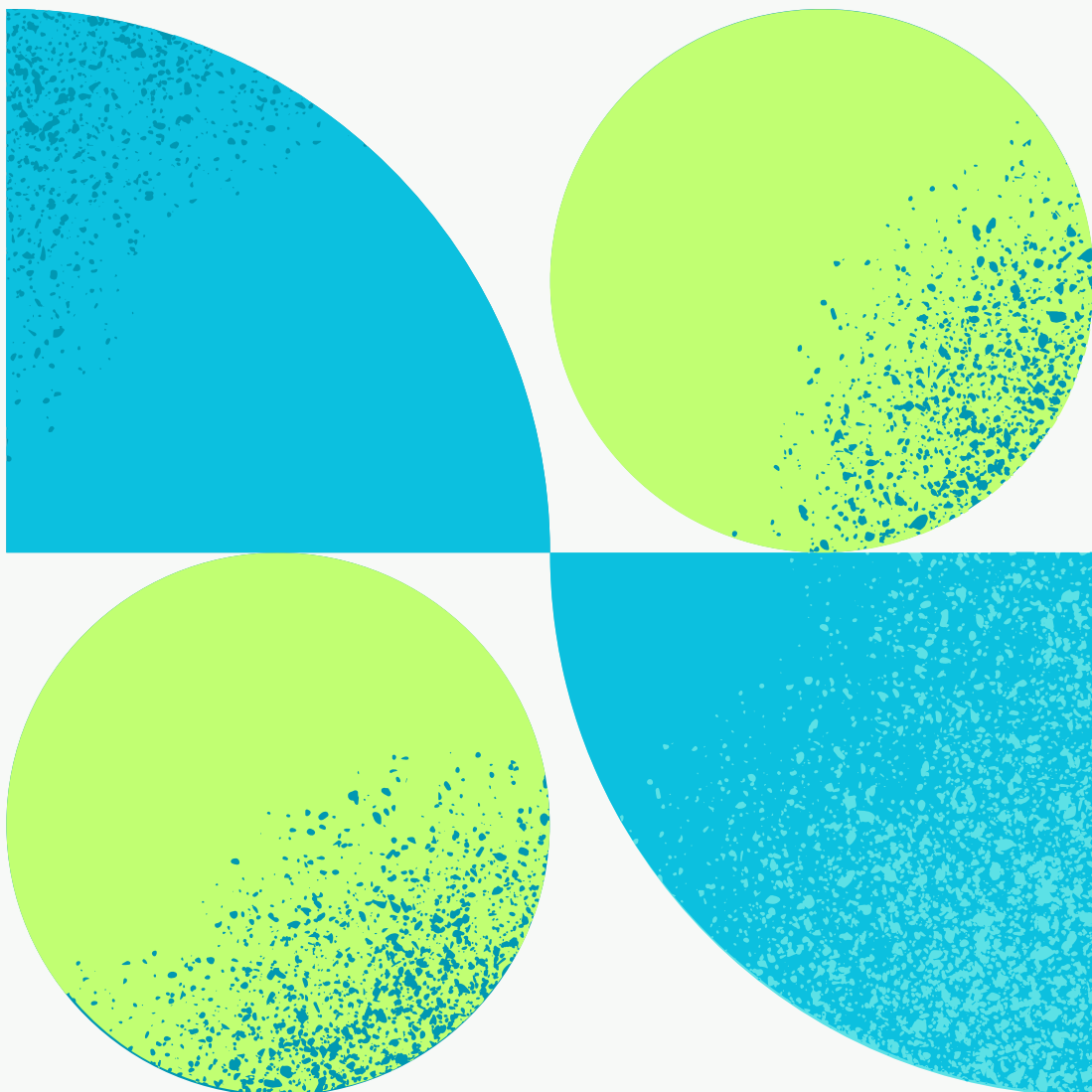
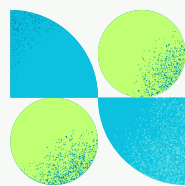

Promoting Education and Employment Resources for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Ireland

PEER4ID Research Report





Report written by:
Donatella Camedda
Catherine Connolly

The PEER4ID project was a collaboration between



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

In partnership with



Inclusion Ireland
The National Association for People
with an Intellectual Disability.

Funded by the Irish Research Council
New Foundations scheme 2023



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Published in October 2025

Foreword

It is with great pride that I write this foreword for PEER4ID, a collaborative research project led by Assistant Professor Donatella Camedda at Trinity College Dublin.

This important initiative explores the transition to third-level education and employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities — a journey that too often remains challenging and uneven. By uncovering the key challenges and opportunities within these transitions, PEER4ID offers evidence that can inform inclusive policy, shape supportive practices, and ultimately open doors to full participation in education and work.

At Inclusion Ireland, we know that meaningful change happens when voices come together. Collaboration between NGOs, higher education, and research partners is essential if we are to bridge the gap between lived experience, academic insight, and systemic reform. Projects like PEER4ID ensure that people with intellectual disabilities are not just the subjects of research, but active contributors to it — shaping the questions, the findings, and the future.

This topic lies at the heart of our mission. Our members consistently tell us that opportunities for learning, work, and belonging are central to living a good life. Yet, barriers — both visible and invisible — continue to limit access and choice.

The PEER4ID project offers a shared path forward, grounded in partnership, inclusion, and respect.

We are grateful to have worked alongside Trinity College Dublin and all the project partners in bringing this vision to life. Together, we can continue to build a more inclusive Ireland — one where every person's rights are recognised, including in employment and education.

— Derval McDonagh
CEO, Inclusion Ireland

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Transitions from school into higher education and employment are important turning points in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. These transitions can bring opportunities for learning, independence, and personal growth. However, they are often made more difficult by barriers such as fragmented systems, limited supports, and unequal access to meaningful pathways.

The Promoting Education and Employment Resources for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Ireland project (referred to as PEER4ID) set out to explore these transitions in depth. The project considered both the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities themselves and the perspectives of those supporting them across education and employment. This approach allowed us to better understand not only the challenges but also the opportunities for creating more inclusive systems.

