

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION  
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE**

**Group of National Experts on Special Needs Education**

**CASE STUDIES RESEARCH REPORT FROM IRELAND**

*This document describes case studies implemented by countries participating in the project "Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment". Each Case Study Report is published under the responsibility of the country that has prepared it and the views expressed in this document remain those of the country author(s) and not necessarily those of the OECD or its member countries.*

*The Group of National Experts on Special Needs Education last met in 2008. However, the remaining outputs of the project "Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment" continue to be given this reference to maintain coherence to previous material produced by the Group.*

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***Pathways for Students with  
Disabilities to Tertiary Education  
and Employment Project***

**Case Studies Research**

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## **1. Introduction**

Ireland is one of a number of countries participating in an OECD research project entitled *Pathways for Students with Disabilities to Tertiary Education and Employment*. The aim of the project is to identify high quality transition programmes with regard to the effectiveness of progression policies and support provided for people with disabilities in transition to post-secondary education, during tertiary education and through to employment. The project is based on three inputs: a country report identifying transition policies; a country research visit; and, a number of case studies delivering good examples of successful pathways for transition.

The first two parts of the project have been completed. This report presents the results of the case study research piece. The aim was to identify high quality strategies developed by stakeholders involved in the transition process for implementing successful transition to tertiary education and to employment as well as skills mobilised.

### **1.1 Structure of the Report**

Following the methodology in Section 2 which outlines the selection of case study exemplars and the approach taken, a brief legislative backdrop is provided in Section 3. In Section 4, the features of the disability services in the three exemplar settings are described. Detailed case studies of students engaged in further education, degree level and PhD level education are presented in Section 5. The themes arising from the case studies and other relevant stakeholder interviews are discussed in Section 6. In Section 7, the conditions that are needed to enable transition and progression are discussed and the features of good practice are highlighted.

## **2. Methodology**

A focused literature review was conducted to provide a policy and legislative context for the supports available to further and higher education students with a disability in Ireland.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) selected the National Learning Network and City of Dublin VEC, University of Dublin, Trinity College and University College Cork, as centres of good practice for students with disabilities. Six students with disabilities were identified by the disability services in these colleges as 'transition exemplars' who have progressed as follows:

- Route 1** Two students currently studying at PLC (Post Leaving Certificate) level in further education (ISCED Level 4), having recently completed second level.
- Route 2** Two students currently studying at undergraduate degree level in the university sector (ISCED Level 5A), having recently completed second level.
- Route 3** Two students currently studying at PhD level in the university sector (ISCED Level 6), having recently completed tertiary level education.

For each of the three progression routes, one student with specific learning difficulties (SLD) and one non-SLD disabled student was selected, in line with the approach suggested by the OECD.

A case study interview schedule, based on the themes supplied by the OECD was drawn up to guide the interviews (see Appendix 1). It was circulated in advance to the interpreter that accompanied one of the students to the case study interview. The students were told that the questions were voluntary and that the interviews would be presented anonymously in the report and that no distinguishing features would be described.

The students were asked to nominate up to four persons that had an influence on their progression through the education system. Four of the six students were willing to do so and nominated individuals in the higher education system (disability support staff, tutors and one parent). The researchers interviewed these individuals and asked them about their support strategy and the rationale underpinning it. The other two students were uncomfortable about third parties being interviewed about how they were supported. It would have been unethical for the researchers to insist on nominations, hence the students' wishes were respected. Both of these students were older and had strong, clear insights into how and why they progressed.

The heads of the disability services of each of the exemplar colleges were interviewed in keeping with the approach outlined by the OECD.

The researchers also attended an in-service training seminar on accommodating specific learning disabilities conducted by The National Learning Network for CDVEC teachers.

The case studies were written up. A thematic analysis of all the interview content was performed. The focus of the analysis was on the conditions for and features of good practice.

### **3. Legislative Backdrop**

Equality and disability legislation has played a significant role in shaping progressive and inclusive policies for people with disabilities in Ireland over the last ten years.

The enactment of the Irish Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Acts (2000; 2004) was of considerable importance in promoting access of opportunity and outcome for distinct groups of people including those with disabilities. The Acts prohibit direct and indirect discrimination on nine grounds (gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community).

The definition of employer used in the Employment Equality Act includes educational institutions and educators/trainers. As such, educational institutions are obliged to take appropriate action, defined as 'reasonable accommodation' in the Equality Acts, to enable students with a disability to have access to and participate in education and training programmes.

The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) suggests that reasonable accommodation in an educational setting might include the adaptation of premises or equipment, changing procedures, modifying the delivery of a course or providing additional services such as assistive technology, educational support workers, including interpreters, personal assistants and note takers, extra tuition and access to materials – for example lecture notes.

These kinds of supports are financed in further and higher education by The Fund for Students with Disabilities, which was established in 1994/5 by the then Department of Education and Science and is administered on its behalf by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education ('National Access Office') in the HEA. The Fund has been instrumental in supporting the increase in the participation and retention of students with disabilities in further and higher education.

Ireland's Disability Act (2005) places a statutory obligation on public service providers, including educational institutions, to support access to services and facilities for people with disabilities. Under the Act, people with disabilities are entitled to:

1. Have their health and educational needs assessed.
2. Have individual service statements drawn up, setting out what services they should get.
3. Access independent complaints and appeals procedures.
4. Access public buildings and public service employment.

The educational needs of children are dealt with under the Education for Persons with Special Needs Act (EPSEN 2004). The aim(s) of EPSEN are to:

- Establish the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and a Special Education Appeals Board, which has responsibility for appeals in relation to a number of the provisions in the Act, was established in April 2006.
- Make further provision, having regard to the common good and in a manner that is informed by best international practice, for the education of people with special educational needs,
- To provide that the education of people with such needs shall, wherever possible, take place in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs, to provide that people with special educational needs shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs,
- To assist children with special educational needs to leave school with the skills necessary to participate, to the level of their capacity, in an inclusive way in the social and economic activities of society and to live independent and fulfilled lives,
- To provide for the greater involvement of parents of children with special educational needs in the education of their children, for those purposes to establish a body to be known as the national council for special education and to define its functions,
- To confer certain functions on health boards in relation to the education of people with special educational needs, to enable certain decisions made in relation to the education of people with such needs to be the subject of an appeal to an appeals board and to provide for related matters. (July 2004)

Both the EPSEN Act and the Disability Act have parts that have not been fully implemented and therefore are without the status of being a statutory requirement. Some of the key provisions of EPSEN, which have been implemented, include the setting up of the National Council for Special Education which sanctions teaching and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) resources and the promotion of an inclusive approach for children with disabilities.

The OECD Project on Pathways for Disabled Students to Tertiary Education and Employment Ireland Country report (prepared by the National Access Office of the HEA,



2010, publication forthcoming) indicates that the intention was to implement both of these Acts simultaneously but the difficult current economic circumstances have unfortunately resulted in a deferral until further notice. However, the government is committed to the full implementation of both the EPSEN and Disability Acts at the earliest possible date.

According to the Ireland Country report (*op. cit.*) the deferral of the implementation of EPSEN directly affects the introduction of statutory Individual Education Plans (IEPs). It was intended under EPSEN that these plans would act as a strategic planning tool, which would allow service providers to create a holistic assessment of a student's needs and implement a tailored plan to respond to these needs. While recognizing that significant resources continue to be invested in health and educational services to build up capacity to assist all people with special needs and that resources are provided for a range of services including psychological services, special education needs organizers, special needs assistants, transport and so forth, the Country Report points out that the full implementation of disability legislation is of fundamental importance to the policy goal to create a socially inclusive society.

While there is not a statutory requirement at present to design Individual Action Plans, schools are encouraged by the Department of Education and Skills to use some form of individualized education planning for children with special needs and the majority do so, according to the Special Education section of the Department.

The Department's *Learning Support Guidelines* recommend that an Individual profile and Learning Programme should be devised for all children who are receiving supplementary teaching from the learning-support teacher. Training has been provided to primary and post primary schools by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in relation to individual education plans, taking close account of the procedures that are set out in EPSEN Act 2004. The provision of individual plans for children with special needs is recognised as an important feature of good practice, and it is in this context that inspectors examine and comment in Whole School Evaluation reports on the quality of planning and the collaboration that takes place between the various teachers, parents and outside services in regard to the provision of an appropriate education for children with special educational needs.

At an overarching policy level, the implications of the legislation are profound in sense that what is envisaged more of a rights-based approach than the compliance model of earlier legislation (Ireland Country Report *op. cit.*). Secondly, the emphasis is on mainstreaming – i.e. on accommodating and supporting people with disabilities within existing educational and other systems instead of separate provision in 'special schools', for example. Some of the case study material illustrates the wisdom of moving away from separate provision. The quality and availability of supports and

accommodations as described in detail in the Ireland Country Report, have clearly improved dramatically over the last decade – the challenge is to ensure that the progress that has been made and commitment to further improvement is not diminished in a context of economic upheaval.

The supports that have been established were designed to have a positive impact on the participation of people with disabilities in higher education. A National Access Plan 2008-2013 to promote increased participation and greater equality in higher education in Ireland was drawn up by the National Access Office of the HEA in consultation with the Department of Education and Skills, assisted by an advisory group. A global concept of access is envisaged by the Plan incorporating not just entry to higher education for groups traditionally under-represented in its environs, but retention and successful completion.

The Plan reflects current Irish Government policy, as stated in the *Towards 2016* Partnership Agreement, to invest in further support measures including needs assessment, technology support, community based strategies, childcare support and access routes to support participation in further and higher by students from diverse backgrounds, including those with a disability.

The reasons identified for the under-representation of students with disabilities include lack of supports throughout the education system, low educational expectations, under-diagnosis of specific learning disabilities and a variety of accessibility issues.

