likely to obtain paid employment in the workforce, a small number may access supported employment, and students from special schools were more likely to progress to vocational training centres, compared to students with ID in mainstream schools. Other post-transition destinations included segregated day centres or sheltered employment; for some, life after school is spent at home, with no opportunity to engage in meaningful pursuits.

Guidance Counsellors (GC) are the main providers of transition information and are particularly important in the absence of an Individual Education Plan. However, the ex-quota allocation of GCs was drastically cut in Budget 2012 in Ireland, and a review of guidance provision in 2012 – 2013 (NGCE, 2013) found that 74% of schools spent only 20% of their time on individual post-Leaving Certificate guidance. Guidance in special schools is not mentioned in the report. By 2016, the Institute of Guidance Counselling were reporting a *"devastating loss"* of 53% of the service across the country. Although school guidance is provided for within the Education Act 1998 (Section 9), to: "ensure that students have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in their educational and career choices" (p. 13), in their policy advice concerning the future role of special schools and classes, the NCSE (2011) dedicates just two pages to 'Educational Supports Provided to Pupils in Special Schools.' Provision of Guidance Counselling for post-school transitions is not mentioned.

A key recommendation of the NIID (2011) report noted the need for: a) person-centred planning service which is "organic, building to transition as the student moves through the stages of his/her school life", assisted by b) a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) with national responsibility for transition planning, and c) recognition that transition is a process which should begin prior to the commencement of the senior cycle of education (p. 13 – 14). More recently, the NCSE (2014, 2018) has produced literature which summarises the main national programmes and supports in education and training available for adults with disabilities,

stating that guidance may be provided by the School Guidance Service, or the Adult Education Guidance Service. The transition booklet for students and parents (NCSE, 2016) advises that transition planning should begin 2 – 3 years before leaving school. Despite these recommendations, personalised guidance in special schools continues to be dependent upon the human and physical resources at the disposal of the school.

Therefore, the emerging hypotheses from this literature review are that: a) students with disabilities and their parents or carers experience complex transition decisions when leaving special education settings, b) these are determined by a range of intrinsic and environmental factors which may effectively act as an enabler or barrier, and c) a structured transition planning strategy in school which integrates with the NFQ and offers supported employment opportunities, can facilitate person-centred and empowered transition journeys. If the CES is to truly pay attention to the geographies of young people with disabilities as they approach the threshold of adulthood, then it is essential to capture the lived experience of real transition journeys.

FINDINGS

"But it is hard. And the opportunities he'll have, like the world is his oyster, whereas [her] oyster is just sort of me."

Introduction

Presented here is a summary of in-depth analysis of the qualitative data from individual interviews and focus group interviews with students in senior classes commencing the WALK supported transition programme, and final year school leavers approaching completion of the WALK supported transition programme, and their parents, in two special schools in Drogheda and Dundalk.

Teaching and support staff in both schools were also interviewed, as were Careers and Employment Facilitators from the WALK programme. Interviews were conducted across two distinct time periods: March / April 2017 and May / June 2017. Findings are discussed within the framework of the research aims which are:

1. **To examine the concept of 'supported transition' for young people with Intellectual Disabilities, to determine its efficacy and suitability to inform the development of national framework of transition for all young people with disabilities moving from compulsory education to FE/HE or employment.**

2. **To document and identify the critical elements within the Irish context that are necessary to develop a system of seamless support to facilitate transitions for care progression for young people with disabilities.**

3. **To explore the effectiveness of current national policy pertaining to the practice of young people with disabilities entering mainstream HE/FE and the labour market.**

Qualitative findings are presented in the following sections, a quantitative comparison of frequently occurring themes is provided in the Appendices. Results indicate mirrored experiences between student and parent cohorts. Common themes arising are discussed under five discrete headings, and barriers and facilitators of supported transitions are extrapolated from this data:

4.1 **Dreams and Aspirations**

4.2 **Post-school Pathways and Options**

4.3 **Access to Information About Choices, Options, and Pathways**

4.4 **Essential Factors in Successful Transitions**

4.5 **Expectations**

4.5 **Barriers and Facilitators**

A final section presents quantitative and qualitative results from an online survey to employers who are currently, or were historically engaged in, providing work experience opportunities to young people with ID enrolled on the WALK PEER programme. Additional tables are presented in the Appendix.

4.1. Dreams and Aspirations

In this section, statements from students, parents and education professionals reflect the evolution of occupational and life aspirations. They include comments about dreams, career ambitions, and future plans for life after school, and reference steps or strategies that need to be taken by the student and parents to achieve these. For many young people, current strengths provide a foundation for building future hopes and ambitions:

"The whole dress design, I love it. As I got older, you know I just got more into fashion and drawing and my art. I want to do clothes design. Like I know how to do a bit of embroidery and knitting and so on and the whole lot, like I practice these things at home in different colours and in the seasons and that… I'd like to have my own clothes range someday."

"I would really like to do something computer, IT, because I'm pretty good at using the computer, I must admit. I've created PowerPoints. I mainly use a tablet or a computer doing all of my work so basically it's one of my primary skills that I use all the time."

This self-awareness married with a growing sense of self-determination, meant that early ambitions were part of a complex plan that had been long in the planning:

"Well, believe it or not, my dream job is to become a game designer. I was about eleven when I thought of it, because I always wanted to see how it's done, what you need to do… …I want to literally put my head down and study for this game design, because this is my actually dream job."

"I have to go to college. Get all my business A levels really, so then I can, in my old school for my Junior Cert I did business studies and I got an A. I love business. I love business, I love doing all the Accounting and everything."

In one particular case, early interests were developed and progressed over a two-year period, with support from the school-based Careers and Employment Facilitator, evolving into a successful transition outcome.

However, this student also acknowledged the need to be realistic about aspirations and pathways:

"It's up there but as I say to everyone, my dream job was a paramedic, but you always have to have a plan B."

Students were aware of the possibilities that further education and training could bring: *"I'm planning to do the EBT course in National Learning Network," "I hope to go to DIFE in Drogheda to do a level 5 course in Childcare, "Or I'll go on and do a GCSE in Business in Newry,"* and that this was a necessary part of moving forward *"Like that's not what I plan to take my life career, that's just a stepping stone."* Sometimes, plans required adaptation in the face of a growing awareness of practical and financial restrictions. This was evident in the testimony of one student who revised his ambition to play for a professional football team, but identified a career pathway that enabled him to work within his area of interest:

"I was hoping I would be able to coach, like a football coach. I was going to do my first coaching in June, to get my kick badge, that's what it's called starting off. There's one up in Dundalk in Oriel Park, that's the Dundalk stadium, I'll be coming up there to do that. Like, they're professional football coaches and they teach you like a level at a time, one course at a time. There's only two and then you go into your UEFA Pro licence, it means that's going into like managing."

The value of timely, first-hand work experience cannot be underestimated:

"I wanted to be a chef. I just love cooking. And all of a sudden then it changed … when I was doing my Junior Cert we went to visit a crèche and since then I loved kids."

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Many of the young people interviewed were acutely aware of the need to plan for life after school:

"Because I just want to get a job or do something when I leave school I don't want to be sitting at home doing nothing. I want to be out and about and that,"

"No, I won't I'll never give up, I don't want to be sitting at home doing nothing under my mother and fathers feet, they wouldn't have it anyway."

They also acknowledged the necessity of a part-time income in order to support their dreams:

"Well, I'd love to have a part time job as well as doing my college course, so just a bit of both," "Hopefully I would like to work in [retail outlet] while I'm getting my coaching... I'll still be able to make a bit of money while I'm doing the coaching."

Later interviews with students who were on the cusp of leaving school, and those who had left school two years previously, asked young people to reflect upon the role of supported transition planning in school, and its impact on realising aspirations:

"No, I think I would be leaving school and that would be it, I wouldn't be going off to college or anything like that. I think I would be just sitting at home living a miserable life," "I'd say I would have dropped out of school sooner. I don't think I would have even finished the first bit of QQI."

To a large extent, parents shared the aspirations of their children with respect to further education and training: *"No my dream for [her] would be to get two days in this course in the Regional and three days with the...National Learning,"* and for the independence that employment would bring:

"And to have just their own little, a little part time job even would be enough for me. If she had two or three days a week that was somewhere for her to go and sort of be used to getting a little wage no matter how small it is, you know. And that's my hopes for [her], you know, so it's not very, it's small enough."

But these dreams were also tempered with uncertainty about how and whether this might be achieved: *"We're going to have to see can we get her a little part-time job that she might enjoy in childcare . . . they need Garda clearance, they need childcare qualifications . . . and I often wonder would [she] be capable of doing it? I don't think so," "Because I don't know actually what he really is into . . . I know he loves acting and I'd love to get him into something like that, but sure he won't. He doesn't mix. He mixes with the younger kids than he would with the older."*

It is abundantly clear, that the hopes and dreams of students with ID and their parents, are no different to those of any other school leaver: *"I want him to have his own independence. Instead of having me beside him all the time."* However, as the end of the school year approached, the thoughts of parents of school-leavers were sharply focused on the practicalities of life after school: *"So there's an aptitude test and an interview so she's been successful, so she's accepted, but we're still worried that, that's only Monday and Tuesday, two days a week for 20 weeks, so what are we going to do for the other three days?"* Much of the dialogue from this group centred upon a growing awareness of the mismatch between earlier aspirations and limited choices:

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"And that's what's happening, you're just . . . the HSE has labelled them and 'this is your options' and that's it. Yeah there's nothing else, no. And they're very capable, well capable to do a lot of things. As I said the last time I think my daughter is entitled to choices. Of course she is. And like all of our kids are, so why shouldn't they have them the same as anyone else? They can contribute to society if they're allowed to. If they're encouraged and pushed, of course they should be."