PEER4ID was carried out in partnership with Inclusion Ireland and funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC) New Foundations Scheme 2023–2024. The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) played a pivotal role in linking the research team with the project's civic partner. This builds on TCPID's longstanding leadership and commitment to advancing education and employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland.

This report outlines the aims of the project, the research design and how it was implemented, the key findings, and the outcomes. It is presented in accessible language and with the use of visuals, so that people with intellectual disabilities can engage with the material more easily.

About this report

01



PEER4ID Project –looked at moving from school to college and work.



We studied –what helps and what makes it hard during these changes.



Who was involved –people with intellectual disabilities, families, service providers, teachers, and employers.



The project was done with Inclusion Ireland, funded by the IRC.



We are presenting what we did, what we found out, and why it matters.



Easy to understand –clear language and pictures used so everyone can access the findings.

Research Team

Dr Donatella Camedda, Principal Investigator
Ms Catherine Connolly, Research Assistant
Trinity College Dublin



People with intellectual disabilities often encounter complex systemic barriers in both education and employment (Connolly, 2023). Compared to their peers without intellectual disabilities, they have fewer equal opportunities, which increases their risk of exclusion, particularly during times of transition between different educational provisions (Van Asselt et al., 2015; Banks et al., 2022). Research also shows that structural and organisational factors strongly influence access to employment for people with intellectual disabilities (Shevlin et al., 2020; May-Simera, 2018).

At the same time, the importance of equal opportunities in education and employment is widely acknowledged. Evidence highlights a clear association between paid employment and improved well-being, both for people with and without intellectual disabilities (Robertson et al., 2019; Kocman & Weber, 2018). Employment is not only a source of income but also contributes to independence, purpose, and social inclusion.

This context highlights the importance of developing systems that better support people with intellectual disabilities in navigating transitions and accessing meaningful opportunities in both education and employment.



Unequal opportunities lead to exclusion



The PEER4ID project

02

The project explored the transition to third level education and employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

It engaged with:



People with
intellectual
disabilities and
families



Staff working in
third level
education
institutions



Employers and
companies
staff



Service
providers
operating
across Ireland

This project is the first of its kind to tackle the challenges of transitioning individuals with intellectual disabilities from school to education and employment, taking a comprehensive, multi-perspective approach at the national level. It involves people with intellectual disabilities, their parents, employers, staff from higher education institutions, and representatives from service providers. All provinces of Ireland were represented, ensuring a voice for national representation. People with intellectual disabilities often face systemic barriers, there is a limitation of opportunities in education and employment. There is unequal access to education and employment opportunities. There is a higher risk of exclusion compared to peers without intellectual disabilities. Research shows us that equal opportunities improve quality of life.

Project goals

02



Uncover key challenges and opportunities faced during these transitions



Inform policy to enhance support systems, inclusive employment and third level education



Promote inclusive environments that empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to thrive academically and professionally

The primary aim of PEER4ID was to explore the key challenges and opportunities encountered during the transition for individuals with intellectual disabilities from school to higher education, and or employment. The project sought to uncover systemic barriers and personal obstacles faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities, as well as the perspectives of stakeholders involved in facilitating these transitions. By analysing existing resources and identifying gaps in support structures, the study aims to inform policy development and promote more inclusive environments that empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to achieve their academic and professional aspirations.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS



Limitation of opportunities in education and employment

UNEQUAL ACCESS



Higher risk of exclusion compared to peers without intellectual disabilities

IMPACT ON LIFE



Research shows equal opportunities improve quality of life

The PEER4ID project aims to make the transition from school to education and/or employment easier for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It focuses on discovering the challenges they face and the opportunities available to help them succeed. The project looks at how education and job support services can work better together. It gathers opinions from individuals with intellectual disabilities, their families, employers, staff from third-level institutions, and service providers to understand everyone's perspective. This initiative addresses important gaps in research about the lack of equal opportunities and the exclusion that people with intellectual disabilities often experience. While some studies have looked at post school transitions for people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland (McConkey et al., 2017) and employment opportunities (TCPID 2022) separately, PEER4ID combines both topics to get a comprehensive picture. By understanding the real-life experiences of people with ID during their transition, the project hopes to influence future policies and support systems.

RQ1



What challenges do individuals with intellectual disabilities face when transitioning from school to further education, training, or employment?

RQ2



What challenges do stakeholders face while facilitating these transitions?