In the last ten years, considerable progress has clearly been made in making further and higher education more accessible to people with disabilities. Numbers have risen from a very low baseline of 450 people with disabilities attending further and higher education ten years ago to a current (2009) population of almost 5,000 (AHEAD unpublished, see [www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie)). Statistics gathered by AHEAD show that students with disabilities now account for approximately 4% of the undergraduate population participating in higher education in Ireland (AHEAD unpublished figures for academic years 2008/2009).

Challenges remain, however. The rate of progression through higher education is significantly lower for people with disabilities, of whom just 3% complete their education to degree level compared to 16% of the general population (CSO Census Data, 2006). An evaluation of access programmes in higher education prepared for the HEA found that while equality and diversity policies and principles are evolving rapidly, few institutions are in the position of reporting that they have adequate resources to

fully implement their access policy<sup>1</sup>. Progression of those with sensory disabilities is particularly low (Seeing AHEAD: A study of the factors affecting blind & vision impaired students going on to higher education, AHEAD, 2008) although improvements are reported at particular colleges. It seems, from student and college (anecdotal) experiences that students gravitate towards institutions that are known to provide good support for particular disabilities.

Progression from tertiary education into employment is also reportedly problematic. Unfortunately, the HEA First Destinations Survey does not take account of students' disability status, making the extent of the problem nationally impossible to quantify at this time. Data from a small survey of UCC graduates with disabilities<sup>2</sup> are illustrative, however. Some 11% of graduates with disabilities described themselves as seeking employment compared to 3% of their non-disabled peers.

Data from the 2006 Census show that 4.4% of people in the labour force (i.e. those who are available to work) have disabilities. They also show that 17% of people with disabilities in the labour force (aged 15 and over) were unemployed compared to 8% in the general population. A high proportion of those with disabilities are not in the labour force (28%) for the given reason of permanent sickness or disability. One encouraging trend is that younger people with disabilities in the 20-24 age cohort are less likely to be this category (20%) than those in the next (25-34) age cohort (27%) indicating a possibility that improved supports and access policies are facilitating greater participation in the labour force.

In the next section, the policies and practices of the three disability support services selected as exemplars for this study are explored.

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Authority (2006). *Towards the Best Education for All. An Evaluation of Access Programmes in Higher Education in Ireland*. Higher Education Authority, Dublin.

<sup>2</sup> UCC Disability Support Service. (2005) *Where Are They Now? Review of the First Destinations of Graduates with Disabilities*. UCC, Cork.

#### **4. Transition Strategies and Approaches of the Higher Education Institutions**

In this section, the transition policies and approaches to supporting students with learning and other disabilities in the exemplar colleges is described.

##### **4.1 University College Cork (UCC) Disability Service Overview**

UCC has approximately 16,000 students. There are approximately 600 students in UCC with a disability. The UCC Disability Support Service (DSS) has fourteen staff (Disability Officer, seven advisors (some are part-time), two job-share career guidance officers, one technician, three administration staff as well as a student who helps with reception).

UCC's DSS administers the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities ('the Fund') at local level. The Fund resources the provision of supports and accommodations to students with disabilities. These include assistive technology equipment and/or professional support, such as note-takers, interpreters and study support appropriate to the needs of students with disabilities.

On registration with the disability service, a needs assessment is conducted to help determine the level and type of supports required by individual students.

UCC's disability policy is to proactively support students with everything they need in first year while encouraging gradual independence from less transferable supports over time. The objective is to enable students to become as independent as possible before leaving college. The UCC DSS has a dedicated disability careers guidance service.

##### **4.1.1 Assistive Technology and Other Supports**

UCC hosts an Assistive Technology Laboratory where students can access computers with specialist software as well as specialist devices such as Dictaphones, CCTV (magnification device), and portable note-taking devices. The Laboratory is open until 7pm Monday to Thursday and until 1pm on Friday but is closed at weekends. It is only accessible (by swipe card) to students who register with the laboratory. Students are encouraged to access technology that can be transferred for use in the workplace (e.g. lightweight IT devices rather than laptops). They are encouraged to show prospective employers how they can overcome perceived barriers with AT and to be solution-focused.

The work of the laboratory includes orientation programmes, needs assessments, identifying and sourcing appropriate technology and software, training students in its

use, identifying other supports a student might need such as a note taker, PA/EA (educational assistant), alternative exam options, tutors to help with specific academic areas, and transport. The student's advisor is responsible for putting non-technological support in place and for supporting them to apply for grant-aid to the Fund. Priorities for funding are agreed with each student at the start of the academic year. The AT Laboratory also has specialised scanning technology, allowing students to have text books scanned and uploaded onto their computers. Use of the scanner is free-of-charge but priority is given to the visually impaired. The AT Laboratory is located in the library on the ground floor and is accessible for those with a physical disability.

Throughout the campus, Read & Write software for students with dyslexia and Zoom Text for visually impaired students have been mainstreamed into the computer system so that it can be accessed anywhere on the campus. Jaws software is available on library computers.

UCC employs a qualified mobility trainer who trained with the Irish Guide Dogs Association. She provides one-to-one support to students in need of mobility training. This can involve helping students to become familiar with the use of a cane. Students are helped to get to know the campus by working out routes for them and walking them through these routes until they are confident, including accommodation to campus, lecture venues, support services and restaurants, for example. The objective is to help students become as independent as possible as quickly as possible.

#### **4.1.2 Outreach/Links with Second Level Schools**

The UCC AT Laboratory is involved in outreach to second-level schools to make parents, students and Visiting Teachers<sup>3</sup> aware of the pathways into UCC and the support that is available for students with a disability.

Higher education students with disabilities give presentations to second level students thinking of coming to college and to mature students. The UCC disability service is developing relationships with Visiting Teachers and with disability associations as a way of accessing potential students.

## **4.2 University of Dublin, Trinity College (TCD) Disability Service Overview**

There were 15,914 students registered at TCD in 2008/09. TCD disability service was established in 2000, at which point very few students with disabilities were attending the college. Numbers grew rapidly over the decade (circa 30% a year) and in 2010, 700

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<sup>3</sup> Support service for deaf/hard-of-hearing/blind/visually impaired students

students with disabilities attended TCD. TCD now has the highest number of students with disabilities of any higher education college in Ireland (unpublished AHEAD survey, 2009).

The TCD Disability Office employs seven full-time and two part-time staff. Its staffing includes an educational psychologist who provides a full screening service for students with learning disabilities and an AT Officer. Disability support officers work closely with academic liaison officers.

In early 2008, TCD received Higher Education Authority *Strategic Innovation* funding for the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project (TIC). The objective of this project is to mainstream inclusive principles within the entire college curricula so as to enable students from non-traditional learning backgrounds to participate equitably in the academic life of college. Courses are audited to ensure they are accessible to all, including for students with disabilities and students from non-traditional backgrounds. The disability service anticipates that this strategy will ensure the continuous improvement of TCD's accessibility for students with disabilities.

The Director of the disability service is a member of the senior management team of the college reporting to the Chief Academic Officer. The approach taken to disability policy is to embed it strongly in college policy. As such, disability policy is threaded through and integrated with TCD's strategic and operational plans rather than being conceived separately. In terms of day-to-day support, the disability service works closely with the academic liaison officer attached to the faculties students are attending so as to ensure good co-ordination and integration with academic matters. The disability service also administers the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities.

#### **4.2.1 AT and Other Supports**

After students conduct a needs assessment with the disability service a Learning and Educational Supports Needs (LENs) report is produced. The LENs identifies the specific educational supports required by individual students at lectures and during course assessments, including the provision of overheads and lecture notes in advance. It also sets out the accommodations provided by the disability service at formal examinations. Examples of the supports provided by the disability service include access to assistive technology, enhanced library and photocopying services and access to note takers, interpreters and other learning support tutors. Exam supports include extra time, rest breaks and technological aids as required. The information in the LENs report is copied to relevant academic staff, including the student's tutor, to ensure full awareness of the accommodation needs required.

TCD has three modern AT resource rooms called 'Assistive Technology Information Centres (ATIC). Two ATIC areas are on campus and a third facility is in St. James' Hospital. The disability service also works closely with specialist support services/organisations for specific disabilities. Examples of low-level AT on offer includes ergonomic aids and adjustments to computer settings, read and write software and mind mapping. High level AT is also available at the centres and includes screen reading software, Dragon voice dictation software and Zoom text screen magnification software. Advanced scanning software is also available which allows common computer files (such as Word and RTF documents) to be read aloud and more sophisticated packages enable blind users to scan in documents and convert the scanned image into on screen text; from which they can have the text read out to them, add their own notes and save the modified file for later use.

In terms of physical accessibility, TCD (because of its historic nature and age) has been perceived as difficult to negotiate for people with mobility difficulties. TCD is committed to the principle of universal access and is actively working towards providing reasonable access to all of its services, information, buildings and facilities. Over the last ten years the accessibility of the built environment at TCD has improved considerably and almost all rooms are accessible. Currently, a pathway is being built through the cobblestones of 'Front Square', which will greatly improve students with physical and sensory disabilities mobility around the campus.

#### **4.2.2 Outreach**

TCD disability service takes part in open days for prospective students. It has strong links with a number of schools in its immediate area that are designated disadvantaged and operates an access programme with those schools. It is engaged in a number of projects with external support agencies addressing in particular developmental disabilities (e.g. ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome) and is involved with parents and schools as part of this work.

### **4.3 National Learning Network and City of Dublin VEC Disability Service Overview**

The National Learning Network (NLN) of the Rehab Group provides the disability service in the City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee (CDVEC). CDVEC, a statutory agency, provides second-level education, further education (ISCED Level 4) and adult education programmes in the Dublin city area. NLN has specialised disability expertise which supports CDVEC to provide a high quality service. The National Learning Network provides high quality, accredited training and specialist support to people who are at-risk of exclusion from the labour market. Within the CDVEC, the disability

service is provided by three disability officers employed by Rehab/National Learning Network, to eight further education colleges. The disability service staff do not have fixed offices in the colleges and instead operate from common areas, using different offices as the need for one- to-one consultations arise. This arrangement seems to work well as it encourages informal contact with staff and students.