A significant level of parental discourse referred to worries and concerns for the long-term happiness and security of their children, implying that the focus of their attention is located in managing realities, rather than supporting notional aspirations. This focal lens was referred to in commentary from school staff: *"I would be a bit concerned if they were being discouraged from making their own choices, but I got the sense this year that there was some discomfort with the fact that there were other aspirations, and I definitely felt that there was a negative attitude to WALK."* Some of the anxiety connected to transition into employment was associated with the possibility that employers might take advantage of their child's vulnerability: *"But there is someone who went straight from school, no specialised services but the reluctance from Mum was that if you were giving someone a job you were probably going to take advantage of them."*

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In practical terms, this reluctance to facilitate post-school aspirations may be connected to the fragility of personal economies for young people with disabilities and their families, where economic disadvantage, unemployment, the potential loss of Disability Allowance, ancillary benefits, transport and medical cards, are a significant risk factor. Fundamentally, *"if you lose it, it is very hard to get it back."* However, school staff were conscious of their role in encouraging young people to dream and explore alternative futures, despite perhaps being limited by doubts and experiences. Teachers see the Supported Employment programme as being an integral part of providing young people with opportunities to expand their experience of the working world, but also to support an alternative pathway:

"They will say in the class, 'I am not going to rehab care, I don't want to go there, I am not going there' because they have had visits to them and they know they are capable of more than that."

Moreover, knowing the capabilities of their students, school staff have a sense of outrage about unequal opportunities:

"We need to get them in there. Why can't our young people work? Why can't they? Why can't they do the things they're good at, and do them in a work environment? They can do them here, so why can't they do them in a work environment? We've denied them that human right, that feeling that they're doing something that's worthwhile, and that they're achieving... Or that they have a purpose."

4.3. Post-school Pathways and Options

Depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding of the range of post-school pathways and options that are available, are a fundamental factor in planning for post-school transitions. Commentary here relates to further education / training / employment options, how these were discovered and who helped in this discovery, and the perceived degree of choice or lack of choice.

Uncertain outcomes and unanswered questions were the strongest sub-themes arising from parent interviews: *"I don't know, I don't know, I just don't know"*, including lack of knowledge associated with the basic information to enable informed decisions, such as student loans and funding for FE courses:

"Now there was an open day here and there was DKIT and you fill in the forms and if you're accepted your accepted and it's nearly €1,000, it's an awful amount. I wouldn't have that money but if she was capable, surely like the way your daughters get a grant or something, surely there should be something like that?"

Lack of knowledge about entitlements extended to part-time work and Disability Allowance:

"But I thought also if they work a certain number of hours, are they not entitled to keep some of the allowance?" and to support provided in further education: *"So, all he has is 12 weeks after he finishes school and there's only a possibility at this stage because the same thing applies, they don't have funding for someone to take him to the bathroom and I'm not allowed to go with him to do it, so we're kind of left with nothing."*

Parents were also clear about successful further study and employment pathways being dependent upon ongoing support, whether that be from WALK, employers, or institutions: *"A support system to move from, this is what is really important here... To fall back on, because they may always need help, maybe not as much as what they need now but just... a reminder of . . . Just a reminder. Reassurance all the way."* These support needs encompassed ostensibly small difficulties with transport, to significant input which might become a major influencer on options:

"She does need the extra support. She always will need the extra support and my only concern with her doing anything that's not within the box, I'm going to call it, of what the HSE is offering, is that she won't have the understanding."

Mary's Journey

MARCH 2017

Mary has been attracted to the idea of owning and running her own clothes shop since she was about 11 years old, but when she was much younger she thought she might want to be a teacher. Mary was apprehensive about the Supported Employment programme at first but admitted that she enjoyed it more than sitting in lessons, and has undertaken work experience in retail to support this ambition, demonstrating an aptitude for stock taking, and increasing social and communication skills. The retailer is impressed with Mary's ability and attitude in the workplace, and intends to offer her part-time paid employment when business picks up. Mary also sampled employment in a beauty salon, but recognised very quickly that this was not a career path that she would pursue:

"I loved it. But it just wasn't for me. I don't know, I just didn't feel as if it fitted, do you know like, when you buy a pair of jeans and you're like, 'These jeans don't fit me'."

JUNE 2017

Mary is waiting to find out if she has been accepted on her chosen course. She is continuing to meet with the Careers and Employment Facilitator, despite disengagement with the school. Mary says that she looks forward to these meetings and that they are an opportunity for her to talk about future plans. Mary is looking ahead to completing a QQI Level 4 and to continue on to a Level 5. She also expressed a desire to pursue a qualification in Business "In my old school for my Junior Cert I did Business Studies and I got an A. I love business," and to follow this up with a course in Retail.

SEPTEMBER 2017

Mary is currently enrolled on Employer Based Training (EBT) at QQI Level 4, a course funded by the local ETB, which is a mix of classroom learning and work experience. Mary continues to be supported by the Careers and Employment Facilitator in work experience, and in her access to the EBT course. Mary has resisted pressure from National Learning Network and HSE, to take a place in Adult Services.

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Transition to HSE services was the least favourable option for many parents, and comments alluded to the fact that this option was a by-product of lack of choice:

"Mine was basically services when I came in to meet. Is to go down the services options of this, this and this. And I was saying well what else is there?" "National Learning Network or … services, they're the only two, aren't they really?"

By contrast, students demonstrated more certainty about future prospects and plans - both positively and negatively:

"I'm going to college in October. I've applied for that as well over the last few weeks. Employment based training in the National Learning in the Ramparts. QQI Level 4. Because my Mum told me she doesn't want me staying at home anymore."

"I actually have a EBT employment –based training as well so if I don't get into Newry this time, I'll go and do that one-year course and I'll try Newry again the year after."

[gaming as a job or a career] "Well it would be but I don't think so no. We'd have a long way to go. Ultimately, I don't think it could happen. It'll be a good dream but I don't think it'll ever happen. It's very competitive."

[without employment prospects] "You'd end up being stuck at home. For the rest of your life. Doing nothing unless like you have a parent that works on something that could help you get that job."

Whilst some students had a clear understanding of the product offered through HSE Adult Services and were specific in their rejection of that model *"Oh service centres. I am definitely not going there. As far as I know it is people with really bad disabilities, they do kind of childish things but I don't want to be doing that,"* for other students, information was vague and insufficient to support them in making a decision about post-school futures:

"Yes, I went to [the] Service. It's a place where most people, kind of disability people go. Drama, art, and all that, most what primary infants school do…You're doing the same things like all the time, like what primary school do, like junior kids doing it, it's like a routine all the time …"

"You go to a service and there's not …I've heard, I can't probably say it's true or not like, all you do is be there, you just don't do work there, you're in there all day every day, I know they do a bit of work experience but not a lot, that's all I know."

From a school perspective, pathways and options look bleak: *"So, most of the children leaving school would have been going to the rehabilitation institute as trainees. And that was just the way it was."* Staff expressed concerns that parents and student are misled into viewing Adult Services as a one-time, one-off option that was subject to a cut-off date, applying pressure to an already stressful situation:

"The impression I have and again, because I wasn't present for the interactions that they had with [HSE representative] I had this brief conversation in the corridor one day …but the impression I had, it was like as if people were given the impression and again, I don't know what she said was, 'Well, there is funding and if you're not going for the funding with the specialised service there is a cliff.' They didn't actually see that this is still my funding, if I go off for 10 years that is still there, and I haven't used it but that wasn't, it certainly wasn't the impression that they seemed to be given, [that] your funding is only used if you use it. It doesn't vanish."

Clearly, this has very significant implications for the choices made by parents and students as the end of school approaches. School staff drew attention to the difficulty of facilitating choices that focused on further education, where students were completing a QQI Level 3 pogramme at school:

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"If you want to go to a PLC the outcomes are not perceived as being likely to be successful because it is a level 5, you probably won't get the communications and maths, therefore the college are looking at their outcomes and not really very keen on taking someone who might be struggling from a level 3 to get to a level 5."

Adult Services were viewed as being appropriate for only a very few young people requiring specific supports, based primarily on a perceived lack of opportunity for growth and skills development provided in current models of provision:

"I had seen the adult services to be honest deteriorate dramatically, which is why I left the services, because the model that I went into had these seven vocational areas. By the time I left rehab there was a catering course and a general operative course."

School staff spoke highly of the benefits that the Supported Employment programme had brought to students, in terms of structured opportunities to complete work sampling. Many referred to ad hoc approaches employed previously, where teachers and parents relied upon local contacts, acquaintances, and family members to source work experience opportunities. However, they acknowledged the difficulty in reassuring parents that employment options were a *'safe option'* compared to Rehab services. Equally clear was the viewpoint that, having gained in confidence, determination, and communication skills through work experience, these should be built on and extended by Rehab services.

4.4. Access to Information About Choices, Options, and Pathways

Ease of access to digestible information and knowledge about the pathways and options, and how to incorporate this into future planning, was a recurring theme throughout the transcripts. Statements referenced this access in the light of changing plans and realities, and general communication about choices from key people. Significant gaps in knowledge were

highlighted by parents in connection with rights and entitlements after leaving school *"there are grants as well there. We just haven't been given the information. We haven't been told about them,"* and this was of particular concern as the end of the school year approached:

"I didn't know about this because I wasn't told about it, do you know what I mean, there's not enough information of when they leave, what they're going to get. They can work, you build them up with their confidence … and you still don't know what you're entitled to, your child is entitled to."

"You've to go to here for this information, here for that. There's nothing all sort of a central pool for everything that you can sort of … you just have to find it, go through a maze and find it yourself, through word of mouth or [Careers and Employment Facilitator] or somewhere else, but no, it's not all out there, there's nothing, there's no central body."

Parents referred to the improvement in access to advice through the WALK Careers and Employment Facilitator *"[She] is the link because the HSE haven't got back to me either"* in particular relating to future options and pathways:

"She organised an open day here recently for all the colleges and providers in the North East … That was never done here before. Never. With that it sort of gave us, put us out there available to see what actually was available for us and for them. We hadn't a clue about that."

Statements repeatedly referred to the viewpoint that WALK Careers and Employment Facilitators took on the role of Guidance Counsellor in the absence of same in schools *"but if they had, you see if they have a career guidance teacher like other schools have, but they've no career guidance teacher,"* and adopted additional roles that parents believed should be met by the HSE: *"She's doing everybody else's job . . . the school should be doing it, the HSE should be doing it."* The absence of advice and guidance was clearly attributed to the prioritisation of transition planning for young people with special needs and disabilities:

"I don't think the school is properly supported by the HSE, I really don't. They should be stepping in and doing these things with our children. They know they're growing, they should be in doing it and be prepared for it, but they're not interested. I think they just think our children are just a waste of time."