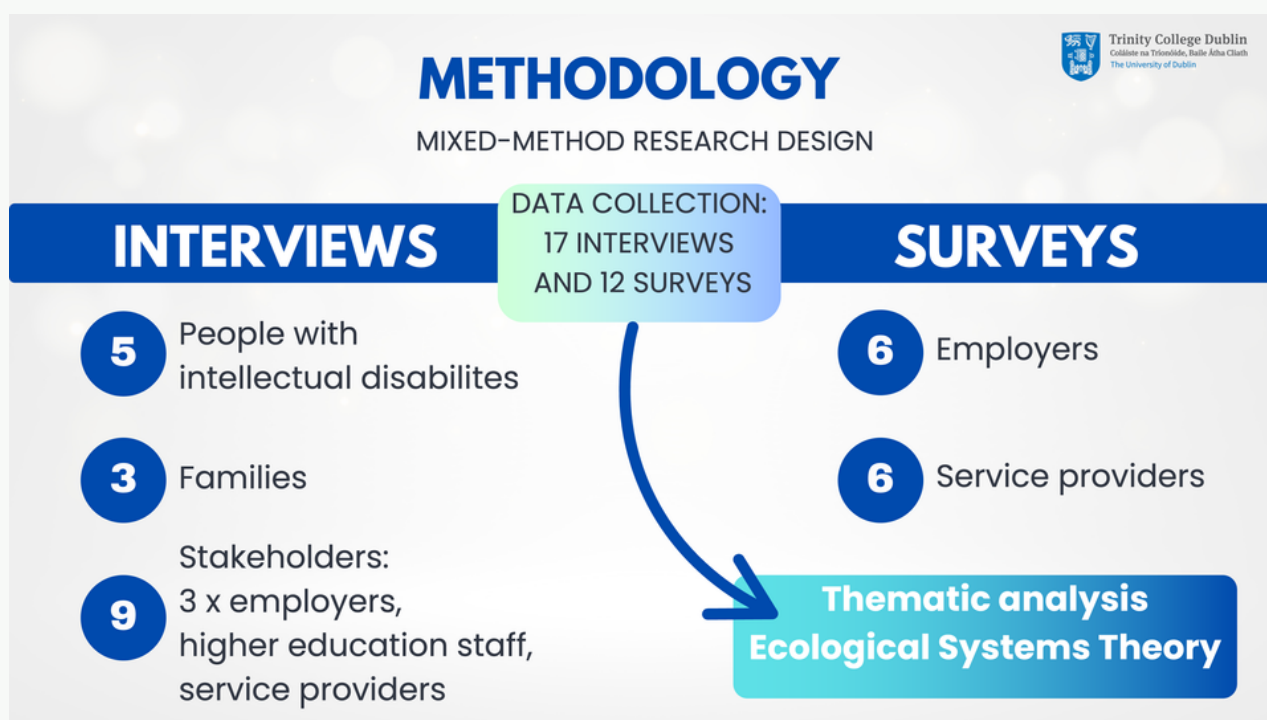
RQ3



What resources are out there to support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities?

The research questions guiding this study focus on understanding the challenges and resources related to the transition from school to further education, training, or employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the main challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities during this transition process. Additionally, it aims to explore the difficulties encountered by stakeholders—such as educators, families, employers, and service providers—in facilitating these transitions. Lastly, the research investigates the availability and adequacy of resources that support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities, with the goal of informing policy and practice to improve inclusivity and support systems.

Overview



The PEER4ID Project employed a mixed-method research design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather comprehensive insights. Data collection involved 29 participants in total, including: individuals with intellectual disabilities; families; higher education staff; employers; and service providers. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, guided by the ecological systems theory to understand the multiple layers of influence affecting transitions for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of experiences, perceptions, and systemic factors related to school-to-education and or employment pathways, providing a robust foundation for identifying key challenges and opportunities in this field in the Irish context.



5
People with
intellectual
disabilities



3
Family
members



9
Higher
Education
staff



9
Employers
staff



3
Service
Providers
staff

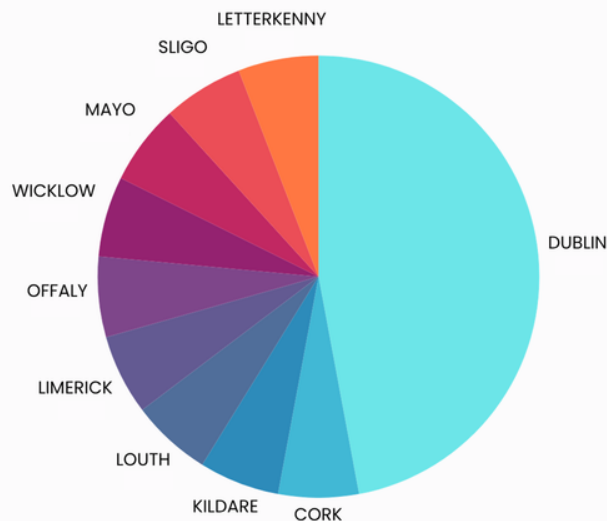
Data collection involved conducting 17 interviews with stakeholders, including individuals with intellectual disabilities, families, employers, higher education staff, service providers and, and administering 12 surveys to employers and higher education staff.

PROJECT COVERAGE



10 COUNTIES

All 4
provinces
covered

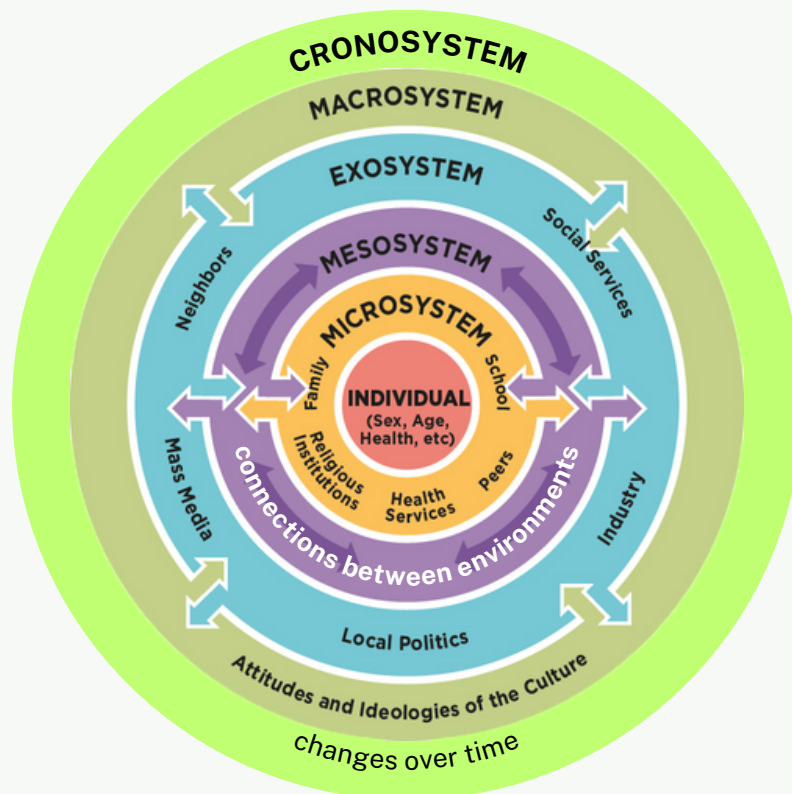


The project coverage had a wide scope involving 10 counties and covering all 4 provinces of Ireland.

We gathered extensive information from the individuals we interviewed and those who filled out the surveys. By examining and considering all this information (called data), we found that various groups conveyed similar messages. Our data collection consisted of 17 interviews and 12 surveys. For the interviews we used a thematic analysis to understand and use this information. A thematic analysis is a way of finding patterns or themes in the research. It helps researchers understand what people are saying, what the main ideas are, and how those ideas connect.