The service is available to other (non-attached) colleges in the CDVEC as a specialist source of advice, information on disability issues. The National Learning Network/CDVEC administers the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities and also sources alternative funding for students with disabilities who are not eligible for the Fund

#### **4.3.1 AT and Other Supports**

The National Learning Network/CDVEC has been developing its AT service since 2003. Students' AT requirements are analysed as part of the needs assessment process. A low-tech AT toolkit (keyboard and ergonomic aids) is available for sampling prior to purchase, to minimize the level of abandonment. The service has recruited a part-time AT technical support worker who will train and support students in the use of more advanced AT and provide technical back up, if necessary. An AT guide for students and staff has been produced to 'demystify' AT and raise awareness of the types of support available, which the service will source for students. A College Principals manual and a study skills manual have also been produced.

Central features of the disability service include:

- An evaluation of students' support needs on first contact with the disability support service.
- Sourcing appropriate and effective AT and training students in its application.
- Organisation/provision of one-to-one learning support for students and training in study skills.
- Organisation of specific professional supports such as note takers and interpreters.
- Liaison with appropriate college authorities with regard to the negotiation of examination accommodations.



- In-service training of academic staff on the nature of different disabilities and the appropriate supports, including AT.

The nature of the disability service provided by the National Learning Network/CDVEC depends to some extent on individual college policy. Hence there is some variation in approach to examination accommodations, for example, across the eight colleges in receipt of the service.

#### **4.3.2 Outreach**

The National Learning Network/CDVEC disability service attends open days in the colleges for prospective students and attends relevant conferences (e.g. Irish Guidance Counsellors, Irish Computer Society teacher conferences) to highlight the support provided. It is planning to develop outreach links into Irish deaf schools. It links in with specialist and specific learning disability services and works in partnership when required. The disability service works with families of disabled students if appropriate and only if requested.

## **5. Case Studies**

### **5.1 Case Study 1 Further Education Sector**

Student 1 is a profoundly deaf young man. He successfully completed a FETAC Level 5 (ISCED 4) Art course and is now pursuing a Higher National Diploma (ISCED Level 5B) in a cognate area. He entered further education from school on the basis of his portfolio, application details and an interview. A schoolteacher brought the course to his attention. His experience of school (a deaf school) was positive. Classes were conducted through signing.

Student 1 avails of interpreters throughout the academic year. He described the provision of interpreters as essential to his being able to access and benefit from college education. He also makes use of note-takers and is interested in having the assistance of proof-readers to help him with the English language (sign language is different to English).

Student 1 found the transition from a deaf school with a small number of students to a larger, 'mainstream' college difficult. Communication with other students was a particular challenge when he started each of his courses, and when the interpreter was not present, as none of the students were familiar with sign language. He taught his classmates basic sign language and over time communications improved. Student 1 said he tries hard to get involved and says that the students were good at including him in conversations and activities. He finds mature students make more of an effort, while the younger students need to be drawn out more.

There was no formal transition strategy in his second-level setting to guide progression from second-level to further/higher education.

The transition from course to course is difficult for Student 1 because he has to start the whole process of familiarizing his student peers with signing each time he changes course.

*'I have to initiate conversations – I always make the first approach - there is a communication problem, perhaps caused by embarrassment. I write notes to students and use universal gestures to try and get relationships started but it takes time and effort.'*

Student 1 hopes to progress into a degree course but is worried about the level of English required. He asks lecturers to speak in easy, clear sentences – again taking the initiative. He is contemplating doing his preferred course over a longer timeframe allowing him to improve his English. However, he is concerned about having to initiate

the communication process again from first principles with a new set of students and the lack of continuity with the friendships he has made.

Student 1 is in regular text and personal contact with the disability officer and has also used the college's guidance service. He finds the educational environment highly supportive and makes daily use of translator services. He would like to progress into employment after finishing his degree but is concerned about accessing employment - for example attending interviews without an interpreter. He views work experience as a critical support in this regard and has yet to experience it.

## **5.2 Case Study 2 Further Education Sector**

Student 2 is a young woman who has a specific learning difficulty (dyslexia). It was diagnosed in her final year at school after her mother brought her to a educational psychologist in private practice. Student 2 knew there was something wrong as she performed well in class assignments but consistently failed her written/exam work. She said that only one of her teachers picked up on the nature of her difficulty.

After the diagnosis, Student 2 was permitted to use a computer to conduct her final school exams (Leaving Certificate) and was successful. No other accommodations were made at her school, however, - no notes were provided and her teachers did not change their practice despite the explicit suggestions in the educational psychologist's report. Student 2 entered a private higher education college and started a course in architecture. She found it difficult. While she had indicated on the Central [College] Applications Office form that she had dyslexia, the diagnosis was either not communicated to the college or was not acted on by the college. Student 2 became pregnant, and subsequently left the private college because of the lack of accommodation for her dyslexia and because there were no crèche facilities.

After a traumatic period in her personal life, during which Student 2 became homeless and lived in emergency accommodation, she started examining her educational options again. She considered doing vocational training courses offered by FÁS [the State Training Authority] but found that only a limited number of courses provided childcare and that these tended to be in areas of little interest to her (for example, secretarial courses). A community organisation recommended a particular further education college to her and she put her name down for three courses and was offered places on two.

On entering her chosen course (a BTEC course, equivalent to FETAC Level 6 on the Irish framework of qualifications) she was immediately contacted by the disability service to conduct a needs analysis and was offered a laptop with 'texthelp'. She is also

able to use the computer for examinations. The student disclosed her dyslexia to her faculty teachers herself. She feels it is important that all faculty teachers be told about students' specific learning difficulties by the course co-ordinator, after agreement with the student, and in the context of meeting their particular needs.

Student 2 raised the issue of needing notes because of the difficulty she has comprehending material while transcribing:

*'If I am trying to write lecture notes I can't follow what is being said and what I have written makes no sense to me afterwards.'*

While a note taker could be provided to Student 2 under the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities, her preference is to maintain her independence and to manage her dyslexia with AT and lecture note support.

One of her lecturers provided her with copies of his Powerpoint presentations on a USB stick, which she found *'really helpful'*. While she had to ask for notes to be provided, generally her lecturers were willing to do so. She did have one experience of non-cooperation however. Student 2 believes that there is a lack of understanding of dyslexia in educational institutions:

*'People think it is all about spelling – it is much more complex than that. Dyslexia affects your concentration and your ability to understand what is being said. Teachers understand it in a technical way but they don't understand what it is like in an applied setting, one that is, for example, lecture based. Very simple techniques can make a huge difference.'*

Student 2 identified the provision of lecture notes as central to her transition into second year and progression thereafter:

*'The teachers are great but their mode of delivery is lecture based and I need the notes to learn and progress'*.

She also highlighted the level and quality of AT support and encouragement from the disability service and the availability of childcare arrangements on site as essential to her transition into second year at college.

### 5.3 Case Study 3 Primary Degree (University, ISCED 5A)

Student 3 entered university as a mature student. His social worker in the National Learning Network recognised his potential and encouraged him to apply for university as a mature student. He is wheelchair bound due to Cerebral Palsy and also has severe dyslexia and is unable to read or write. He has completed second year of his university degree.

From age 11-15 he spent a lot of time at an institute abroad (for his physical disability). While there, he sat the equivalent of the Junior and Leaving Certificate, however they were not recognised in Ireland. He sat the Leaving Certificate in Ireland but did not get the points he needed, as he did not have English or French. As a result he did not gain admission to higher education through the central applications system and had to wait until he was 23 to enter as a mature student.

His school abroad, which he attended primarily because he was in treatment for his physical disability was described as *'great'*. He was back and forth to it every six months and while there he did tests with different educational psychologists [a number indicated that he is very bright]. In addition, he was very self-motivated and accessed any educational programmes he could, such as Open University courses.

His experience of schools in Ireland was not positive. He was not diagnosed with dyslexia until his mother read an article about it and had him privately assessed. The school was described as poor in terms of accommodating his disabilities and he was left at the back of the room and told to stay quiet – there were reportedly no attempts made at enabling inclusion or facilitating his needs.

When the school received the educational psychologist's report this prompted the school to get in touch with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), which then recommended the kinds of supports he should have in school or for examinations including audio-tapes, a scribe and reader for examinations. The NEPS report was described as crucial in gaining access to supports at school and in changing the teachers' attitudes to him:

*'They realised I had the intellect of a 25 year old but couldn't read or write'.*

Looking back, he feels that the second level system was overly dependent on him being diagnosed by NEPS in order to get supports. He also wonders why the teachers did not question why he found it so hard to engage.

He described the Irish schools he attended as *'having met their legal obligations'*. The last school he attended was a special school and only provided classes up to junior

certificate level. It had good physical accessibility, however. Student 3 wanted to do the Leaving Certificate but felt he had to fight for it. He became the first person in the school to complete the Leaving Certificate examinations. The school now provides leaving certificate education and further education courses. While this students' experience was negative, his persistence may have acted as a catalyst for improving the quality of educational provision to other students at this school.

Student 3 needed a number of supports to participate in higher education. Access to transport (campus mini-bus) has been very important, not only in terms of physical access, but also because the bus driver is very friendly and has helped him to find his way around the city, which is not his home place, and where to get the best deals for clothes and food. Student 3 is living on Disability Allowance (a social welfare payment) so budgeting is critical and he struggles with this – *'lots of Pot Noodle and caffeine'*. In 2010 he moved to private accommodation so he is no longer eligible for the campus mini-bus but now has the confidence to use public transport.

Student 3 found the first three weeks at university really difficult, so much so that he had a number of panic attacks, and he considered dropping out. He went to the disability service to discuss his difficulties and was convinced to avail of support. The disability service organised for each academic year to be split over two years so that he did not get overwhelmed – this made a huge difference and he is now considering doing a masters degree when he finishes his undergraduate degree.