"We could have done with this a year ago. Oh of course but I was still sort of… Navigating the landscape. Navigating my way to see where I'm going from September."

Parents also alluded to lack of awareness about the structure and delivery of the WALK programme prior to their children participating in the programme, and that the provision of early communication and explicit information prior to commencement of the programme, would be very useful: *"And she'd come home and [say] something that [she] was after giving her and I'm like going 'Who the hell is this [person]?' "*

When questioned about potential further education routes, students were aware of a range of options - National Learning Network (NLN) and QQI courses through Education Training Boards (EBT) - but unclear about their personal pathway: [interviewer] *"Then as soon as you finish those, does that mean you can then apply for a job in a crèche? When you finish the EBT and then when you finish the course in Newry?" "I'd say so, I'm not quite sure."* Young people also alluded to the information provided by the HSE which implied that essentially, there is no choice:

"I thought there was no support or anything like that you know … like when I told your one from the HSE, as I said before, she just came in and just start telling me I have to go to this place, or else nowhere so I just kind of took it in my head but sure, I can't really go anywhere except there you know what I mean?"

Students were keenly aware that WALK Careers and Employment Facilitators had communicated information about alternative pathways that they might not otherwise have received:

"I'll probably end up on a course your one wanted me to go to. It's the same as EBT but it's completely different like. It's like, it's people with like really bad disabilities … it would probably put me down or something like that you know what I mean like, it's not that I don't… them or anything, it's just that I don't think it would be my type of thing."

Greater effort is required in providing access to clear information about choices, options and pathways to parents, was a frequently occurring theme. Education staff highlighted the need for guidance to parents in establishing the full facts about opportunities and pathways:

"But there's definitely a challenge there for those kids who could go in a different direction, that their parents are given the succinct information that they need, and that parents know the questions to ask, because sometimes information's given, but you don't ask the right questions. So you don't get the answer you're really looking for. Or you get a leaflet handed to you which is generic, you take it home and you read it and you go… Where do I fit into that? Where does my Mary fit to that programme there? And it seems to be only so many hours, and what'll she do the rest of the time? And who's going to be responsible for her?"

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Barbara's Journey

MARCH 2017

Barbara has had an ambition to work with children since she was young, and, having a large number of younger nephews and nieces, believes she has the skills and experience to make a successful career in this area. However, for her work experience this year Barbara decided to try something different and opted for a work sampling in retail for two days a week. She doesn't enjoy it as much as childcare as it involves walking around the shop and waiting for customers to approach. Barbara has been looking at courses to qualify in Childcare, but doesn't think she is *"fit for college or anything like that,"* as the level of academic work could be a barrier.

APRIL 2017

Barbara is excelling in tasks such as stock taking and filling, and can work independently and shows high levels of initiative: *"I just picked up and I just said to myself there's no point standing here looking at everyone else doing it . . . Then just go up to them, see what they are doing, do they need any help . . ."* However, Barbara still has an eye on childcare work once her retail placement has finished *"then I'll go back and do another six weeks in childcare then."* She doesn't want to leave school and sit around at home.

MAY 2017

The retailer is talking about offering Barbara a position in June when she leaves school, so Barbara is going to maintain her two days a week and continue learning and improving skills. Barbara is apprehensive about leaving school and is hoping that the retail position will work out: *"it's just hard like because, to be just sitting at home there, just looking out the window, saying 'Where am I going to go next?' Another three months left and so just hopefully now I just get that job . . . and just see what's coming next."* She is adamant that she will not be transitioning into Adult Services:

"Oh exact same things that you do here, it's just repeating back to school again," and is confident and proactive about future employment: "Ah it is yeah disappointing sometimes but if you want to get into that job that you really want you can't, you just take it on the neck and just say thanks very much for that and put another CV in to other shops, and just wait and see what they have to say like. It is hard but you just have to take that."

JUNE 2017

Barbara left school and accepted a place in Adult Services where she will engage in educational and community programmes such as Choices, New Directions, Health and Wellbeing, and an Employment Service. Barbara had already achieved a level of independence, self-awareness, skills and experience which would have enabled her to pursue part-time or full-time employment.

Whilst staff acknowledged the value of the Supported Employment programme, they drew attention to the need for communication to parents in relation to its structure and delivery, and the role of the programme in providing alternative pathways and outcomes for young people, and what those outcomes might be, well in advance of beginning the programme. Additionally, staff believed that uncertainty around continued funding for the programme created a vacuum in information, and by extension, a sense of instability for parents and young people:

> *"So it feeds into the uncertainty...so you're trying to change something and to change something you have to have certainty around it. And to really bring people with you, it has to be led by somebody. We know about leaders, people are led. Why are we led? Because we believe in the person we are following. And we know they're going to be there. But this nagging doubt about whether it was going to be there or not going to be there, that surely had to play on people's minds. So could I really mess with my young person's future here for a couple of years and this programme disappear?"*

The need for more detailed information is strongly correlated to the uncertainty of adulthood; as the end of formal education approaches, so does the realisation that the routines and structures of the previous 13 years, will simply disappear. Parents, carers and young people need to know the shape of the hours, days, weeks, months, and years that make up their future: *"'What's my son going to be doing on Monday morning at nine o'clock, Tuesday morning at nine o'clock, and will he be there 'til three?' And then rolls into that 'And will we still get the few euro for him, and will he still be able to hold onto his bus pass?'"* All very legitimate questions. Ultimately, schools believe that there is a need to provide face to face opportunities for parents and carers to pose these detailed questions, but that there is a blurring of roles in terms of who is responsible for this communication.

4.5. Essential Factors for Successful Transitions

Awareness of personal strengths and challenges, and how these might need to be developed or addressed, are a critical part of transitions. Self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy are key skills for young people leaving school. Statements in this category refer to the acquisition of competencies that will help the student to achieve their aspirations, and traits or characteristics that will be useful in pursuit of goals, including development of independence. Work experience opportunities play a significant role here. Comments also acknowledge the importance of supports and resources provided by schools and WALK Careers and Employment Facilitators, that directly facilitate successful transitions.

Without exception, students talked about growth in personal skills over the course of the programme, principally in relation to confidence, a calming reassurance, and solutions that alleviated anxiety about life after school: *"At the start I didn't know what I was, where I was going or anything but since WALK came I know now I'm much calmer and everything, they're a great support."* This personalised development was attributed directly to engagement with Careers and Employment Facilitators:

> *"That's the way I looked at it because then you can be like, 'No I don't want to do this but I want to this' like, she understood really. Yes and she always listened. I think if I'm right it was the questions she asked us like, 'What did we like doing? What would we want to do?' Do you know like just stuff about us, what we liked, our hobbies and it's was about like her to get to know us."*

> *"If I wasn't in school she'd meet me after the school hours and we'd go and get a coffee and sit down and have a chat and catch up, and then I'd tell her what I'm looking to do. She's just a phone call away. She met up with me when I was on my work experience and she would pop in and out."*

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Not only is this level of personal engagement with young people reassuring, it provides a valuable role model of social skills at an adult level, focusing attention on personal presentation and workplace communication:

"Normally when I go into a shop or if I was getting up to talk to someone like you know just passing or small talk or going out looking for a job, I wouldn't normally do that. And since [she] came I've handed my CV out, I applied for a job in the Hotel. I've done loads."

Strong indicators of person-centred planning are seen in the data, tailoring experiences to individual strengths and interests:

"I don't know, it was like [she] believed that we could do whatever we wanted. And it's hearing it from someone else you actually think to yourself, 'I can do this' and she, it wasn't that she was pushing us, she was making sure we were reaching the goals that we were able to reach."

"[She] said, 'You can do this and you can do this and you can do this' but I like I had my mind set on one thing but she like had other options there as well if I wanted to try them."

Parents valued the presence of an adult voice that reiterated their own views on independence and responsibility: *"[She} doesn't see their problem, or she doesn't label their problem. You're a young adult, you want to get ahead in life, you're going to have to start listening to somebody,"* and acknowledged that their child was more likely to accept guidance from known adults outside of the family:

"Of course, the school has been great too, but it's through the WALK programme, has given her a future and giving her a meaning. Because, they don't listen to us, they'd say, you know, your mammy's going to tell you anything, mammy's going to say anything to you... But when it's somebody that actually comes in..."

However, there was general agreement that fear and anxiety around personal safety and competent social skills resulted in high levels of over-protection:

"So, but at the moment he's talking about going to Dundalk. Now my problem is I've never, and I think it's my fault as much more than anything else, I've never let him go anywhere, travel on his own,"

"I could but my mother wouldn't trust me on my own. No because she thinks I am going to get on the wrong bus or something."

School staff provided anecdotal reference to the necessity for self-confidence in communication skills: *"She got home and she hadn't had a break all day . . . because nobody had actually been told to tell her when to go on her break, and she didn't have the assertive skills to say."* They emphasised the importance of developing self-awareness and confidence around disclosure of strengths and challenges, and associated needs such as methods of communication and task-related limitations. Most importantly, teachers emphasised the value of challenging young people to step outside their comfort zone, by providing carefully planned and structured real-world experiences. Many references were made to the positive physical changes they observed in young people, in posture, mood, and personal presentation.