This analysis was part of a mixed-method research design, which allowed us to integrate insights from stakeholder interviews—including employers, higher education staff, service providers, families, and individuals with intellectual disabilities—to pinpoint key themes surrounding the challenges, opportunities, and support systems involved in the transitions for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

As we looked at the data, we identified several recurring themes, including attitudes and expectations, barriers and challenges, opportunities, collaboration, support systems, societal change, education, employment, occupation, and resources. We coded all the data using the computer program NVivo. Our analysis revealed what matters most to individuals with intellectual disabilities during their transition from school to post-school education and employment, listening to the voices of families, employers, service providers, higher education staff, and the individuals themselves. We organised our findings into two main categories: **Challenges, and Supports**. The additional theme of **Life Goals** was included in the findings from interviews with people with intellectual disabilities.



Adapted from: <https://www.pngwing.com/en/free-png-dlfmk/download>

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to look at what we found during the research (Crawford, 2020). This explains how a person's environment (everything and everyone around them) influences their development. These environments are organised by systems: **micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono**.

This research adopted this ecological model because transition for individuals with intellectual disabilities involves multiple interconnected environments—families, schools, workplaces, societal policies, and cultural attitudes. Using this systemic approach allowed us to examine how these multiple levels influence transition outcomes. It emphasises that effective support requires understanding and addressing factors across all levels, not just targeting the individual.



1. **Microsystem – The Immediate Circle**

This is the closest layer to the person — the people and places they interact with every day. Examples are; family, friends, teachers, school, workplace, and neighbourhood. These relationships and interactions have a direct impact on how a person thinks, feels, and behaves.

2. **Mesosystem – Connections Between Microsystems**

This layer is about how the different parts of the microsystem connect. Example: how a child's parents and teachers communicate; how family life affects performance at school. Positive connections support development, while conflict between these settings can cause stress or confusion.

3. **Exosystem – Indirect Influences**

This includes settings that don't directly affect the person, but can still impact them, even if they are not personally involved. An example could be a parent's workplace (if a parent is stressed from work, it affects home life), other examples are government policies, or community services which impact the individual.

4. **Macrosystem – Society's big picture**

This includes the larger societal and cultural values, traditions, policies, and laws that shape our environment, like national education policies or laws about disabilities.

5. **Chronosystem -how life changes over time**

This refers to how time changes contexts and individuals, including life transitions or changes in policies over time. It looks at how events and time periods shape development.

Ethical approval was obtained from the School of Education Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin. The application was classified at the highest risk level due to the involvement of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the research. Careful ethical considerations were prioritised throughout every phase of the project, following the guidelines set by Trinity College, the Policy on Good Research Practice, and the Ethical Guidance for Research with People with Disabilities from the National Disability Authority (NDA, 2013).

A clear explanation of participation in the study was provided in an accessible format. Since the primary target group consists of vulnerable adults with possible communication difficulties, easy-to-understand documents were created, including the invitation letter, participant information leaflet, consent form, and other study materials. Participants with intellectual disabilities had the option of choosing between in-person or online interviews, and those who opted for in-person interviews had the freedom to select the interview location.



The study gathered rich and diverse information from a small group, which made the analysis time-intensive. Response rates fell short of expectations, complicating efforts to represent all participants' voices equally in a single overview. Additionally, data collection and analysis took longer than planned, and creating accessible recruitment materials required extra time.

The ethical approval process was lengthy, and coordinating participation, particularly for individuals with intellectual disabilities, proved to be challenging. Despite broad outreach efforts, rural voices remained underrepresented. Ultimately, the study highlighted the need for more participants and a greater diversity of perspectives, as well as stronger connections to effectively reach individuals with intellectual disabilities.

LIMITATIONS



Small Cohort, Large Data Volume

- Rich, diverse data from a small group made analysis time-intensive
- Low response compared to anticipated sample size
- Difficult to represent all voices equally in one overview



Time Constraints

- Data collection and analysis took longer than anticipated
- Preparation of accessible recruitment materials



Recruitment Difficulties

- Time-consuming ethical approval process
- Hard to coordinate participation, especially for people with ID
- Rural voices underrepresented despite broad outreach
- Need for more participants and greater diversity of perspectives
- More links needed to reach people with intellectual disabilities

Overview

The surveys engaged both employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with 12 completed in total – 6 from employers and 6 from HEIs.

Findings from these two stakeholder groups – higher education providers and employers – demonstrate a mutual acknowledgment of the benefits associated with inclusive practices, despite being in the early phases of implementation. Both parties noted several key points:

There are significant advantages for individuals with intellectual disabilities, and their non-disabled peers. Collaboration between educational institutions and employers is crucial and is currently in its infancy. Engaging in this collaboration demands substantial time and resource investment from both staff and management. Additionally, there is a need for improved tracking and evaluation of outcomes to assess the long-term impact of inclusive initiatives.

Overall, both stakeholders see the potential of inclusive practices to enrich the lives of individuals with intellectual disabilities and the wider community. However, they also recognise the difficulties in effectively scaling and maintaining these initiatives. The findings suggest a commitment to promoting inclusion in education and employment, but current participation levels remain low. This underscores the need for enhanced engagement, stronger partnerships, optimal resource utilisation, and systematic progress tracking in both sectors.

What employers said about involvement and roles of people with intellectual disabilities in the workplace