Student 3 described the support provided by the disability service as *'brilliant'*. It helped him with technology, accessing accommodation and provided educational assistants (EAs). EAs and note takers have been essential as his level of dyslexia is profound. The disability service encouraged him to look at software such as Read & Write and Dragon. He can use the disability service scanner to scan in books to his laptop and all the computers on campus have Read & Write. Student 3 had been reluctant to use AT initially but has seen the benefits and is beginning to build up his AT skills:

*'The disability service has been fantastic. Each student is treated with respect and as an individual and in a holistic way. I feel valued, welcomed (unlike at school) and this has motivated me to do well. I registered with them when I first came to university but felt I didn't need them – they kept chasing me down to come in and talk and I was really glad when I did as they helped me realise that I needed support and that this was ok.'*

Student 3 is registered with the disability service and as such he is provided with his own exam room so that there are no distractions – he is easily distracted. He is also provided with an exam scribe and reader and an invigilator appointed by the disability service (usually all three roles are fulfilled by one person). He is allowed 10 minutes

extra per exam in addition to lavatory and cigarette breaks as needed. Stickers are put on all of his work to identify that he has a disability (they do not indicate the type of disability) and he gets a spelling and grammar waiver.

Finances are an on-going challenge for Student 3. His local authority awarded him a student maintenance grant. However, because he splits his academic year across two years, his grant is also split, effectively halving the amount he has to live off each year. He took up a part-time job to help with the bills but it was too distracting so he gave it up. He budgets very carefully and has not been afraid to go to charity for help. He has debts of nearly €2k and growing. He is not entitled to rent allowance as he is a full-time student and he has to apply for a medical card every year since coming to college – the disability service scanning technology and software means that he is now able to cope with the paperwork and application forms.

Participation in higher education has enriched Student 3's life in many ways. The disability service made him aware of clubs and societies on campus and he has made many friends. He also got involved with campus radio in first year when he produced and presented a programme about disabilities.

He has been given opportunities to speak in public. For example, he gives talks to students and parents about coming to higher education with a disability. One of his support persons described him an inspiring speaker. He said that talking in public and to researchers has increased his confidence and reduced his panic attacks. It has also given him the confidence to ask questions and form his own opinions.

Student 3 is hoping to progress into a Masters course. In order to make this transition he needs to pass his exams, which he is confident of doing. He needs ongoing support in the form of EAs and technology, which are in place. Financial issues are the greatest threat to his being able to progress through higher education. The financial strain he is under has affected his health. He cannot afford healthy, fresh food and his blood pressure has risen.

In terms of making the transition into work, having done a number of interviews he recognises that he will need to be solution-focused with employers in terms helping them understand how AT works and its benefits. He hopes to use the job coaches that work with the disability/guidance service.

He has also become more active politically and campaigns on behalf of people with disabilities.

Student 3 believes that his participation in higher education has improved his employability, self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy. He now views himself as

capable instead of disabled. Higher education has had the impact of helping him become more outgoing, with an established social network and a wide circle of friends:

*'I'm not at home on welfare watching TV. I am calmer, I feel networked and motivated.'*

#### **5.4 Case Study 4 Primary Degree (University, ISCED 5A)**

Student 4 is visually impaired. She entered university through the Central Applications system. She is entering the final (4<sup>th</sup>) year of her law degree. She had some measure of support before she came to university, which the college built on. At school, she used Jaws software and she had a note-taker for mathematics and science subjects. In classes involving languages, her teachers were very accommodating and dictated class notes for her. Her parents were also very encouraging and helpful in terms of practical and academic supports.

*'I was very clear about what I needed and wasn't afraid to ask for it. I was also lucky to have attended a newer school with younger teachers who were very open to helping students with disabilities. I felt very included at school – I did everything everyone else did and if I couldn't a teacher would find something appropriate. For example the PE teacher (who also had a disability) went out of his way to provide different PE options for me.'*

The school, which is publicly funded, does not have specific disability policies. It practices inclusive teaching for all students and has a strong ethos of supporting students to fully achieve their academic potential. It is a new school with recently qualified teachers who would have had some input during their training on diversity and accommodating disabilities. At least one of the staff had a disability and he took a particular interest in making sure Student 4 was fully involved. This particular student also had parents who were highly supportive of her academic attainment (see also 6.1 for more detail).

Student 4 was very well supported academically at school and she worked hard to achieve the high grades needed to study the course in which she was interested.

In terms of making the transition from second level to higher education, Student 4 needed a number of practical supports including help with transport, which was initially provided by her parents. In the second year of her degree programme she accessed funding (Fund for Students with Disabilities) to avail of taxis and next year she hopes to use the train, as she wants to build her own experience and confidence of different transport systems. In the summer before she entered university she updated her laptop and her software



At the start of each year the disability service conducted a needs assessment with Student 4, as it does with all students who have a disability. She had an assistant from the National Council of the Blind in first year to help her with orientation and personal development. She made new friends on arrival at university and they and staff helped her find her way around campus. She also used a note-taker. She identified the provision of notes as essential to her participation in higher education. Many of her lecturers were told that she would need notes in advance of her taking their classes and all were co-operative. Student 4 had books scanned for her by the AT Laboratory and she also accessed notes through the university Blackboard system. Most of the legal cases used in class are available on-line and from the university's *'fantastic access to key databases'*.

In her second year, she improved her IT (Excel and Outlook) and AT skills. Student 4 decided to use her laptop and dispensed with the note-taker. She was determined throughout her college life to become as independent as possible. She became so proficient with using her laptop for note taking that she took notes for other students! In her third year she used the Mobility Trainer to get around more. She has been using the Mobility Trainer progressively since her first year at university. The trainer walked routes with her, giving her landmarks, walking behind her and meeting her at agreed spots until she was confident. The Mobility Trainer also encouraged her to consider using a cane and in 2009 Student 4 started using a cane.

Student 4 is now well integrated into university life and is very independent. In 2010, as part of her course she completed two work experience, in two different cities. The accommodation office in her university found a place for her in a student hostel (bed and board) and her mother stayed with her for the first week. She made friends with others in the hostel and took the train home at weekends. She spent time with a friend who is totally blind, going around the city. This was a totally new experience and it was a confidence boost to be with someone who was totally blind and who successfully negotiated everything from getting the right bus, to reading a menu, to checking and paying for bills. In advance of starting the work experience, she accessed support from the National Council for the Blind and got mobility training to support her commute from her accommodation to work. She really enjoyed the first of the two work experience placements:

*'The staff was great, the office was open plan, well lit and I made friends. It also helped me realise that I want to work in a corporate/organisation environment rather than a solicitor's office'*.

She found multi-tasking in work experience a challenge but it was a great confidence-booster and it afforded her the opportunity to deal with the general public. The second work experience post was not as successful:

*'It would have been a poor experience whether you were disabled or not. They didn't know what type of work to give me – it was very restrictive ('you are not staff' was used a lot as an excuse!).'*

She is considering doing a Masters degree after she finishes her primary degree and is confident about entering the workplace. Student 4's higher education experience has had a number of positive impacts on her quality of life. It has increased her confidence, her mobility (through the use of a cane) and has enabled her to avail of two different work experience placements. She has made many friends and is involved in many different clubs and societies.

### **5.5 Case Study 5 Fourth Level (PhD, ISCED Level 6)**

Student 5 is visually impaired and has a secondary physical disability. She is a mature student and has completed the second year of her PhD studies.

Student 5 described herself as strongly self-driven but with a history of her family having a strong and vocal belief in her ability. Hence she knew she was academically bright despite a negative school experience, which seemed to have been almost devoid of academic encouragement or engagement. She described the school for the blind she attended as good in terms of learning Braille but poor in terms of her secondary disability (physical accessibility) – *'there were no accommodations made'*. She described the expectations at the time for students who were blind as very limited:

*'I was told the perfect job for me would be sticking stamps on envelopes.'*

She entered university as a mature student at primary degree level and transferred to her current university after completing her Master's degree. The absence of tuition fees was a major impetus for entry to higher education :

*' I wouldn't have considered it otherwise'.*

Student 5 failed her first year degree examinations, mainly because she had been out of the education system so long and did not know how to study. She was pro-active in seeking help from a family friend and from a particular lecturer to improve her study, written course work and exam technique. Their support was described as critical in helping her meet formal examination and course work requirements.

She did not seek the assistance of the college disability service in her first university to provide support for study skills development, preferring to rely on those with whom she

had established relationships. However, she used the dedicated librarian service for students with disabilities intensely as an undergraduate. She described this service as an essential support in terms of her retention at primary degree level:

*'I wouldn't have got through my degree without it.'*

Student 5 said that at the time (five years ago) she was not aware that note takers had been available and that in any event she had a strong desire to maintain her independence and found it difficult to contemplate having a third party accompany her to lectures. In terms of her support strategy, her preference was to rely on relationship-building with lecturers to meet her needs:

*'I would ask the lecturer to spend time with me and explain exactly where I went wrong and what I needed to do. I worked exceptionally hard; long, long hours despite being in physical pain for considerable periods. I was very determined to succeed.'*

Her grades improved dramatically over the following three years and she was awarded first class honours in her final exams. The critical transition point in her degree career was from first to second year and her ability to progress was largely down to her communicating and managing her information needs with academic staff:

*'I found overheads used by some lecturers a huge problem – I was using tapes, which I then had to transcribe into Braille at night – it was exhausting and of course you cannot tape an overhead! I asked the lecturer to describe what was on overheads during his lectures – he had been doing it the same way for 40 years but he did accommodate me.'*

She was encouraged to study at post-graduate level by a lecturer that had been very supportive to her. She made contact with the Irish specialist in the topic she wished to study at postgraduate level and decided to move to that (her second and current) university after being encouraged to continue her studies by the specialist. Her transition to post-graduate studies was smooth academically. The main challenges were acquainting herself with new surroundings, making new friends and developing supportive relationships with academic staff, all of which she succeeded in doing. She made contact with the disability service (in her second and current university) and accessed its AT services and developed her AT competencies.