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4.6. Expectations

The term *'expectations'* was the strongest of the emergent themes and is allocated its own category here. Statements from participants include expectations of individuals and families, but are strongest in their reference to attitudes, assumption, and expectations expressed within wider society and how these might impact on employment opportunities. By association, worries and concerns of students and parents about near and distant futures, are described here: *"I would like all options to be open, because I think she's got a right to have the same options as everyone else."* Of note, all parents alluded to the categorisation of their children and described this in terms of being 'boxed in' and essentially written off in terms of post-school futures:

> *"That they can be integrated, that they just shouldn't be sort of put into certain boxes without trying other avenues before it all comes to that, we really shouldn't because I think there's definitely … all the kids I know in this class are well used to more potential than that, well fit for more potential. If they get the encouragement and support of course."*

Parent viewpoints were almost wholly negative about perceived ability of their children, expressing deep outrage and injustice at the lack of equality of opportunity *"Like, just because she has like special needs, it doesn't mean that she's only able to pack a shelf."* As the transition from school approached, these beliefs were accompanied by high levels, of stress and anxiety:

> *"And that's what's happening, you're just, the HSE has labelled them and this is your options and that's it. Yeah there's nothing else no and they're very capable, well capable to do a lot of things. As I said the last time I think my daughter is entitled to choices. Of course, she is. And like all of our kids are so why shouldn't they have them the same as anyone else. They can contribute to society if they're allowed to. If they're encouraged and pushed, of course they should be."*

Parents believed that the academic expectations of further education providers limited choices and pathways:

> *"Because sometimes they internalise, this is what I want to do, and there's no changing their mind. And that's the one thing I have with childcare; we've had a very heated debate about it, I can't tell you, with [FE institution] and a few of them over it. Because it's… this is where these young people fall, because they can get to FETAC level three, but the colleges don't feel that transition to five… it's too much."*

Younger students just beginning the supported transition programme talked about access to equal opportunities and rights: *"It didn't really help that like I just noticed people were getting a lot more opportunities than the special needs schools would."*

> *"Basically you'd think like back 10 or 11 years ago, anyone with a disability or a form of special needs would end up in a rundown job like working as a janitor or something, like cleaning like, in a restaurant or some place, nothing big, like very simple like job that he just wouldn't feel great about yourself but then like WALK came along and basically WALK are here to tell you that just because you might be impaired in a way or even like, to have some form of weakness, doesn't mean you can't do what you want when you're older."*

04

Paul's Journey

MARCH 2017

Paul is in his final year of school and has been following the Junior Cycle Programme at QQI Level 3. Paul has wanted to be a paramedic since he was a boy. He has investigated the qualifications route and has discovered that he will need to complete a Leaving Certificate course after he has finished school, and gain a minimum of a D grade in Mathematics, English and a Science. He has already identified several colleges who provide a Leaving Certificate Applied programme. Paul has completed a number of work sampling placements which have included catering environments, and also successfully ran a mini company at Christmas, designing and making wooden tree decorations, and selling these to the public in a local shopping centre.

JUNE 2017

Paul worked with the Careers and Employment Facilitator to prepare for college application interviews, including CV work and mock interviews, which were essential to managing the interview process: *"She is the one who found me the course and she prepared me for the interview . . . I was nervous at the start but when I got there the nerves went, and I was really pleased with myself."* Paul was accepted into the City and Guilds Diploma 2 in Cookery which takes place over two years, however, he also identified a 'Plan B' QQI Level 4 Preparation for Employment course. Paul is aware that he will require support in college in terms of academic work and examinations:

"And there always is going to be things that I'll find hard to do but I am just going to need a bit of help for it, you know, like anyone else."

Paul's family are fully supportive of his plans, including his refusal to consider Adult Services: *"As far as I know it is people with really bad disabilities, they do kind of childish things but I don't want to be doing that, that is why I don't want to go."* However, he described they had experienced some pressure to reconsider: *"Yeah, sure the HSE was ... telling my mam that this is the only option and all this kind of stuff. And then, they rang my mam last week and saying we will pay you to go here..."*

SEPTEMBER 2017

Paul was supported in completing restaurant and hospital kitchen placements over the summer months. His ambition to do a professional cooking course looked positive and his place on the City and Guilds course was confirmed, but in August Paul decided that he was not yet ready for this challenge. He has deferred his place for a year and is completing the QQI Level 4 course for one year. He also completed a manual handling course in July, and has passed his driving test.

For those approaching the end of their school career, stress and anxiety creeps in, despite all of the groundwork of the WALK programme, and the fragility of tentative and uncertain plans for the future cast a shadow over expectations: *"But he's delighted and he's not delighted. It's a fear, like a fear for him. It's a fear, they haven't a clue what they're really doing."* This is compounded by pressure to transition to adult services on the basis of little information, and little person-centred planning:

> *"Yeah, sure the HSE was forcing, they weren't forcing but they were telling my mam that this is the only option and all this kind of stuff. And then, they rang my mam last week and saying we will pay you to go here and they were on about [Careers and Employment Facilitator] and saying [she] might not be here. And all this kind of stuff, talking crap."*

The practical skills required to manage everyday life are based on academic skills taught in school, so there is an expectation that academic performance is an indicator of ability. However, using this as a yardstick with which to determine who should and should not be employed, may prevent many young people from accessing post-school opportunities. As one teacher said: "Now she could not do a single set of maths worksheets properly, but she would say to me in Dunnes *"Why are we standing here figuring it out, I am telling you that is the cheapest one . . . She was used to doing shopping for home and she'd be like, 'I know exactly how much it is going to cost."*

Education professionals were clear about assumptions that are made by virtue of students attending a special school: *"The idea is in the decision-makers' heads that if a young person is capable of doing all the things that we say the young people are capable of doing, why are they here in the first place? Why aren't they in mainstream?"* They also spoke about societal preconceptions and judgements around capabilities, based purely on a superficial understanding of specific disabilities, rather than a person-centred assessment of individual strengths and challenges:

> *"How much more difficult is it then for a person with a physical disability, intellectual disability, or what I would call a very noticeable disability like Down syndrome? Or Williams syndrome. I think the communication of the messages about young people, whether it's a cognitive disability, or a physical disability, is go back to what they can do."*

4.7. Barriers and Facilitators

All of the data from each of the preceding categories can be observed as either a barrier or facilitator of accessible and supported transition to employment and provides clear pointers to strategies and interventions for agencies and policy makers.

Barriers

Statements include perceptions, experiences, and descriptions of cultural and societal attitudes, environments, viewpoints on State assistance and responsibility in providing support programmes, pathways, and opportunities that impact on aspirations and goals, as intolerable, unacceptable, or needing change. The most significant barrier identified by parents is the lack of continuity between child and adult services, and provision of support to manage this transition bridge:

> *"The care worker, we have no care worker, [she] has no support worker. Nothing. I've never had anyone . . . but she apparently is entitled to something but no one has ever told me this."*

> *"[He] changed over to the adult service and nobody came around us and your man said before he changed over that was over him that time the care worker will get in contact with you and you'll get to meet, I'll bring her down to meet you. Yeah, you'll get to meet the team. Never seen her. Never seen anyone."*

> *"A support network I suppose. To help and support, to support a child in getting a job and filling out forms and that kind of a thing, you know what I mean. It is vital, but they are not there."*

04

"There's a massive gap there but there's also a gap of when they're under 18 as well, the care isn't consistent coming from [services]. [Her] social worker changed in the November and her social worker never reappeared again until [she] had a breakdown the following November . . . never heard from no one, we never got a letter, nothing."

"Plus I feel too there should be continuity of care, there should be sort of an overlap of the new and the old for at least six months."

"And since she's turned 18 forget about it."

However, not all barriers were attributed to policies and procedures within the system. Parents freely admitted that their own worries and concerns around personal safety, placed limitations on acquiring new skills and experiences: *". . . at the moment he's talking about going to Dundalk. Now my problem is I've never, and I think it's my fault as much more than anything else, I've never let him go anywhere, travel on his own."* Travel and transport, independence, and understanding personal safety, are concerns noted by many parents.

School staff drew attention to the difficulty that parents experienced when faced with the realities of post-school futures. Special schools do not have access to a Guidance Counsellor and teaching staff are not sufficiently resourced to provide this support to students and their families. Coupled with a dearth of information from State departments and service providers, there is an urgent need for greater clarity around options and financial implications, and more timely communication of same, to alleviate the stress and anxiety described by pupils and parents. A dedicated, person-centred, post-school transition planning strategy is an obvious solution.

Facilitators

Statements demonstrate a strong correlation between support programmes and transition planning, their role in realization of goals and successes, and concrete examples of strategies and key people who have facilitated transition and transition planning: *"These people are trained for that purpose and that is where the likes of our children need someone who is trained to make*

the children not be, you are not patronising ... you are just letting them show that they have the ability."*

Parents were specific about the growth in personal skills as an outcome of supported transition:

"Because as I said, he stays in the background, he'd let everybody else do the talking and he'll sit there. Now he's putting his spoke in. He's telling you stuff but literally 12 month ago, two years ago it was going to be finish school, didn't know what he wanted to do."

"WALK PEER made a huge difference. He can do anything now."

Development of clear goals and aspirations for the future, means that parents can aid and support their children in achieving their ambitions:

"Oh, it takes an awful lot pressure off me. An awful lot of pressure off me. Because now I know that there's something I can focus towards and that if it's what he wants then I'll go and get it for him. Or at least try to help get it and that."

The supported transition programme has also opened up choice and opportunity providing parents with hopes for the future:

"Absolutely fantastic. Relieved. There's hope. There's hope. Yes. Relieved because there was hope then for them to actually do something."

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4.8. Employer perspectives

This section provides summary data from a survey administered to n = 56 employers; additional tables are provided in the Appendix. Responses were returned from n = 37 participants. Four principal participant roles were recorded, indicating that 78.4% of responders would be directly involved in taking the decision to employ school leavers with ID.

Human Resource Professional	16.22%
Executive Team	10.81%
Front Line Management	45.95%
Owner	16.22%

The majority of respondents represented medium to large scale organisations (64%), the majority operating as private enterprise entities.

04

Micro (Just Me)	5.56%
Small (Less than 10 employees private)	13.89%
Small (Less than 10 employees public)	5.56%
Medium (Between 10 and 50 employees private)	19.44%
Medium (Between 10 and 50 employees public)	13.89%
Large (More than 50 employees private)	16.67%
Large (More than 50 employees public)	13.89%
Multi-national	11.11%

Six main industry categories were provided for in the survey, however 37.4% of participants selected 'Other' and these responses were reviewed and re-categorised (e.g. heritage re-categorised under Art and Entertainment), and three additional categories allocated.

Retail	12	32.4%
Hospitality	5	13.5%
Manufacturing	3	8.1%
ICT	0	0.0%
Education	4	8.1%
Arts & Education	6	16.2%
Wholesale	2	5.4%
Social Care	2	5.4%
Finance and Enterprise	3	8.1%

Employers were primarily represented in the retail and Arts / Entertainment sectors. The data suggests that the ICT sector is under-utilised and as an important contributor to the national economy, this is an opportunity that requires further exploration. This is particularly noteworthy as man of the young people interviewed expressed an interest and strength in computers and computing.