04



INVOLVEMENT
AND ROLES



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

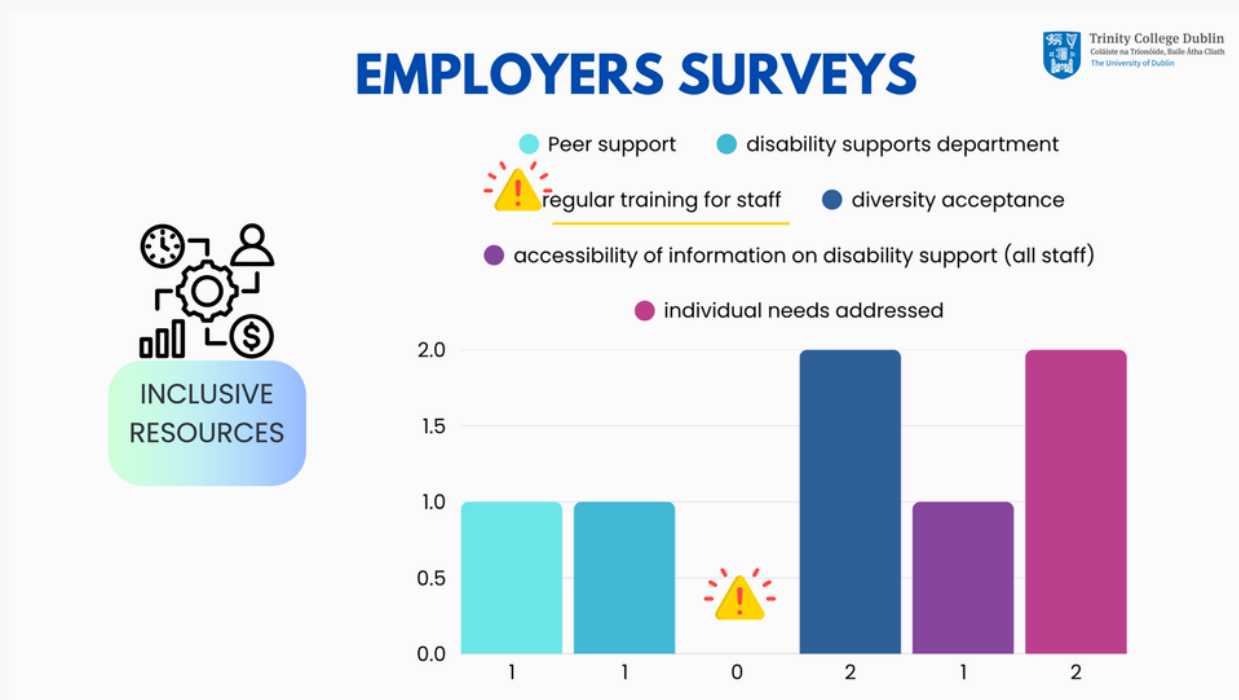
EMPLOYERS SURVEYS

It's at a very early stage and is due mainly to our partnership with (HEI).
Minimal
We partner with (HEI) and have had two interns convert to permanent staff members but on reduced hours. I believe the involvement of those two individuals has been greatly beneficial for them and their teams.
Rewarding and refreshing, but requires significant time commitment from manager
Not disclosed/tracked. When the business is aware it tends to be employees who came from programs.
Working in facilities or catering mostly.

Surveys conducted among employers indicate that engagement with inclusive employment programs is still in its infancy, primarily spurred by collaborations with higher education institutions (HEIs). The retention rates are low, and there are few opportunities for career progression. Most roles are typically found in areas such as facilities management or catering.

Some employers have successfully transitioned interns into permanent positions, often with reduced hours, resulting in perceived benefits for both the interns and their teams. However, meaningful employer engagement demands a significant time investment from managers, and there is limited tracking or disclosure of outcomes. Nonetheless, it has been emphasised that hiring individuals with intellectual disabilities can be both rewarding and revitalising.

In relation to supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities during their transition from education to employment, the findings highlight the need for inclusive resources.



Employers emphasised the importance of tailored support and accepting diversity.

Other areas of success were peer support, having a disability support department, and providing accessible information on disability support.

The most significant challenge was the regular need for staff training.

It was interesting to note that none of the employers mentioned regular training was available for staff.



EMPLOYERS SURVEYS



- Low employment application submission compared to individuals without disabilities
- Low successful interview process and employment offer
- Low participation in entry-level employment
- No career progression/promotion to higher salaried opportunities
- Low retention rate: average of 11.5 months



The employment outcomes were highlighted in the survey data. The findings indicate that structured pathways, such as the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), serve as the primary access points for candidates seeking employment. However, the data revealed that the practice of employing people with intellectual disabilities remains largely inconsistent and not fully streamlined outside of collaborations with existing inclusive higher education programmes.

This underscores the critical importance of these targeted initiatives as they function as vital connectors that facilitate employment opportunities for this population. There is a need to strengthen and expand such programmes to create more integrated, sustainable employment pathways beyond current collaborative efforts.

At present, the application rate is minimal, and there is a low success rate in the interview process. Additionally, entry-level employment rates are low, retention rates are poor, and individuals with intellectual disabilities face a lack of career advancement opportunities.

	EMPLOYERS SURVEYS	
	 Trinity College Dublin Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath The University of Dublin	
	Name	Responses
	anonymous	My sense is that in the past, we weren't aware and were probably wary or scared of taking on someone with a disability - mostly down to ensuring their safety in the workplace.
	anonymous	We are a fast-paced manufacturing business making life saving products. Anybody who works in that space needs to meet the associated demands. If we identified those with intellectual disabilities who are capable of doing the job then we would be happy to employ them.
	anonymous	Any bias can prevent inclusion and understanding on a more granular basis why inclusion of all is beneficial.
	anonymous	Commitment from staff and other colleagues to have the patience and consideration to be flexible in how they work, to ensure the employee with the intellectual disability is fully equipped and informed to excel in their role.
	anonymous	Employees do not have to disclose their intellectual or other disability which makes it hard for a company to ask, or also to know how many people are facing certain challenges. Stats would help HR professionals like myself push for sensory rooms etc. and also insert specific accommodations into flexible working policies. Lastly, are we doing enough to hire from this pool, roles with purpose need to be identified and filled to really have inclusion as at times it feels like its not part of our business.

Findings highlights employers' perspectives on the challenges of including individuals with intellectual disabilities in the workplace.

Many employers express concerns rooted in historical fears regarding safety and the fulfilment of job requirements, which can influence their hiring choices.

Additionally, biases and a lack of awareness can hinder genuine inclusion.

It is essential for co-workers to be flexible and accommodating towards employees with intellectual disabilities, as this requires a commitment from the entire staff to ensure success.

Not disclosing a disability can also lead to a lack of access to necessary supports and services.