As a PhD student her reliance on lecture notes is diminished. She uses a digital recorder now and voice recognition software (Dragon), and finds AT support to be excellent particularly the scan readers (Jaws and Zoom Text). She has a dedicated desk in the library and a magnifying facility both of which are part of the college's inclusive disability service. She has also been provided with a lightweight laptop, which has a

docking station and a large screen. She finds all of these disability service supports essential in pursuing her studies.

Her ability to disclose her disabilities and articulate her needs and the specific accommodations required was central to her progression. She acknowledged that students who were reluctant to disclose, or were intimidated by lecturers might find it more difficult as the initiative around the accommodations was self-motivated in all instances. Once she had taken the initiative with lecturers, however, there was a good willingness to listen and to respond. It is worth noting that the disability service in her university works with academics from each Department to ensure they are aware of the necessary accommodations.

In terms of physical accessibility, Student 5 made the observation that both campuses she had attended were poorly designed from the perspective of students with visual disabilities:

*'The buildings are dark and it is difficult to make your way around – different areas in the universities all look the same – there is no differentiation in colour between different areas, the numbers over the doors are very small, steps are sometimes unmarked, more ramps and lifts are needed – what happens if the one lift malfunctions? My strategy is to disclose my disabilities, to memorise places and to meet people in specific locations. I also use the mobile telephone to help locate people. Otherwise I would be very isolated.'*

In terms of employment progression, Student 5 felt she would face considerable obstacles because of her disabilities, her age and the current poor economic climate.

*'Why would an employer choose me when they have much easier options available to them?'*

She is hoping to progress into non-traditional employment such as part-time lecturing or consultancy work where she can manage her work around periods of high energy.

In terms of disability supports in a higher education environment, she is strongly of the view that the service is mainstreamed with some provision for specialised support:

*'Nobody likes to be singled out and sent to a disability service. The Departments need to be much more proactive and prepare lecturers who in turn need to be more enquiring about the kinds of accommodations needed and generally more prepared around the whole area of disability. It is difficult for young students to disclose, particularly with less visible disabilities, and very difficult to ask for particular supports. The role of the disability service should be focussed on raising the awareness of tutors and encouraging*

*them to improve their ability to educate in an inclusive manner that is attuned to the specific needs of students with disabilities.'*

### **5.6 Case Study 6 Fourth Level (PhD, ISCED Level 6)**

Student 6 is a young man who has a specific learning difficulty (dyslexia). He entered university through the Central Applications system. His choices of university were limited because of the Irish language requirement<sup>4</sup> because his dyslexia was not diagnosed until after he entered higher education (during third year). His learning difficulty had been picked up at primary level and he attended special classes. However, there seems to have been slippage between primary level and second level as there was no follow up on foot of primary school notification to his second level school.

In retrospect, Student 6 believes his difficulty should have been picked up as he excelled at mathematics and science subjects and had great difficulties with languages, particularly the Irish language:

*'I didn't like the way it was taught. French was broken down more, making it easier to learn and build sentences up – I couldn't structure Irish.'*

Student 6 identified his own determination to enter university from a very early age (12), parental support and awareness of his academic strengths as the critical factors in making the transition from school to university. He is very conscious, however, that the lack of routine screening for learning difficulties – particularly on foot of recognised difficulties at primary school, could easily have prevented him from attending university.

He finds university much easier than school because he is able to use laptops and because he chose to study what he enjoyed. Since his diagnosis, his performance at exams improved because of the various accommodations made, including extra time and:

*'Knowing I had the freedom to write without being picked up for seeming mistakes helped take the stress away'.*

His academic confidence improved in consequence and he said that he became much more serious about his studies. His academic performance also improved strongly and his grades *'shot up'*.

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<sup>4</sup> The minimum entry (matriculation) requirements for the National University of Ireland for degrees in Arts, Human Sciences, Law and Social Science, specify that applicants need Irish, English a third language and three other subjects.

Student 6 identified the provision of lecture notes as a critical support to enable progression at undergraduate level:

*'I can't concentrate on the content if I am trying to take notes and I cannot understand the notes afterwards because I hadn't understood what was being taken down at the time.'*

He said that some lecturers were good about providing him with notes but others seemed to believe that if they provided notes, students would not attend lectures.

Student 6 applied for and successfully received PhD funding while he in his 4<sup>th</sup> year. He is enjoying his studies and believes his education has greatly enriched his quality of life. He is very conscious that all of this experience may have eluded him if his dyslexia had not been diagnosed (albeit very late). He strongly believes that there should be routine screening of 10-14 year olds in Irish schools for specific learning difficulties.

This student and the other PhD colleague are in a university that strongly supports students' independence. The disability service works at college level to mainstream practices and procedures that are supportive of student achievement. While the disability service is there for students who need individual support, it sees its role as largely strategic in promoting inclusive good practice systemically, so that students' needs are automatically facilitated.

## **6. Analysis of the Themes Arising from the Case Studies and Issues Raised by Key Support People and Providers**

It is important to point out that the case studies are not necessarily reflective of current disability practices in Irish schools. There are undoubtedly many students with disabilities that had more positive experiences at second level. While the colleges had been asked to select students who had recently left school and who had had a positive transition experience, those that came forward had very varied and sometimes difficult school experiences. While their case study profile differs somewhat from what was envisaged by the HEA National Access Office, valuable lessons about good practice could, however, be drawn from sometimes negative experiences.

All of the students had left school some time ago – the most recent (three students) two years ago, one five years ago and one student over 20 years ago. A number of significant improvements have been made to help identify and support students with specific learning and other special needs, particularly at primary level, which the case study students would not have experienced. These include the introduction of mandatory standardized testing at primary level in English, reading and mathematics in 2006 and the guidance provided to schools via various circulars on special education needs and the NEPS<sup>5</sup> staged approach since 2007. Other notable recent improvements include the resourcing of Special Needs Assistants and teaching supports, and the overall emphasis on mainstreaming and accommodating diversity. (See the Ireland Country Report for more details).

Some of the case study students had attended special or segregated schools for children with specific disabilities and some had attended mainstream schools. Most of the schools had reasonable to good physical accessibility. The special schools were accommodating in terms of the particular supports needed by blind or deaf students, but less so in terms of accommodating any secondary disabilities. The (three) students with dyslexia excelled at schoolwork that did not require written language capabilities and underperformed during formal examinations or in formal written assignments. This disparity was not picked up at second level. All cases of dyslexia were undiagnosed until late in second level and not until well into the higher education phase in one case.

Schools varied considerably in terms of recognising and encouraging ability. All of the students knew from an early age that they were bright and academically capable. In some of the schools, educational expectations of students appear to have been very low – this was particularly the case for older students who had attended school prior to the introduction of equality legislation and the subsequent improvements in awareness and

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<sup>5</sup> National Educational Psychological Service

facilities. One of the six students attended a progressive, supportive (mainstream) school that consistently included her in all academic and sporting activities and helped her develop necessary AT and IT skills. She made the easiest transition of the six students into higher education.

### **6.1 Transition from School to Higher Education**

A background of having had active support and encouragement from parents about academic capabilities was a critical factor in encouraging progression into higher education from school and for mature students who had been outside the education system for many years. Strong parental belief in their children's ability seemed to counter even the most negative of early educational experiences by helping instill or reinforce self-efficacy and academic confidence, even when external validation was not present. It can also be inferred from the case studies that a positive school environment, where teachers encourage and support students to reach their full potential, is enormously important. The key features of the strongly positive school environment described by Student 4 and her nominees were as follows:

- The teachers were very open, approachable and inclusive of students with disabilities.
- The support of her parents made the day-to-day school work much easier
- The school encouraged and accommodated her to do what everyone else did.
- The school allowed her to use a laptop in class on which she had Jaws AT software
- The student had a note-taker for maths-based subjects, e.g. maths, accountancy
- Teachers dictated to her for English and Irish – and were generally very supportive. Student 4 was also very clear about what she needed and assertive about asking for whatever she needed.
- Student 4 was very well supported academically. The teachers knew she wanted high points and worked with her and encouraged her to achieve good grades.
- Physical access was good (bright, well lit, ground floor only) as it was a newer school.

Students who had attended special/segregated schools had to overcome deficits in the areas of English language, syllabus constraints and in some cases, outdated and even damaging attitudes about disability. It is important that special schools address students' capacity to join mainstream systems and their longer-term integration needs.



For mature students, the availability of financial assistance for day-to-day living expenses (grant aid or disability allowances) was an essential pre-requisite for entry to higher education, as was the lack of fees. The facility to enter higher education as a mature student and thus bypass entry points requirements that can act as a barrier for students with learning difficulties was also very important.

### **6.1.1 Screening Specific Learning Difficulties at School**

A consistent and comprehensive approach to the identification, screening and diagnosis of specific learning disabilities is a fundamental condition of good disability policy. Students are effectively excluded from full participation in education if existing learning difficulties are not recognised and accommodated from an early stage. Under the Department of Education and Science Circular SP ED 24/03 primary schools were advised to implement a staged approach to the assessment and identification of special education needs as drawn up by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). A circular with guidelines for post-primary schools is due to be issued in 2010. Essentially, the model envisages that teachers administer initial assessment measures to identify pupils with special educational needs, including dyslexia. Severe learning or other difficulties are to be referred by the school to an appropriate professional.

Under this process each school takes responsibility for initial assessment, educational planning and learning support, in consultation with their assigned NEPS psychologist. Only if there is a failure to make reasonable progress in spite of the school's best efforts, will a child be referred for individual psychological assessment. This system allows the psychologists to give early attention to urgent cases and also to help many more children indirectly than could be seen individually. It also ensures that children are not referred unnecessarily for psychological intervention.

The staged model recognises that pupils present with a wide range of issues and difficulties and allows for their amelioration and intervention at the level most appropriate to the particular need.