Attitudes and expectations about young people with ID

Employers were positive about employment of young people with ID, and attitudes were contrary to perceived stereotypical attributes of young people with ID in the workplace: they were unlikely to arrive late for work (72%), they were dependable (81%), and were valued members of the workforce (78%). Almost half of the employer group believed that it was not difficult to accommodate support needs (46.6%), of those who did believe that this was the case (30%) these respondents were a mix of small, medium and multi-national organisations, with staff training, complex business functions, and time constraints given as reasons:

"It takes time to figure out all the details and training on the job takes a lot of time."

"During busy times it is difficult to stop to take time to explain things numerous times."

"Managers don't always have the time to spend with someone who has a lot to learn."

Sorcha's Journey

MARCH 2017

Sorcha enjoys cooking and had thought about making a career in catering until a class visit to a creche in the local area. This prompted Sorcha to select work experience in this area her first year working with WALK, and she discovered a real love and talent for working with children. Indeed, the creche manager believes that she has a natural ability and that this is the right career path for her. Sorcha has already identified a route to qualification in Childcare through a two-year QQI Level 5 course, but is conscious that this is a 'massive jump', and that she might need to pursue a QQI Level 4 after school. Unfortunately, there are no Level 4 Childcare courses in the local area, but with the help of the Careers and Employment Facilitator, Sorcha has identified a Level 4 employer-based training course which includes three days of work experience which could be completed in the crèche, or alternatively, pursue the General Learning level 4 course which includes childcare modules.

JUNE 2017

Sorcha has completed 35 hours of work sampling and is now focused on arranging a summer placement before she begins college. She is working on a CV and interview techniques with the Careers and Employment Facilitator, and has the full support of her family, and says that her mum is *"guiding me and explaining and then she'll leave it to my decision."* Sorcha says that she feels calmer and more confident about her future, as she could only really see herself sitting at home and doing nothing before she began the programme.

SEPTEMBER 2017

Sorcha transitioned from school to Employer Based Training, a QQI Level 4 course funded by a local ETB, a mix of classroom based and work experience which builds on her prior learning and work sampling in the creche. Sorcha has been supported through the application process for the EBT course and has declined to take up the Rehabilitation funded place in the Disability Centre.

Importantly, 70% of employers did not believe that their organisation had a system in place to support young employees with an ID, 50% of employers do not have a formal or informal policy for hiring people with an ID, and only 35% believe that they provide a satisfactory level of satisfactory disability awareness training, including lack of knowledge of legislation (41%) such as the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015 and Equal Status Acts 2000-2015.

The final section of the survey asked employers to reflect upon factors that enhance or promote engagement with supported transition programmes, and these viewpoints are thematically analysed and discussed below.

Important factors in supported employment programmes

Employers were asked to indicate the single most important factor that would make a difference to recruitment, selection and progress of a young person with an Intellectual Disability within their organisation.

Practical factors associated with employment were of primary importance (32.4%) including advice and guidance provided through programmes such as WALK, or by a specific individual *"To have the support from a dedicated person with the knowledge required on site to train the young adult correctly and also be there should any issues arise."* Practical assistance included access to training (14.7%) as *"there seems to be minimal training for employees and employers to help and assist employees with intellectual disability."* This was closely linked to financing training and funding the employment of a school leaver (23.5%) *"As a non-profit organisation - the most important difficulty I would have is funding."*
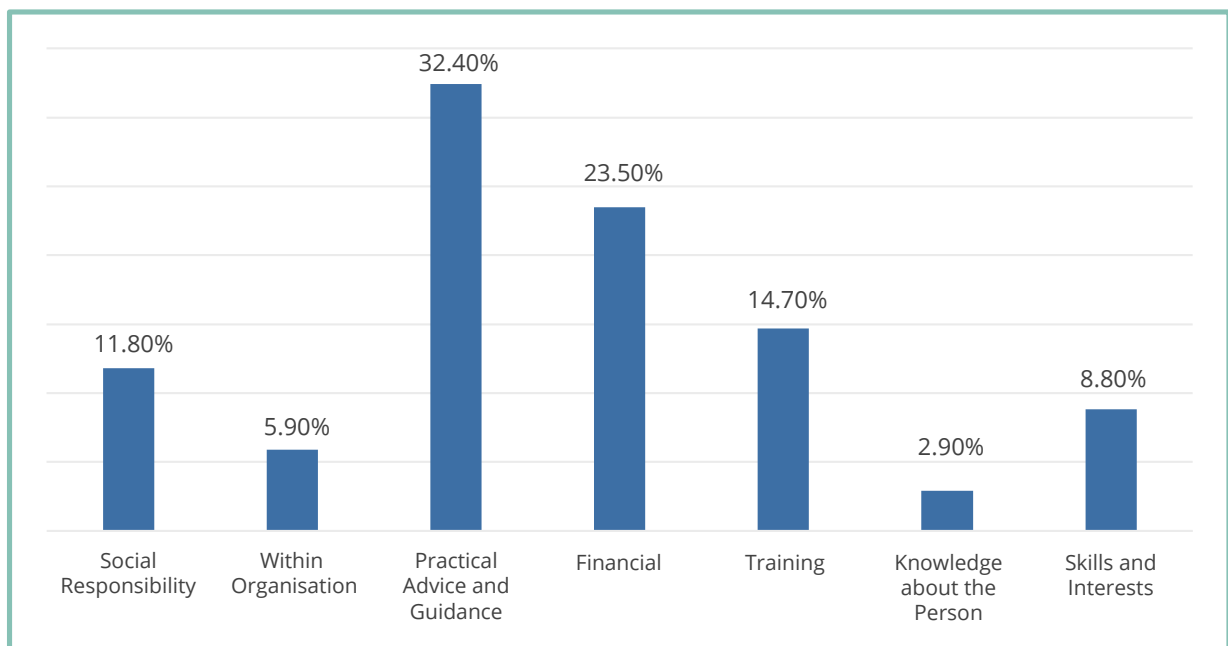
Benefits of engagement with the WALK PEER Programme

The presence of Careers and Employment Facilitators was a significant support expressed by 50% of respondents and was the channel for most of their learning, including personal learning from the experience:

"Knowing that we have given the young adults the respect and pride that they deserve"
(Frontline management, Wholseale).

"The experience we've had with WALK PEER has ensured a better understanding and respect of these employees, not just by myself and other managers but throughout the whole team … Creating a better understanding of the level of interest and ability the students have"
(Accounts & Marketing Manager, Retail).

Employers also noted that this improved understanding had real benefits for their business, and that most of this learning (50%) was provided by WALK Careers and Employment Facilitators:

"The Facilitator brought us through the whole process. Without that we would not have thought of looking to employ young people from special school."

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Figure 2. Important factors in employing young people with ID

John's Journey

MARCH 2017

John will be leaving school in June 2017. John began the Supported Employment programme in school in September 2016, and has completed a number of work experience placements. For the previous two months John has completed two days of work experience a week in a local Supermarket. Some days John is assigned to warehouse duties such as bailing products and stacking shelves, and on others he works with security and tags all the electrical goods. Looking to the future, John says that he will need to complete a health and safety certificate and training to use a forklift truck in the warehouse. John feels optimistic about the future and his opportunities, but that he also tries not think about life after school too much as he finds this 'terrifying'? John thinks that the Supported Employment programme is good because:

"You are learning something, you are learning about where you go. You learn more about yourself as well. Yeah, you learn a lot more about your own self than you do about other things."

APRIL 2017

John's Careers and Employment Facilitator describes him as one of the programme's real successes. He is still working in the Supermarket and enjoying the work, but elected not to attend an individual interview for the research project, as he had recently spent a taster week in HSE Adult Services.   John is being encouraged to take up a place in Adult Services rather than go into part-time employment, and will receive a payment of €30 per week as an incentive. John's parents are happy for him to take this direction as it means that he will be supported indefinitely. John's mentor in the Supermarket is disappointed given the skills and experience that John has developed.

SEPTEMBER 2017

John enters Adult Services where he will engage in educational and community programmes within the service such as Choices, New Directions, Health and Wellbeing, and an Employment Service. John had already achieved a level of skills training and experience which would have enabled him to pursue part-time or full-time employment.

"Having the opportunity to work with and along so many different people has created a very welcome, unique environment to work in. Our customers love our diversity and as a result, it has created a sense of loyalty, that in turn has given us opportunities to get more business in the door"

(Frontline management, Wholseale).

"We learned a lot. The training for our staff was excellent as it gave us an understanding of some of the issues we can have with customers and we never thought about what they might be going through" (Executive Team, Multi-national Retail).

Continuing and future support requirements for employers

Overall, employers were enthusiastic about continuing to engage with supported employment programmes, identifying that continued guidance and feedback from Careers and Employment Facilitators would be crucial (47.6%), and that this should include additional training (9.5%). Employers stated that the company should play a role in the promotion of such schemes (4.8%) "I need to continue to promote this valuable programmer more and encourage more people to engage in it." Increased efforts to provide employment opportunities through supported transitions and the funding to facilitate this was identified by 28.6% of employers:

"It would be great if this programme could be used all over the country and our corporate HR could introduce it in all our locations. It could give 100s of students a chance to get jobs"

(Executive Team, Multi-national Retail).

However, reference was made to internal constraints that impact upon employer engagement, and the need to do more to open up opportunities with businesses:

"On our side we can create more opportunities, we need to expose Managers in the business to what WALK can do"

(Human Resources, Multinational Finance and Logistics).

"Some sort of a programme that allowed us to do more of this, as overall we are constrained by corporate metrics"

(Human Resources, Multinational Finance and Logistics).