CHALLENGES OF INCLUSION IN THE WORKPLACE

EMPLOYERS SURVEYS



Name	Responses
anonymous	Nothing that can't be overcome. I think that the key challenge is being willing to explore opportunities and to take advice from the experts/advocates.
anonymous	It depends on the nature of the disability. For example, attention to detail, ability to read and understand operating procedures, ability to work shift hours, organizational skills, etc, would be required.
anonymous	I believe resourcing in teams to allow for the additional support needed for those hire with intellectual disabilities hinders us taking on more people and I think training is not where it needs to be.
anonymous	The time required for the manager to set aside each week to guide and support the student,
anonymous	Lack of training or awareness for HR, managers and colleagues. Trying to strike the balance between treating an individual with intellectual disabilities with respect and similarity with other colleagues whilst also trying to care or look out for them.
anonymous	Funding right opportunities

The survey highlights several challenges faced by employers in promoting inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Key challenges include a lack of training and awareness among Human Resources personnel (HR), managers, and colleagues, which hampers effective support and integration.

Employers also struggle with balancing respect and equal treatment of employees with disabilities while providing the necessary care and support, which can be complex.

Additionally, resource limitations, such as insufficient staffing and time for managers to guide and support these employees, pose significant obstacles.

Funding and finding the right opportunities are other challenges mentioned, alongside the need for a willingness to explore new approaches and seek expert advice to facilitate inclusion.

HIGHER EDUCATION SURVEYS



- 4 HEIs active courses
 - 1 HEI no course
 - 1 HEI course discontinued
- 2 courses between 10-15 hours/week
 - 2 courses more than 20 hours
- 2 full-time ● (18-24 months)
 - 1 part-time +80% retention
 - 1 both
- Mix of fully inclusive and targeted programmes



Six Higher Education Institutes participated in the surveys, revealing four active courses across various institutions.

One course has been discontinued, and another is not operational.

There are variations in weekly hours and delivery modes, including both full-time and part-time formats. Two courses were between 10-15 hours per week, and two courses were more than 20 hours per week.

These courses typically span 18-24 months and employ a mix of fully inclusive and targeted programs, achieving an overall retention rate of over 80%. Two courses offer a level 5 qualification, one provides level 4, and one offers level 3.

The surveys for higher education institutions had some differences compared to the employer surveys.

What higher education staff said about the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities at university

04

HIGHER EDUCATION SURVEYS



STUDENT
INVOLVEMENT

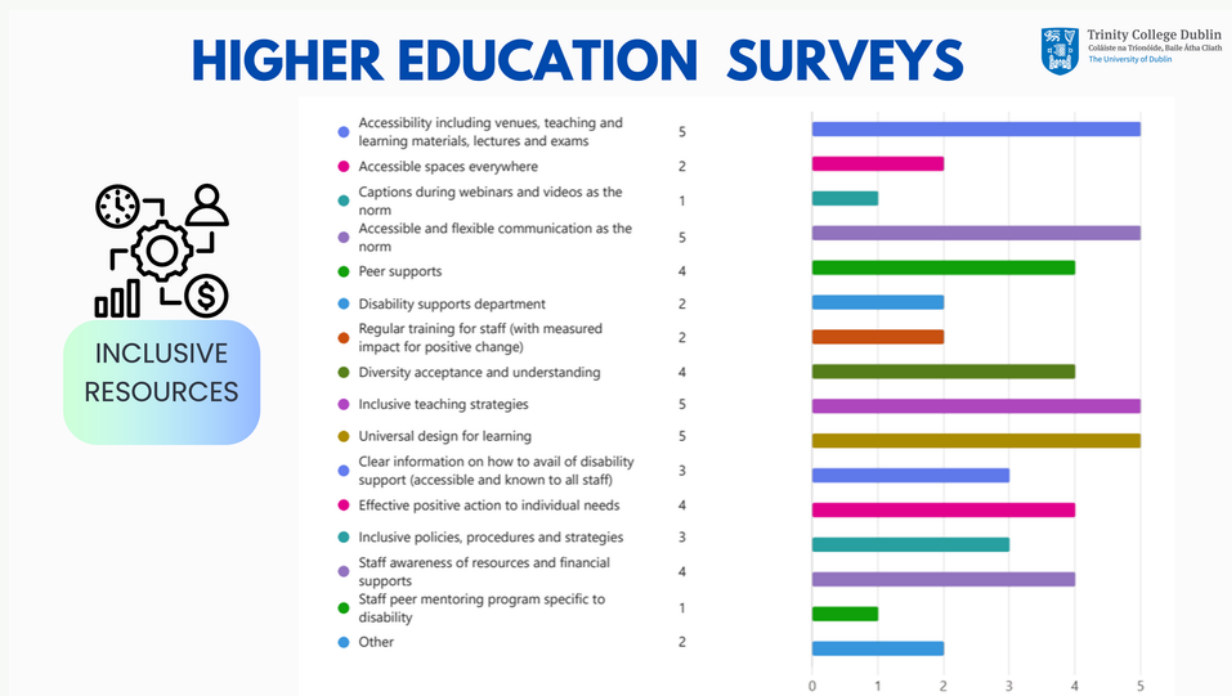
Each cohort have elected Class reps
Work with Music and Drama students and students on sports course
1 st yrs Mentored by 2nd yr ID nursing students
They are very well integrated via co-learning modules, belonging to clubs and societies etc
Students will be fully involved in academic and university life (course just started)
Our aim is that students with ID are involved in all aspects of college life, academically and socially. Our core model is based on co-learning

The Higher Education Surveys highlight a strong student involvement and inclusion across all aspects of university life. Comments were very positive. One respondent reported that each cohort has elected class representatives, ensuring that every group has a voice.

Likewise, students collaborate closely with peers from Music, Drama, and Sports courses, while first-year students are mentored by second-year students in an Intellectual Disability nursing programme. They are well integrated into campus life through co-learning modules and active participation in clubs and societies.

As some of the courses have only recently begun, it is anticipated that students will become fully involved in both academic and social experiences.

The overall aim is for students with intellectual disabilities to be included in every part of college life — academically, socially, and personally — within a model firmly based on co-learning.



The Higher Education Surveys show a strong commitment to inclusion and accessibility for students with intellectual disabilities. Teaching, communication, and flexible learning approaches were highly rated, while peer support and inclusive policies also scored well.

Moderate scores were given to staff training and awareness of supports, and lower scores to campus accessibility and clarity of disability information.

The weakest area was staff peer mentoring on disability.