This approach is reliant on individual teachers' knowledge, competence and availability to do initial and ongoing screening of a wide range of disabilities. International evidence suggests that teachers can reliably distinguish children at risk from controls in referred samples (Gresham, MacMillan, and Bocian, 1997<sup>6</sup>). However they find it more difficult to distinguish general learning disabilities from specific learning difficulties (*op. cit.*).

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<sup>6</sup> Gresham, F., MacMillan, D., & Bocian, K. (1997). Teachers as "tests": Differential validity of teacher judgments in identifying students at-risk for learning difficulties. *School Psychology Review*, 26, 47-60.

More recent research bears this out. In a report for the UN Literacy Decade, Thompson<sup>7</sup> (2010) reports that across English speaking countries, classroom teachers reported feeling unconfident about how to detect a child at risk of dyslexia and varying accessibility to specialist support.

Real life identification can be problematic. Assessment of specific learning difficulties at school level appeared to be a hit and miss affair for the case study students. Even if an assessment of dyslexia at school was made, leading to a referral, there were long delays for an appointment with a NEPS psychologist. From the evidence of two case studies of dyslexic students who were picked up late in the school cycle, the NEPS report does seem to act as a strong trigger for prompting adequate supports and accommodations. However, the process of getting to that stage seems to have been lengthy and difficult.

If SLDs are not picked up early, the opportunity to enter higher education may be permanently affected. This is particularly the case for those from lower income groups as the cost of screening with an educational psychologist in private practice may be prohibitive (c. €700). At present, there is no refund for private screening, even after a positive diagnosis.

The case studies of students with dyslexia strongly illustrate the importance of early, routine screening. The consequences of having a disability that is not diagnosed (or subsequently registered) are serious in terms of access to supports, learning readiness, educational achievement and progression, and general self-confidence and self-efficacy. In addition, as illustrated by case study Student 6, choice of university may be restricted because of Irish or other language admissions criteria.

While case studies presented in this report are illustrative rather than representative in nature and hence cannot be used to make generalizations about the effectiveness of screening policies, the fact that none of the three Irish students with dyslexia were diagnosed or provided with specific learning support until their school education was nearly over or over, suggests a need to continually monitor the effectiveness and timing of dyslexia identification and intervention policies in Irish schools.

International research supports early referral and recognition of dyslexia for the best possible outcome (Coyne et al., 2001<sup>8</sup>; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001<sup>9</sup>; Gresham, 2001<sup>10</sup>;

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<sup>7</sup> Thompson, J. (2010) Good Practice in interventions for teaching dyslexic learners and in teacher training in English-speaking countries. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<sup>8</sup> Coyne, et. al (May 2001). Prevention and Intervention in Beginning Reading: Two Complex Systems *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* Volume 16, Issue 2, pages 62-73, May 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Fuchs, D.; Fuchs, L. S. (2001). Responsiveness to Intervention: A Blueprint for Practitioners, Policymakers, and Parents. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 38, 57-61.

Langenberg, 2000<sup>11</sup>). While there are disagreements amongst professionals and researchers about the definition and etiology of dyslexia, there is agreement about the effectiveness of very early intervention in phonological awareness and phonics. There is also agreement about the need for individualized and intensive instructional approaches in recognition of the heterogeneous nature of dyslexia and about the usefulness of the structured, multi-nodal techniques that have been developed. Students who had early intervention (i.e. early childhood or the first year of primary school) show greater gains in reading accuracy and fluency compared to those who received later support. It is also easier for those who were identified early to catch up with their peers, and the long-term cost of their education is lower (Schneider et al., 1999<sup>12</sup>; Borstrom & Elbro, 1997<sup>13</sup>; National Reading Panel, 2000<sup>14</sup>; Torgerson et al., 2006<sup>15</sup>; O'Connor, 2000<sup>16</sup>).

Research and good practice suggest that children are closely monitored by teaching staff at kindergarten level for age appropriate phonemic awareness (particularly when any difficulties are at variance with their other abilities and educational experiences). Rather than attempt to diagnose (or label) very young children with dyslexia or with a specific learning difficulty (the younger the age the more likely it is that such diagnoses will be inaccurate) research instead suggests that the primary aim of screening techniques should be to identify the maximum number of children 'at risk' (Torgesen, 1998 *op. cit.*; Singleton et al., 1996<sup>17</sup>; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2001 *op. cit.*; Nicolson & Fawcett, 1996<sup>18</sup>) so that effective strategies can be deployed for groups of children. In summarizing what is known about effective intervention from research, Thompson (2010<sup>19</sup>) notes that key features of best practice for content teaching include:

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<sup>10</sup> Gresham, F. Response to Intervention: An Alternative Means of Identifying Students as LD. Paper Presented at the LD Summit. US Department of Education, Washington DC.

<sup>11</sup> Langenberg, D. N. (Ed.) (2000). Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching children to read. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>12</sup> Schneider, W. Ennemoser, M. Roth, E. Küspert, P. (1999). Kindergarten Prevention of Dyslexia: Does Training in Phonological Awareness Work for Everybody? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 32, 429-436.

<sup>13</sup> Borstrom, I.; Elbro, C. (1997). Prevention of Dyslexia in Kindergarten: Effects of Phoneme Awareness Training with Children of Dyslexic Parents. In Hulme, C.; Snowling, M. *Dyslexia: Biology, Cognition and Intervention*. London: Whurr.

<sup>14</sup> National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction*.

<sup>15</sup> Torgerson, C. J.; Brooks, G.; Hall, J. (2006). A Systematic Review of the Research Literature on the Use of Phonics in the Teaching of Reading and Spelling. London, UK: DfES.

<sup>16</sup> O'Connor, R. E. (2000). Increasing the Intensity of Intervention in Kindergarten and First Grade. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 15, 43-54.

<sup>17</sup> Singleton, C. H.; Thomas, K. V.; Leedale, R. C. (1996). *Lucid Cognitive Profiling System (CoPS)*. Beverley: Lucid Research.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolson, R.; Fawcett, A. J. (1990) Automaticity: A New Framework for Dyslexia Research? *Cognition*, 30, 159-182.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, J. (2010) Good Practice in interventions for teaching dyslexic learners and in

- Explicit training in phonological awareness
- Strong focus on phonological decoding and word-level work
- Supported and independent reading of progressively more difficult texts
- Practice of comprehension strategies while reading texts

Key good-practice teaching-process strategies include approaches that emphasize:

- Phonetics
- Multi-sensory teaching
- Cumulative & Sequential stages
- Small, Scaffolded Steps
- Ensuring Automatisation through Practice and Review
- Provide Mental Modeling
- Provide Opportunities for Success

Thompson points out that major reviews of early reading instruction for both classroom-wide success as well as specialist teaching for individuals with dyslexia concur that the key features of teaching reading at the earliest stages are that it is multi-sensory and phonologically based, given that the core of dyslexia is a phonological deficit.

It is hoped that the identification, screening and support process is set to improve in Irish schools. The NEPS guidelines for a staged approach to assessing SLDs are to be extended to post-primary schools. This should benefit children with an SLD undiagnosed at primary level and those who were allocated additional resources without being diagnosed<sup>20</sup>, resulting in more opportunities for assessment or referral and access to accommodations in advance of national examinations. According to the Department of Education and Skills, the majority of post-primary schools now have at least one teacher with a postgraduate qualification in the area of special needs education and this teacher is responsible for organising the provision for students identified as in need of support. While these measures at post-primary are welcome, the literature makes it clear that very early identification of SLD risk coupled with intensive preventative/corrective measures is what produces the greatest impact and at the least cost.

NEPS is continuing to expand its number of psychologists under the Renewed Programme for Government to a total of 201. Schools that do not have a psychologist

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teacher training in English-speaking countries. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

<sup>20</sup> For example, a student with learning difficulties but without a specific diagnosis may receive support in a school through the school's DES learning support allocation.

assigned to them may avail of the Scheme for Commissioning Psychological Assessments (established in 2001) for up to 2% of their pupil population.

In addition, the Department of Education and Skills issued Circular 0138/2006 in 2006 setting out the requirement for mandatory standardised testing in English, Reading and Mathematics. From the beginning of 2007, testing has been implemented on an annual basis for all pupils at two stages of Ireland's primary cycle, (at the end of year three/first class and year six/fourth class) This will help teachers to make more informed decisions in relation to teaching and learning, and will assist in the identification of pupils that may require additional support.

While a number of improvements in the Irish system are evident, more needs to be done in terms of identifying 'at risk' children from a very early age and providing them with the specific measures that the literature supports (see above) so that they do not fall behind the peers and lose confidence in their abilities at a critical developmental stage. As such, the Irish system would benefit from the introduction of earlier (under six years of age) monitoring of phonemic age appropriate awareness followed by intensive corrective instruction of 'at risk' children. This, together with ongoing follow-up (including later screening, full assessment as necessary, appropriate intervention and accommodation), could prevent early difficulties from becoming full-blown and ameliorate the challenges of those with ongoing support needs, while also saving the state money.

### **6.1.2 AT supports at School Level**

The DES provides an Assistive Technology Scheme (Circular M14/05) to support pupils with an assessed special educational need, where they may require specialist equipment to enable them to access an appropriate education.

For example, children who have hearing impairments may require radio aids or sound field systems; visually impaired children may benefit from computers to enable them to read text in larger print etc.

Applications under this scheme are made to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs). All applications for assistive technology are submitted by school management authorities to their local SENO who will examine the application in light of the pupil's assessed disability, the supporting professional recommendation and the school facilities including existing I.T. services in the school.

The Department of Education and Skills has also provided substantial supports for ICT in schools in recent years. These supports have included targeted investment in ICT infrastructure, the provision of a national Schools Broadband Service and associated

Helpdesk; the funding of a programme of continuing professional development in ICT for primary and post-primary teachers through the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE); the provision of technology grants in relation to the new technology subjects at leaving certificate (T4); and the procurement and dissemination of a range of curriculum-relevant digital content resources, primarily through the national portal for ICT in Schools, [www.Scoilnet.ie](http://www.Scoilnet.ie). Further information on ICT and SEN is available on the NCTE's website at <http://www.ncte.ie/SpecialNeedsICT/>.