"National rollout of Walk Peer programme. Easier access for PWD – currently constrained by service provider"
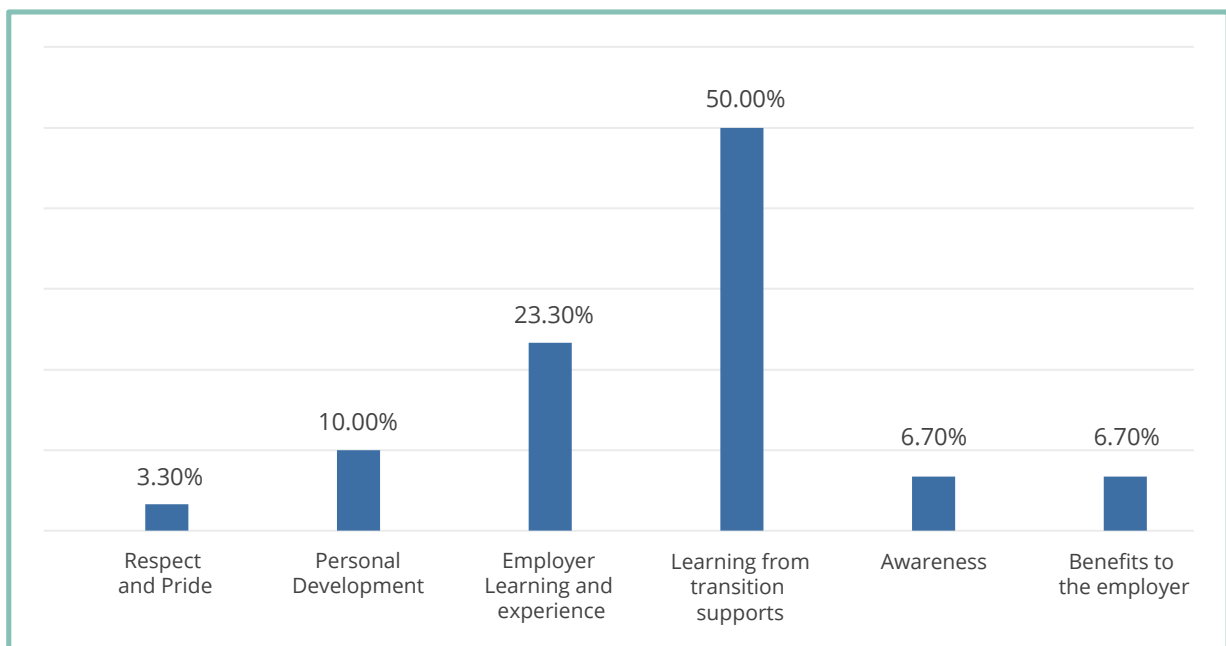
(Executive Team, Education Provider).

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Figure 3. Engaging with supported transition: Benefits to employers

Robert's Journey

MARCH 2017

Robert is in his final year of education and will be leaving school in June 2017. For the past two years, Robert has engaged in work sampling through the Supported Employment programme. Initially, Robert thought that security was something he'd like to do and he spent a long period of time shadowing the security team in a local shopping centre. Robert did very well, and then moved to a wholesale supplier to the construction industry. Since beginning this work experience, Robert has excelled, and the owner of the business is considering offering Robert a permanent full-time contract as opposed to his transitioning to Adult Services. Throughout the work experience process Robert has gained in confidence and independence, and is now travelling independently. However, Robert has a passion for sport and has been encouraged to think about transitioning to the National Learning Network as they have a gym and a football team.

APRIL 2017

When he was younger, Robert dreamt of becoming a footballer. More recently, he has looked into the training and qualifications needed to be a football coach. Robert is thinking about beginning the Kick Start programme in June, and working his way through FAI training. Robert is still engaging in work sampling with the wholesaler and thinks that the experience has improved his skills and awareness: *"Yes, I think it's confidence, you know . . . How to work, to work hard and be focused. That I can do things on my own. I got more independent, confident, talking to people."* Robert is a little apprehensive about leaving school and hopes that he can still access support from the Careers and Employment Facilitators. He would like a part-time job that provides him with an income whilst he is pursuing his coaching qualifications. He thinks it is possible that he will be offered some work with the wholesaler over the summer:

"I am thrilled you know to be able to work and get my first wages. I got on really well with the lads there, the lads are really good there, work colleagues."

SEPTEMBER 2017

Robert was supported over the summer to do a full-time work trial with the wholesaler, and attended Manual Handling Training in July to help prepare him. The trial was successful, and he was offered a permanent contract of 25 hours per week and is attending Friday morning computer classes to improve office skills. The Supported Employment programme continues to assist Robert in communicating with Revenue and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

In order to continue engaging in supported transition programmes, employers felt that guidance and feedback provided through the WALK PEER programme would be essential (47.6%), but also alluded to funding for employers to support such initiatives, and increased opportunities for young people through national roll out of the programme. This last item was strongly connected to persuading larger companies to adopt strategies throughout the organisation.

Most importantly, positive outcomes for young people participating in the programme were also recognised: *"We hired a young man who had just finished school and he is now a permanent member of staff. Getting on great and a credit to his family and school"* (Executive Team, Multi-national Retail). Furthermore, employers recognise the advantages of connecting with other aspects of the supported transition provider:

"It has been a great. We have a number of service users who train in our cafes and as a result, some are now in paid employment. We link in with other areas of the organization like "Real Life Training", who place their students with us. There is support when needed from the Support Workers and other staff when needed."

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Future opportunities for young people with an Intellectual Disability

Many employers identified specific potential opportunities for employing young people with ID within their organisation in roles as diverse as:

- Customer Care
- Customer Service desk
- House Keeping operative
- Office Helper
- Canteen assistant
- Porters
- Cleaners
- Brand Ambassadors

They also provided suggestions for continuing opportunities for young people whilst still at school, such as site visits, work experience and job shadow placements, and specifically *"part-time jobs that fits well with our business. So there are plenty of opportunities in the stores, bakery, merchandising, accounts, deliveries, etc"* (Executive Team, Multi-national Retail).

Employers also recognised the advantages of breaking up roles that could be completed through part-time positions, and that particular tasks can be assigned *"that not every member of staff would like or is good at, as these young people are, for example 'Tagging', quite a boring task to a lot of people and these young people excel at."*
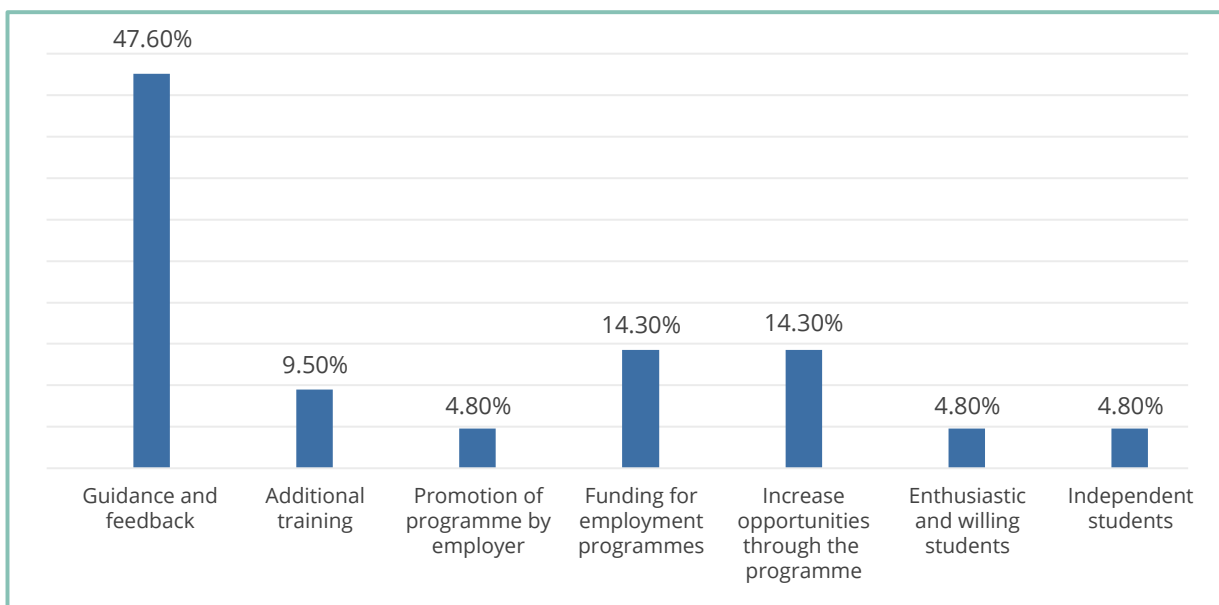

Figure 4. Essential factors in continuing with supported transition programmes

Whilst 83% of businesses were pleased with the structure and roll out of the programme and had no comment to make on additions and improvements, 84% felt that young people with ID lacked specific and necessary job training:

"The students seemed to be very low on skills when they came in. I don't know if that is something WALK PEER can do anything about or if it is the school. However, the improvement in the students over a few months is great to see"

(Human Resource, SME Retail).

No descriptive detail was provided on the meaning of 'skills' so it is difficult to ascertain how these can be improved, and in what areas. However, this is an important consideration for development of programmes going forward.

CONCLUSIONS

"There is nothing out there for when he leaves. We haven't told him that. And we're letting him look into all the possibilities there is, in the hope that something will change or that lady will come back to us at the end of the summer and tell us 'Yes, okay, we've got the go ahead for that'. But when that phone call comes in and if it's that he doesn't have that place because they can't, then we'll have to tell him."

The emotional cost to young people with ID who experience a lack of future prospects and opportunities for life after school, is rarely acknowledged or voiced. Statements from parents clearly referenced the impact of uncertainty, narrow choices, and low expectations on mental health, and the potential long-term consequences associated with these factors.

5.1 The Role of Supported Transitions

The role of supported transitions in broadening horizons and providing positive, concrete, and long-term outcomes, cannot be underestimated: The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between support programmes, transition planning, and positive transitions, which is critical if young people with disabilities are to realise their goals. The research has clearly demonstrated how these activities translate into realization of goals and successes and has also provided illustrative examples of strategies and key people who have facilitated transition through dedicated transition planning.

From an employer perspective, findings suggest that employers are willing and open to providing work experience opportunities to young people with ID but require a structured support programme or mechanism to do so. The input of WALK PEER is essential, in the sense that not only do they provide a bridge between the student and employer, they represent a bank of knowledge and strategies that the employer can reliably depend on, and a guide and mentor that students, parents, and schools know and trust. Thus, increasing

employer confidence is key to opening up the world of work to young people with ID. To this end, a significant information and experience gap is noted in areas which would not be difficult to address: knowledge of employment law, financial schemes to support provision of reasonable accommodations, and disability awareness training. Over and above the work of entities such as WALK PEER, there are a myriad of national and local support groups for people with disabilities, who are ideally placed to provide this information to employers in their local community.