Overall, the results highlight good progress in inclusive teaching but a need to improve mentoring, accessibility, and communication about available supports.

Notably, more strategies were highlighted in the responses from higher education institutions compared to employers, likely due to the well-structured and articulated nature of programmes and pathways to employment that are central to the learning experience.

OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS OF INCLUSION

- Increased independence, confidence, self-determination, advocacy, and aspirations for students
- Pathways to employment, work experience, and more meaningful, independent lives
- Academic and personal development, including improved skills (reading, digital, life skills)
- Friendships, social inclusion, and greater enjoyment of college life
- Positive influence on staff: enriched teaching, expanded repertoires, reinvigorated practice
- Greater empathy, understanding, and inclusivity across the college community
- Shifts in perceptions of people with ID—from passive to capable, equal contributors
- Families gain pride from students' progress and certification

In relation to opportunities and benefits of inclusive practices in higher education institutions, the respondents mentioned their positive impacts on both the institutions and the participants. These benefits include enhanced academic and social learning experiences for students with intellectual disabilities, greater awareness and understanding among staff and students, and the creation of a more inclusive campus environment.

An attitudinal shift was noted, recognising people with intellectual disabilities as equal contributors with valuable capabilities. Additionally, the surveys revealed advantages such as expanded social networks, increased confidence and independence for participants, and the potential for greater collaboration and resource sharing between universities and community support organisations. These practices lead to pathways for employment, work experience, and more fulfilling lives.

Families also gained pride from their students' progress and certification.

Overall, these insights underscore the transformative potential of inclusive higher education practices for individuals and institutions alike.

BARRIERS TO INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- Limited institutional commitment and staff training in inclusive pedagogy and supports
- Funding uncertainty (tuition fees, reliance on SUSI, unclear continuation of programme funding)
- Organisational challenges (timetabling, availability of classroom spaces, quiet spaces)
- Lengthy and insecure staff hiring processes, difficulty offering job security
- Disability supports already overstretched; reliance on programme-specific staff rather than mainstream services
- Accessibility barriers (IT systems, signage, complex navigation on campus, lack of easy-read materials)
- Transition supports into and out of higher education not fully established

Among the barriers to inclusion in higher education for students with intellectual disabilities identified in the surveys were limited accessibility of learning materials and campus facilities.

To foster an inclusive environment, institutions must commit to providing staff training in inclusive pedagogy and support. Organisational and structural challenges, such as funding issues, lengthy staff hiring processes, and the availability of appropriate learning and sensory spaces, can further limit opportunities for inclusive participation.

There was a notable emphasis on the shortcomings in support services. Disability services are already stretched thin, and institutions are not utilising mainstream disability support but instead relying on program-specific resources. Additionally, there is a need to strengthen the transitions in and out of higher education.

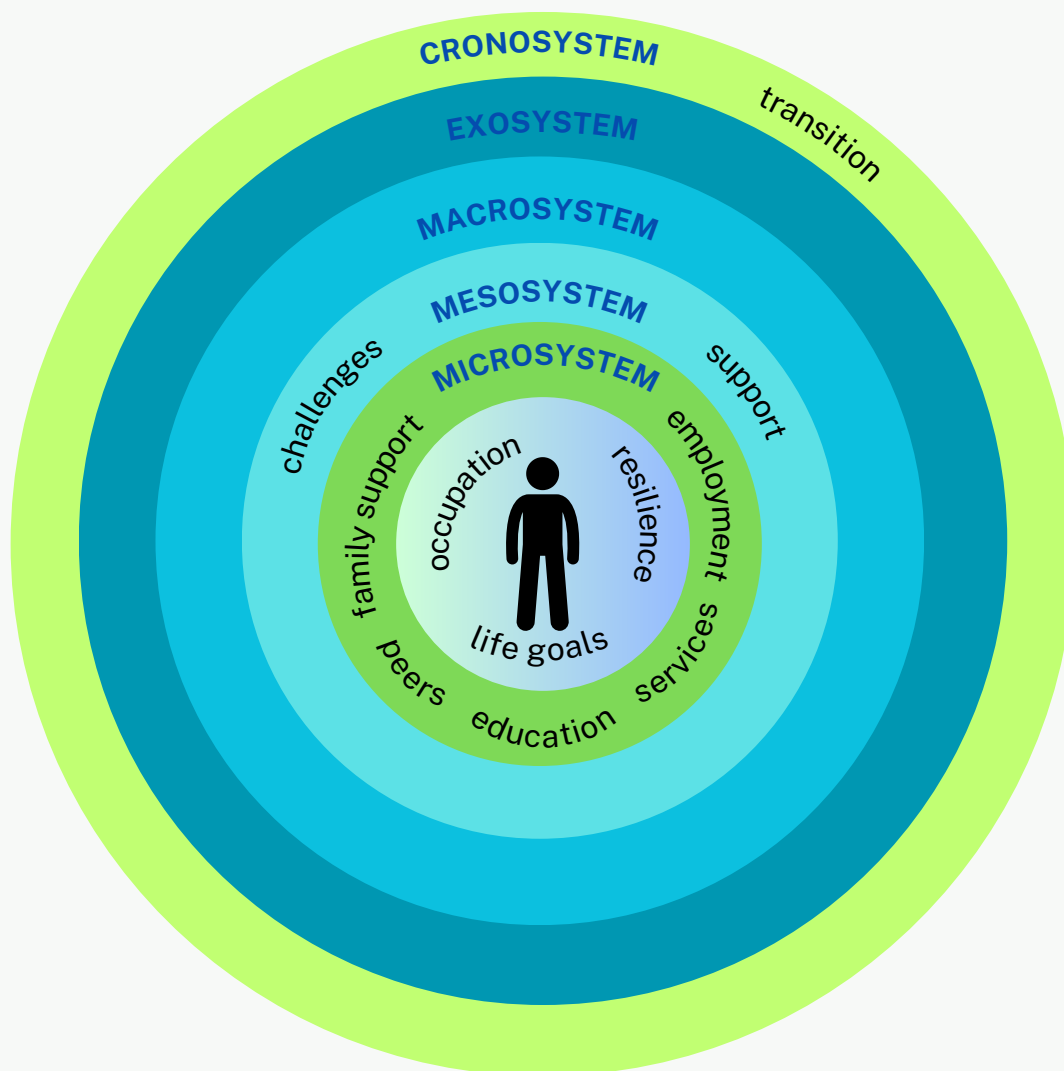
Overall, these barriers underscore the need for systemic changes within higher education institutions to foster a more inclusive environment for students with intellectual disabilities.