The case study students who entered higher education with knowledge and experience of supports from school (e.g. IT and AT) seem to find it easier to integrate into college life from an early stage as they have a knowledge base that can be readily expanded instead of having to learn about new technology from first principles, in addition to dealing with the size and unfamiliarity of the campus. The mainstreaming of a basic standard of IT and AT disability support across the entire school system would be of great benefit in this regard.

In December 2000, the then Minister for Education and Science initiated a £2 million scheme for the delivery of laptop computers to students with dyslexia and other reading and writing difficulties in 31 post-primary schools. The purpose of the initiative, which is being overseen by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE), was to explore ways in which ICT can assist students with learning difficulties to work independently within mainstream classes. Students with specific learning difficulties may also access assistive technology through the Aids and Appliances Grant from the Department of Health and Children, or through local Health Boards. Parents who independently purchase equipment can obtain a refund on value-added tax (VAT).

The National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) is currently providing advice and assistance to schools in implementing technologies for students with special educational needs, including those with severe difficulties arising from dyslexia. The extent to which schools are taking up training and at an appropriate level is not possible to establish at this point (no evaluations or reviews have been conducted to date). At a very basic level, however, the provision of good AT support presupposes strong IT competencies at school level. It is widely recognized that IT capacity in Irish schools varies considerably. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has adopted a detailed information and communications technology (ICT) strategy for 2008 – 2013 which if fully implemented, should improve ICT teaching competencies and the integration of ICT in learning and teaching

## **6.2 Progression Within Higher Education**

All of the students found their first year in higher education the most difficult. For students who came from small special schools (for the deaf for example), where they knew everybody and every detail of the layout, to a large college or university environment, the changes were enormously challenging.

All of the further and higher education institutions featured in the study conduct a needs assessment with students and provide individually tailored supports and back-up as required. None of the students that participated in the case studies had been involved in preparing an IEP at school, because of timing factors/delays in policy implementation. The needs assessment exercise in higher education was for most of the students the first time such a process had been undertaken and they found it useful in identifying supports they might not otherwise have considered. In UCC, needs assessment is an ongoing rather than a once-off process in recognition that students' needs change and evolve over time. At a more global level, all of the disability services use monitoring tools and performance indicators to review the quality and effectiveness of their services on a regular (usually annual) basis.

Student contact with the disability service prior to entry seems to be very important in terms of identifying and lining up financial, educational and practical supports, as well as preparing academic staff. The process for disability services' making contact with prospective students appears to be very streamlined in all of the colleges visited. CAO and other entry forms ask students to indicate their disability status. This information is forwarded to disability services. On acceptance of a college place, the disability service then contacts the students prior to entry to introduce them to the service and supports available and invites them to register. On entry, students that have registered access the range of supports available.

All of the students interviewed were highly self reliant and some were initially reluctant to take up some of the supports provided by the disability service because of concerns about compromising their independence. The use of AT instead of interpreter or note-taking services was preferred by one of the students with a sensory disability. The student who was deaf would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to participate in higher education without the use of interpreters. One of the students resisted the disability services' efforts to get her to use a cane – again fearing loss of independence, only to find that it increased her independence when she accessed the mobility service. Another student had attended third year lectures while in the first weeks of college without realising it and was feeling out of his depth and close to dropping out until the disability service helped him reschedule his course. The importance of disability services offering a wide range of supports in a sensitive but persistent (if necessary) and nuanced way cannot be overstated.

Assertive communication by students with academics as to the requirements to be met for course assignments and examinations was also critical for academic success, retention and progression in university. This was particularly the case for mature students and those who had non-traditional educational experiences/ entry routes into higher education.

Active engagement with lecturers by SLD students as to how their needs around written and oral presentation of lecture material could be accommodated was a major factor in those students' progression at further education and undergraduate level. Most lecturers obliged but a small minority was reluctant to post notes or provide them to students in advance.

The case studies indicate that the onus is on students to communicate with academics as to how they need to be accommodated. Some of the students had misgivings about the extent to which they had to negotiate access to notes and accessible lecture materials, while recognizing that academic staff in most cases were pro-active, once approached. The students for the most part said that once they had taken the initiative, most lecturers were highly accommodating and supportive. Some had gone out of their way to support students with the result, in one case, of a student progressing from exam failure to becoming a first class honours student. Another student had a similar outcome when his long-standing dyslexia was finally diagnosed by the disability service at university.

However, case study students were concerned that some students with disabilities might find it very difficult to be assertive about their needs. In UCC it is (as of this year) formal policy that students initiate such conversations. TCD has a similar policy focused on fostering student self-reliance. Despite some reservations, there is a good rationale for this policy in the sense that it does foster independence and assertiveness, which are qualities students with disabilities will need when they negotiate their progression and employment options. The context for introducing such a policy is important however, bearing in mind that UCC operates the Blackboard system and its academics undergo at least 20 hours training about disabilities. The Blackboard Learning System can overcome the difficulty of students having to ask for notes, when successfully operated as it appears to be by UCC where staff routinely communicate and post lectures, notes and articles onto the system. Academics are strongly encouraged to use the Blackboard system and most UCC staff (90%) does so but in some cases intermittently, according to the UCC disability service. High levels of academic co-operation and good IT competence on campus are necessary for this system to be effective.



It seems that if students are appropriately supported during first year and make the transition into second year, the journey to course completion and beyond into fourth level if desired, is relatively straightforward. At PhD level there are very few lectures, students are specializing in areas they excel at and most of the students who have come through the disability support system have good AT and IT competencies. Mobility may be an issue if students move from one familiar university campus to another at post-graduate level, which was the case for one of the students interviewed. While she found the transition challenging, it was the right academic decision for her and she knew what she needed and how best to access appropriate support.

It makes sense to frontload high levels of support in first year and gradually phase out the use of note takers or EAs (as appropriate) while building up student's competence in AT/IT and independent mobility over time to foster their independence. The more disability support is mainstreamed and hence normalised, the easier it is for students. There is still a need for specialized disability staff to support and model good practice. In the case of both of the in-house disability services at TCD and UCC, there is a fine and appropriate balancing act between direct service provision and facilitating, disseminating and embedding good practice into the policies, practices and culture of the entire academic institution. Both UCC and TCD are committed to mainstreaming inclusive education through college-wide policies and systems that address the diverse needs of all students including those with disabilities. The mainstreaming process recognises that all students have access and support needs. This means that the needs of disabled students are covered within all mainstream policies (while they continue to be a named group) rather than having specific policies for disabled students.

In both of the universities, disability policy is part of college-wide policy and the disability officer is a senior management post having direct input to high-level strategic decisions about enhancing physical and academic access. Disability services work with academic and non-academic staff to help instill awareness and responsiveness into college wide culture and practice. In UCC for example, the disability service provides a 20-hour training programme for academics, which, it feels, makes quite an impact. Each disability is covered, as are the supports UCC can provide. A student with disabilities also gives a talk on their 'real life' experience. This helps academic staff develop a better understanding of the needs students with disabilities might have in classroom/lecturing situations. In the DSS's experience, the students participating and showing (sometimes sceptical) academics what that they can achieve is what has the greatest impact in terms of breaking down barriers and bringing academics on board with disability policies and supports. While the CDVEC/Rehab disability service is not mainstreamed throughout the further education sector, the disability service also provides training modules to academic staff in a highly targeted manner. If, for example, a student registers with a specific disability, a training input on that disability

is provided to the staff that will interact with the student. A strong emphasis on speaking about disability from real life or lived experience is also practiced.

In TCD the disability service works with academic liaison officers for each Department, who in turn liaise with academics to ensure student accommodations are put in place. A similar system prevails in UCC where each academic department has nominated disability representatives (from the academic staff) who are responsible for students with disabilities in their department. According to the disability service, about half of these representatives are very active and provide superb, inclusive support. They tend to be in departments where traditionally there have been many disabled students, e.g. arts, law, commerce. The less active representatives tend to be areas where there are few disabled students, for example health and medicine.

Mainstreaming disability awareness involves working proactively with library and career services, ancillary services and student unions and staff unions so that eventually the disability service is in the background or effectively redundant while front line staff and policy makers maintain excellent systems and supports. It also requires a college culture and level of awareness that ensure widespread and consistent use of systems like Blackboard in UCC and the inclusive curriculum being piloted at TCD so that students have automatic digital access to essential curricular materials.

### **6.3 Supports Within Higher Education Systems**

According to the institutions interviewed, the finance provided by the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities for such supports as PAs/EAs, interpreters and note takers, AT, learning/academic support and transport has been good up until now. The Fund has made a significant difference to the quality, appropriateness and availability of disability services provided and has improved the opportunity for people with disabilities, and particularly people with high support needs, to access, benefit from and progress within higher education.

Concerns were raised in one institution about possible changes to how the HEA Fund for Disabilities is allocated in the future. The point made was that any departure from the current model may militate against the provision of adequate support in smaller universities/colleges and against the provision of high cost services to particular groups of disabled students, e.g. those required by deaf students. Other concerns raised included the difficulty of drawing down per capita grants for students within a very tight timeframe, which sometimes led to student supports not being in place until well into the first academic year. The increased flexibility on re-allocation of funding was welcomed, however.

Students across the three higher education institutions were very happy with their experiences of higher education disability services, which in many cases contrasted sharply with what was available at school/second level. There may be many other students with disabilities that have had much more positive experiences of second-level (particularly more recent school leavers). However, a feature of the case study method is the small number of cases, which may miss such positive experiences.

In terms of the higher education sector, the current HEA funding model seems to be appropriate and supporting the desired policy objectives. At individual college level, the different disability service models in operation seemed to fit well with local circumstances. The outreach model practiced by the CDVEC with the specialised support of Rehabs' National Learning Network is a sustainable, innovative and cost effective approach in the context of small colleges that do not have the student numbers to justify a dedicated in-house service.