Finally, employability skills are noted as an important factor in engaging young people with ID in work opportunities. Of these, the most important are independence achieved through self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy. There is a proliferation of curriculum packages that could be adapted and utilised to this end, for example, *ME! Lessons for Teaching Self-Awareness & Self-Advocacy* (University of Oklahoma, 2016), *Stepping Forward: A Self-Advocacy Guide for Middle and High School Students* (Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, 2013). What is required, is a dedicated guidance and counselling professional in every special school, to deliver these essential skills.

5.2 Implications for Policy

The findings from this study clearly highlight the essential components required to enable young people with disabilities to make a seamless transition from compulsory education into further education, training and/or employment. The research proposes a new model of *"Supported Transition"* which is embedded in the Strategic Priorities of the CES (2015). Indeed, it can be argued that the model clearly mirrors *all* of the strategic priorities (Figure 5, overleaf).

Figure 5. Supported transition with the Comprehensive Employment Strategy

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However, at its core the model could contribute to the development and sustainability of Strategic Priority 5.1 that is:

"To work together to develop an effective co–ordinated policy approach (and draw up an implementation plan based on that approach), to assist individuals with disabilities, including those who require a high level of support, to obtain and retain employment having due regard to the implementation of New Directions"

Essentially, this is sustained by the Careers and Employment Facilitator whose function has been outlined in the study. It is important to note at this juncture that this role is distinct from the current role adopted by Career Guidance Counsellors in mainstream schools and Occupational Guidance Counsellors linked to special schools.
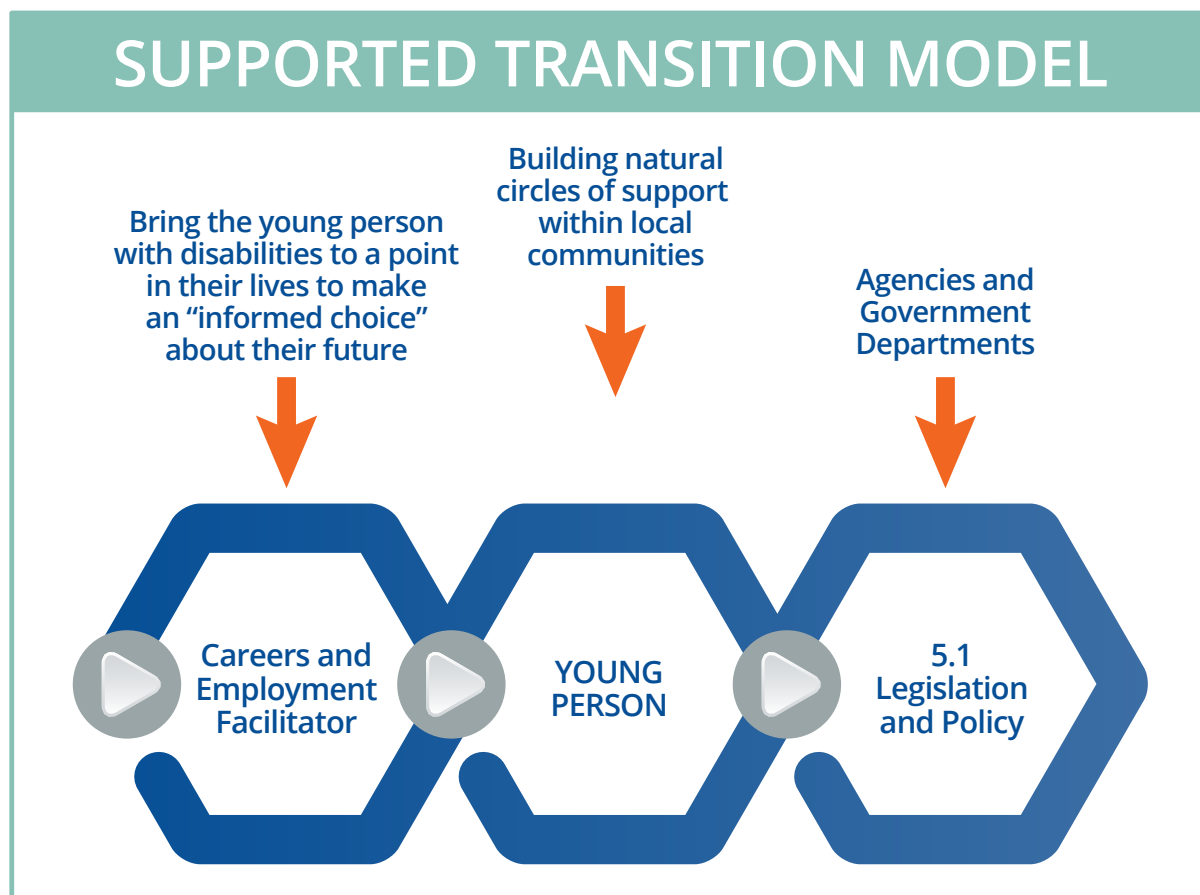
SUPPORTED TRANSITION MODEL

Bring the young person with disabilities to a point in their lives to make an "informed choice" about their future

Building natural circles of support within local communities

Agencies and Government Departments

Careers and Employment Facilitator

YOUNG PERSON

5.1 Legislation and Policy

Figure 6. A New Model for Supported Transition

5.3 Definition of Supported Transition

The authors propose that the concept of the "Supported Transition Model" should be separated from the already established notion of *"Supported Employment"* which is facilitated by the Employability Service. In keeping with the core principles of transition planning, the model places the young person at the centre of the process by assisting them to explore their aspirations and brings them to a point in their lives where they are able to make an *"informed choice"* about their future (Figure 6). This process should begin at 15 years of age in special and mainstream schools and is achieved by building natural circles of support within their local communities, guided by the Career and Employment Facilitator.

In order for a seamless transition to occur, government agencies engaged with the young person must ensure that relevant supports are established and implemented in a timely fashion (Strategic priority 5.1, p. 20), and that parents are included in this process. This model is reflective of the CES's position on planning ahead by placing employment firmly on the agenda while young people are still in school and aims to *"stem the flow into joblessness"* (CES, p.13).

CAREERS & EMPLOYMENT FACILITATOR

(Mentoring)

Trusted Adult Relationship

Explore Aspirations

Raise Expectations

Develop Pathways

Sustainability

Access

Choice

Citizenship

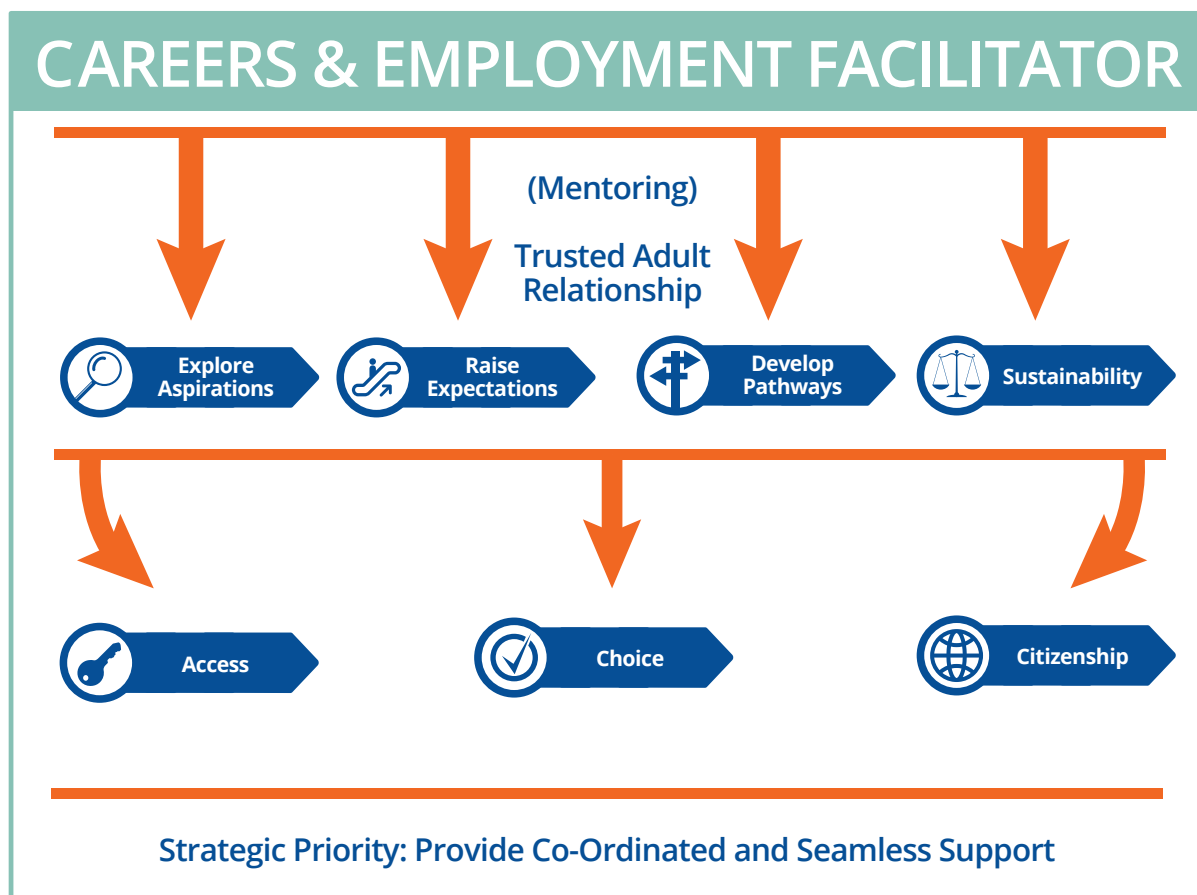**Strategic Priority: Provide Co-Ordinated and Seamless Support**

Figure 7. The role of the Career and Employment Facilitator

5.4 Career and Employment Facilitator

The role of the Career and Employment Facilitator (CEF) is critical in order to ensure a seamless transition and as noted above is distinct from the role currently adopted by Career Guidance Counsellors in mainstream schools and Occupational Guidance Counsellors in special schools. As can be seen overleaf in Figure 7, the CEF adopts the concept of mentoring the young person by developing a close relationship based on trust. This then enables the CEF to explore aspirations, raise expectations, develop pathways and ensure that their transition plan is sustainable. This enables young people with disabilities to have access to the same choices as their peers who do not have disabilities and enables them to become active citizens in their community. Again, these concepts are central to the CES (2015) strategy.