The main challenge is to ensure a consistent approach to good practice across differently managed constituent colleges. The in-house model of the larger universities is appropriate in terms of numbers and pursuit of excellence. Their emphasis on mainstreaming or embedding disability responsiveness within college policy and practice across services is wise, respectful and was strongly endorsed by the case study students.

The focus of this study was educational progression. However, students and other stakeholders raised a number of important points about progression into the workplace. The first point is that the First Destinations Survey<sup>21</sup> needs to be adapted to record respondents' disability status, allowing a baseline to be established. The evidence gathered to-date suggests that students with disabilities find it at least twice as difficult as their peers to enter the workplace. Those interviewed, and available studies, suggest that employers have low awareness of how AT and IT can be used to overcome what might have been perceived as limitations in the past. High quality work placements can play an important role in making the pathway into employment easier for students with disabilities and help improve employers' awareness. Only one of the case study students had experienced work placement and it was very valuable from a personal independence point of view as well as improving her employability.

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<sup>21</sup> All higher education institutions in Ireland survey their graduates within 9 months of completing full-time courses. This national survey is conducted by the HEA (Higher Education Authority) and the results are compiled in the HEA report on 'First Destinations of Award Recipients in Higher Education' which is published each year. This report can be accessed on the HEA website.

According to the students and other stakeholders that were interviewed for this study, mainstream careers service practitioners may not have strong awareness of the transforming nature of new/assistive technology either. This is despite the availability of good paper resources. AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) has produced a number of publications which address good practice for those providing careers information or guidance counselling to students with disabilities (see for example, *Great Expectations: A Handbook for Guidance Counsellors Working with Students with Disabilities* and *Supporting Students with Dyslexia - Practical Guidelines for Institutes of Further and Higher Education* at [www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie)).

Some issues to do with boundaries and territory as and between careers and disability services were also raised. There is a need for integrated service provision between careers and disability services and an aftercare strategy that bridges the gap between the education and employment readiness. The provision of a mentor/coach/guide for the first year in the workplace was identified as a missing link in this regard.

On a final, slightly tangential but important note, non-disabled students' willingness to interact with students with a disability is central to the latter's social inclusion and enjoyment of college life. From the case study material it seems that the initiative in terms of making social contact and the development of friendships was reliant on the students with disabilities' motivation and determination to pave the way. There appears to be a need for some general awareness raising about diversity in Irish education systems so that students who are not confident or assertive are not isolated.

The Irish Equality Authority has produced useful guidelines in partnership with the Department of Education and Skills School Development Planning Initiative, which give an overview of the equality issues across the nine grounds that can arise in second-level schools. The guidelines describe how equality can inform the process of preparing a school development plan, and provide practical advice for second-level schools on how they can identify equality objectives and take steps to achieve them.

#### **6.4 Implications for policy conditions needed to support high quality strategies**

The policy implications that arise from the case study research are summarized below.

There is a need for strong and effective AT training resources and access for second-level students with disabilities. It may be more efficient (and effective) for AT training to be provided by external parties given economies of scale and the difficulty of training teachers to the necessary level via in-service courses, which typically only last a day or two. The model of service provision provided to small colleges by Rehab/National

Learning Network could serve as a prototype to develop a networked AT service by those with the relevant expertise to schools. Such a service could be provided to clusters of schools on a regional basis, nationwide.

The adequacy and effectiveness of the arrangements for early monitoring, screening and diagnosing specific learning disabilities needs to be evaluated. There is scope to improve the monitoring of early childhood phonemic difficulties and by responding at an early stage, prevent further deterioration in the reading skills of children at risk in a cost-effective manner.

Possible weaknesses in the system have been further complicated by a historical lack of capacity in the state system (NEPS) to respond to those who are referred for assessment. In the case studies for this research, parents were much more likely to identify a possible learning difficulty than teachers and were the ones most likely to do something about it. Perhaps parents should be better supported to pursue assessment options. Of relevance in this regard is the cost and availability of professional diagnosis, particularly for low-income families. Access to the state psychological service is set to improve with a recent recruitment drive for additional educational psychologists. A system for providing access to pre-approved psychologists operating privately or for reimbursing parents whose child receives a positive diagnoses of dyslexia may still need to be examined if unacceptable appointment delays remain.

There is a strong rationale to continue investment through the HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities and the quality of support it enables in the higher education sector. The work that is being done at higher level to mainstream support through inclusive education systems and practices has implications for all those who work in education and schools in particular.

The policy focus on mainstreaming reflects and recognizes the position that ultimately, good practice in education for students with disabilities is not very different from good practice in education generally. For example, key strengths identified in the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills' study of good practice (cited in National Economic and Social Forum Child Literacy and Social Inclusion Report 39, November 2009) with regard to literacy, but of broader relevance include:

- Strong decisive leadership that is shared
- A 'can-do' attitude
- Positive expectations about levels of achievement for all pupils
- Commitment to parental involvement in education
- Learning and teaching strategies that accommodate various needs

Good practice is about having positive expectations of students, providing learning environments that are inclusive, respectful, open and bright as well as being appropriately challenging, genuinely supportive and interested in adapting technologies and pedagogical methods as required to ensure all students reach their full academic potential.

#### **6.5 New research and development needed to promote the adaptation and broad diffusion of such innovative practices.**

Research that identifies and disseminates good practice within Irish schools is needed, and particularly with regard to inclusive practices and appropriate level/types of support, especially in AT. This could be done easily with the input of the higher education disability services and would help inform further policy development

Research into the systemic, leadership and other factors that shape highly supportive and policy compliant learning environments is also needed so that lessons can be transferred within higher education and to schools.

Finally, research and policy is needed into how special schools prepare students for later integration into mainstream systems.

In the next section, conclusions about good practice from the case studies are drawn out and summarised.

## **7. Conclusions about Features of Good Practice that Enable Progression into and within Further and Higher Education for Students with Disabilities**

The quality of disability service provided at the further and higher education institutions that were selected for this study is very high, making further and higher education much more accessible for students than in the past. However, there are considerable challenges to overcome in the pathway from second to further and higher education before equality of participation and outcome is achieved.

The following principles, practices, and procedures emerged from this study as supportive of the access, retention and progression of people with disabilities in further and higher education and beyond. There were no different lessons arising from the transfer into further education as distinct from higher education. Hence the relevant learning is merged under 7.1 below.

### **7.1 From School into Further and Higher Education**

- The championing and promotion of school environments that are inclusive, educationally challenging and accommodating of students with disabilities and diversity generally.
- Pedagogical approaches which embody high expectations and delivery strategies to enable *all* students to reach their educational and personal potential.
- A consistent approach to the monitoring, screening and assessment of SLDs at a critical age junctures - under 6, 8 and 10-12 - in advance of subject choice decisions, which impact strongly on eligibility for further and higher education and for different courses.
- Clear policies and procedures for communicating disabilities to relevant teachers within schools and between schools at transition points.
- Basic teacher training in the recognition of SLDs (i.e. the kinds of anomalies that arise between the quality of oral and written work) their effects in a formal learning situation and the kinds of accommodations required.
- Encouraging teachers to acknowledge students' disabilities, validate their abilities appropriately and to initiate the process for managing any support needs that arise.

- A consistent or curricular approach to providing disabled students with education in core AT and IT competencies at school level. Much can be learnt in this regard from the approach taken at further and higher education.
- Access to good further and higher education pre-entry disability services – i.e. ideally students would register with the disability service and conduct needs assessments prior to entering college so that funding and supports are lined up at course entry.
- Clear college policies about disclosure of student disabilities to relevant academic staff.
- Good systems for early and explicit notification to teachers, tutors and lecturers in the academic department the student is attached to, so that they can plan/prepare the necessary adjustments needed in lecturing style to facilitate those who have sensory or learning disabilities.
- A basic tool, built into disability services' overall monitoring and evaluation systems, for tracking the extent to which agreed disclosures/communications about disability reached the intended academic staff.

## **7.2 Retention and Progression Within Further and Higher education**

- In-service training about the effects of SLDs and sensory disabilities in applied learning situations, and the measures that need to be taken by academic and other staff to manage the difficulties experienced by those with such conditions.
- Clear university/college management policies about the responsibility of academic staff to provide lecture notes, overheads, etc., to students with SLD and other relevant disabilities.
- Mainstreaming disability accommodations throughout colleges so that it becomes the norm for lecturers, library staff and others to be enquiring about diverse needs and responsive to the changes in practice required.
- Clear national/grant-aid policies that do not disadvantage students who, because of their disability, avail of the option to conduct a full time course over an extended (e.g. two-year, part-time) period.



- Academics being encouraged and supported to acknowledge students' disabilities appropriately and to initiate the process for managing any support needs that arise in fulfilling course work requirements.
- Offering students a wide range of disability supports in a sensitive but persistent (if necessary) and nuanced way.
- Use of system-wide tools like Blackboard to ensure that all students, including those who choose not to disclose a disability, can access essential educational resources.
- Annual, rather than once-off, disability needs assessments, not just to identify support needs but also as a tool to progressively move students off supports that are not transferable into the workplace (if appropriate) and increase the use of transferable supports that increase their independence.
- Including disability status as a category in graduate 'first destinations' surveys and other student employment outcome surveys so that progress can be quantified and built on.
- Well-lit, clearly-signposted lecture halls and potential obstacles such as steps or slopes, and colour-differentiated areas within buildings.

### **7.3 *Transition to Employment***

- Strong focus on student independence and encouragement to access technology that can be transferred to the workplace.
- Encouraging students to be proactive in explaining the benefits of AT to employers.
- Availability of high quality work experience to build confidence and independence and help overcome any misplaced concerns employers might have about disabilities in the workplace.
- Availability of aftercare or integrated (disability-aware) guidance support to provide advocacy and other supports that enhance progression into the workplace.