The CEF explores the aspirations of young people by identifying educational and vocational goals as well as training needs. These aspirations are then translated into real work experience opportunities which are assessed by the CEF, and young people are then assisted to be fully included in the workplace. The CEF then monitors the placement and evaluates the overall performance in order to ensure that the young person progresses to their final destination,

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for example, moving to further education in order to achieve appropriate qualifications. This process should also include parents and any other relevant agencies engaged in supporting the young person.

Ideally the CEF should be based in the local community, have first-hand local knowledge of further education and training opportunities, and be prepared to build relationships and create a network with local employers. In short, they should be willing to liaise with parents, carers, employers, and training staff where appropriate in respect of supporting the young person with disabilities.

This research has highlighted the critical role of the CEF in engaging and working with employers, particularly by giving young people with disabilities access to work experience, which has led to further opportunities for education training and employment. Their role cannot be under-estimated, and they are fundamental to the sustainability of the programme.

5.5 Summary

Undoubtedly, engaging in the supported transition programme examined in this study has provided parents and young people with access to information, options, confidence, and some of the hard and soft skills required for successful transition into education and employment contexts, even though those pathways are long and circuitous: *"It will take a while for me to get to the top of the mountain."* Arguably, however, there is a need for more focus on the personal and social skills required to navigate not just unfamiliar environments, but unanticipated events and outcomes.

The recent review of supports available to people with disabilities transitioning from education or training into employment conducted by the Oireachtas (2018) highlighted the complex issues that people with disabilities encounter in their endeavours to engage with education and employment. Previous research within the Irish context also supports many of the issues concerned with people with disabilities accessing employment opportunities (for full review see Scanlon and Kamp, 2015), and the necessity of planning for transition from primary to post primary school (Barnes-Holmes, Scanlon, Shevlin, Desmond & Vahey, 2013). Indeed, for young people with disabilities transition planning should begin as early as possible i.e. fourth class in primary school, or where needs are more complex, in the early years of primary. Planning for transition from post-primary to further or higher education for students with Special Educational Needs

should be instigated from the age of 15 years (Doyle et al., 2017; McGuckin et al., 2013). Furthermore, the latter study concluded that at post-primary level Guidance Counsellors felt ill-equipped to support young people with disabilities in determining post-school journeys. This pre-planning stage speaks directly to Comprehensive Employment Strategic Priority 1: Build skills, capacity and Independence, in particular to the remit to:

- Develop and foster each student's independence during their school-years,

- Plan young people's transitions from school to training and further education. (CES, 2015, p. 14).

Findings from this current study closely mirror those of the NIID (2011) investigation of transition from post-primary outcomes for young people with Intellectual Disabilities, using data collected across 2008 and 2009. Crucially, in the intervening period of almost 10 years, little about this landscape has changed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Qualitative findings from this research suggest the following recommendations in support of the concept of supported transition from school for young people with Intellectual Disabilities.

1. Transition Planning

Conceptually, transition planning is a longitudinal strategy in which early implementation is vital, thus this process should begin in the junior cycle of education and continue until the transition to post-school destinations. Best practice advises that transition planning should focus on self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy, and the acquisition of essential functional skills. A dedicated transition programme should focus on acquiring these skills, developing independence and autonomy through age-appropriate activities, increasing opportunities for personal development within the community, and enabling students with disabilities to progress towards their personal goals. This can best be achieved through provision of:

- Transition Module

Dedicated curriculum time for transition planning module which should take place at least two years prior to leaving school, drawing together life skills, communication, work experience, and links with local community

- Personal Transition Plan

Person-centred Transition Plan setting out the specific, realistic and achievable pathways that have been planned; linked skills, targets and activities; key people and key timelines.

- Career and Employment Facilitator

Access to career guidance and employment professionals with the remit to organise, manage and facilitate supported transition planning.

2. Transition Tools

Equal access to information, irrespective of geographical location, is a cornerstone of transition planning. Providing young people and their families with the tools to consider all of the available options, make person-centred decisions, and plan for positive futures, is essential. These tools inform and support the transition planning programme by providing education on important topics related to transitioning into adulthood, connecting service providers, and sharing information on local community resources. This can best be achieved through:

- Transition Information Portal

Creation of an online repository of transition information for students and parents, to include modelled pathways and options using real world examples, application forms, decision timelines, advice guides, key contacts, and student stories. These materials to be fully accessible (WCAG 2.0 compliant) to all members of the community.

- Parent Information Programme

Provision of a parent transition programme including information sessions, advice clinics and workshops in advance of key decision timelines, for example:

- **Timepoint 1 before commencement of 5th year,**

- **Timepoint 2 before commencement of 6th year.**

- Transition Fair

Development of an annual transition event for special schools at which agents and agencies can explain choices, options and aspects of transition, such as college application, grants and finance, personal support and care workers, and HSE options.

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3. Access to career guidance information and support

Young people in special schools and their families need access to career guidance information to make an informed choice about their future and should be supported accordingly. This can best be achieved by appointing Careers and Employment Facilitators with a remit to:

- **Work regionally with a cluster of schools, and on a full-time basis.**

- **Provide first-hand knowledge of further education and training opportunities in the local area and create working relationships with a network of local employers.**

- **Liaise with parents, carers, employers, and training staff where appropriate in respect of supporting young people with disabilities.**

- **Connect the transition planning programme provided in school, with real world opportunities.**

Accreditation

Findings from the study draw attention to a lack of continuity in further education and training opportunities, and specifically, to gaps in accessing progression through the National Framework of Qualifications. Provision is often geographically restricted (i.e. not all QQI levels are offered in all locations) and does not take into account practical considerations that are a distinct feature of disability. The development of a national transition framework to facilitate progression from school to further education, training, and employment, will ensure positive futures for young people with disabilities. This can best be achieved through:

- **Nationwide rollout of the WALK PEER programme as a pilot for the Supported Transition model.**

- **An integrated curriculum in special schools which equips young people with the soft and hard skills necessary to achieve and retain employment. Such a programme to be commenced at least two years before school completion.**

- **A staged transition programme in Adult Services that recognises current levels of achievement and experience in the work environment, and which progresses these forwards to real and permanent employment opportunities.**

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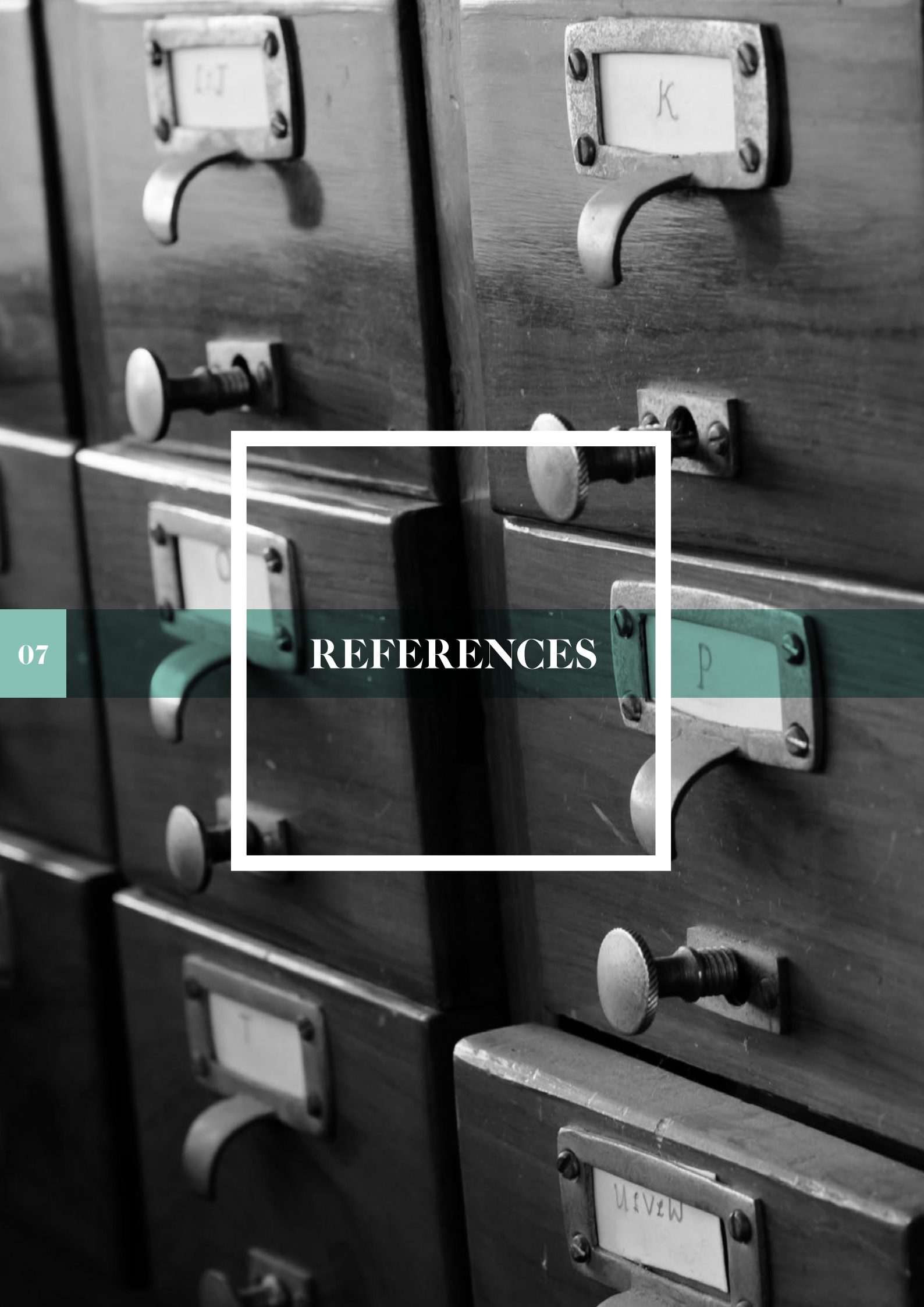
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