Findings from interviews

PEER4ID
Report

05

People with intellectual disabilities: systems perspective



People with intellectual disabilities themselves gave great insight into the challenges that exist and the support needed whilst transitioning from school to education and or employment. The image above represents the key topics that emerged from the interviews with people with intellectual disabilities, organised within an ecological systems theory framework.



Five people with intellectual disabilities were interviewed. Three were currently enrolled in two different higher education institutions, one was employed, and one was seeking employment.

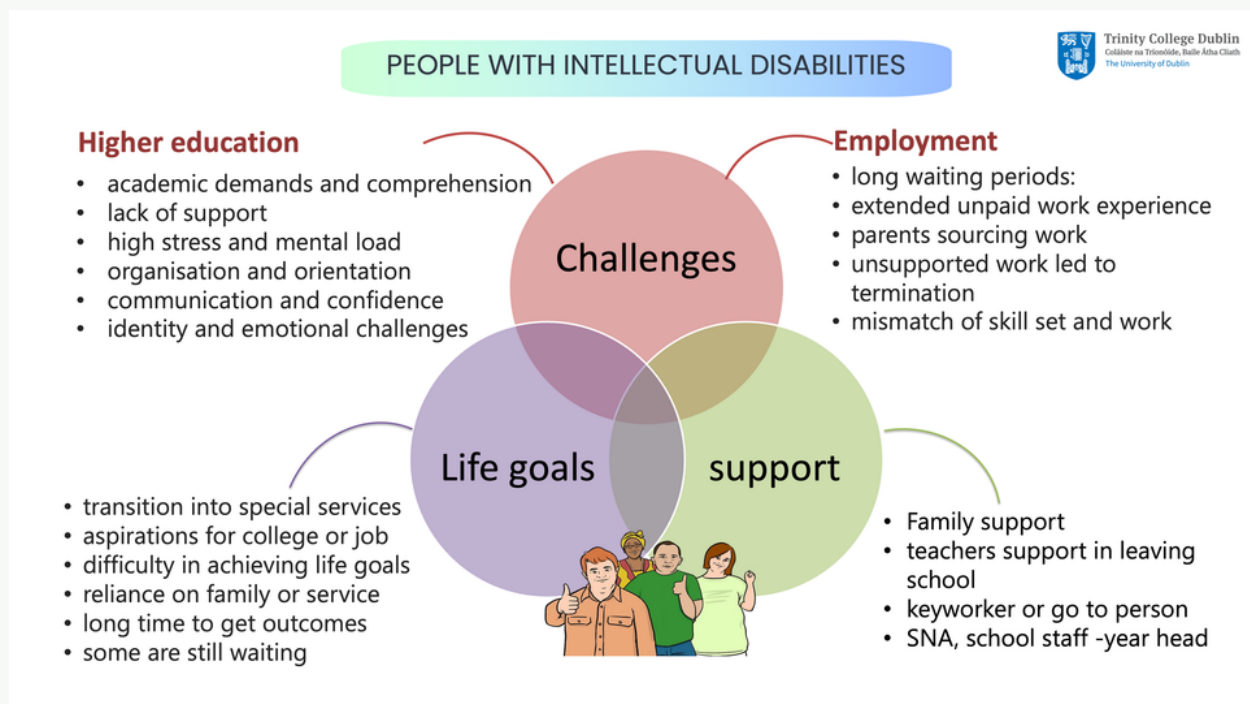
The main messages from these interviews highlight the importance of support systems, suitable communication, personal resilience, and opportunities for growth after leaving school.

Family support, access to education, and having rights are crucial in the transition from school to work and adulthood. Receiving help to apply for jobs and gaining work experience are significant for employment success.

Additionally, the interviews underscore the value of social inclusion, such as meeting friends, being welcomed into third-level institutions and participating in activities, which contribute to a fulfilling life.

The individuals acknowledged that transitioning from school to college can be stressful and challenging, especially in managing time and understanding expectations.

The interviews demonstrate that with proper support and opportunities, individuals can successfully transition into employment and actively participate in the community.



The three primary emerging themes highlighted were challenges, life goals, and support as experienced by individuals with intellectual disabilities. These themes are interconnected.

In the space of higher education, individuals often encounter challenges related to academic demands and comprehension, insufficient support, high stress levels and mental burdens, as well as issues with organisation, navigation, communication, and self-confidence.

Additionally, identity and emotional well-being issues emerge as significant obstacles. In terms of employment, individuals often encounter long waiting times, extended periods of unpaid work experience, and situations where parents must seek job opportunities.

CHALLENGES

LIFE GOALS

SUPPORT

Unsupported work placements can result in job losses, and there is often a disconnect between a person's abilities and the tasks assigned to them.

Life goals, such as aspirations for college or employment, are vital but can be challenging to attain due to reliance on family or service providers and the lengthy processes involved in achieving these outcomes. Many are still waiting for opportunities to move forward.

Support is critical in overcoming these challenges. Family members, teachers, key workers, and school personnel like Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and year heads offer vital assistance, especially during transitions and when leaving school.

It is interesting to notice that topics related to friendship or societal attitudes did not emerge from the analysis of interviews with people with intellectual disability. This could be because there were no explicit questions in the semi-structured interview that focused on those topics, or for other reasons.

However, the perspectives and the voices of the five people interviewed gave an incredibly valuable account of the challenges and opportunities they face when transitioning to education or employment after secondary schooling.

PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

LIFE GOALS



I want to move into college to gain employment.

I obviously wanna get like a good job

BEING A COLLEGE STUDENT



Like you're always worrying about like your assignments, and like what needs to be done. And are you on the right train, or the lecture there or like. There's always other things that you're worried about. When you're being a student, it's not always like happy [...]

EMPLOYABILITY

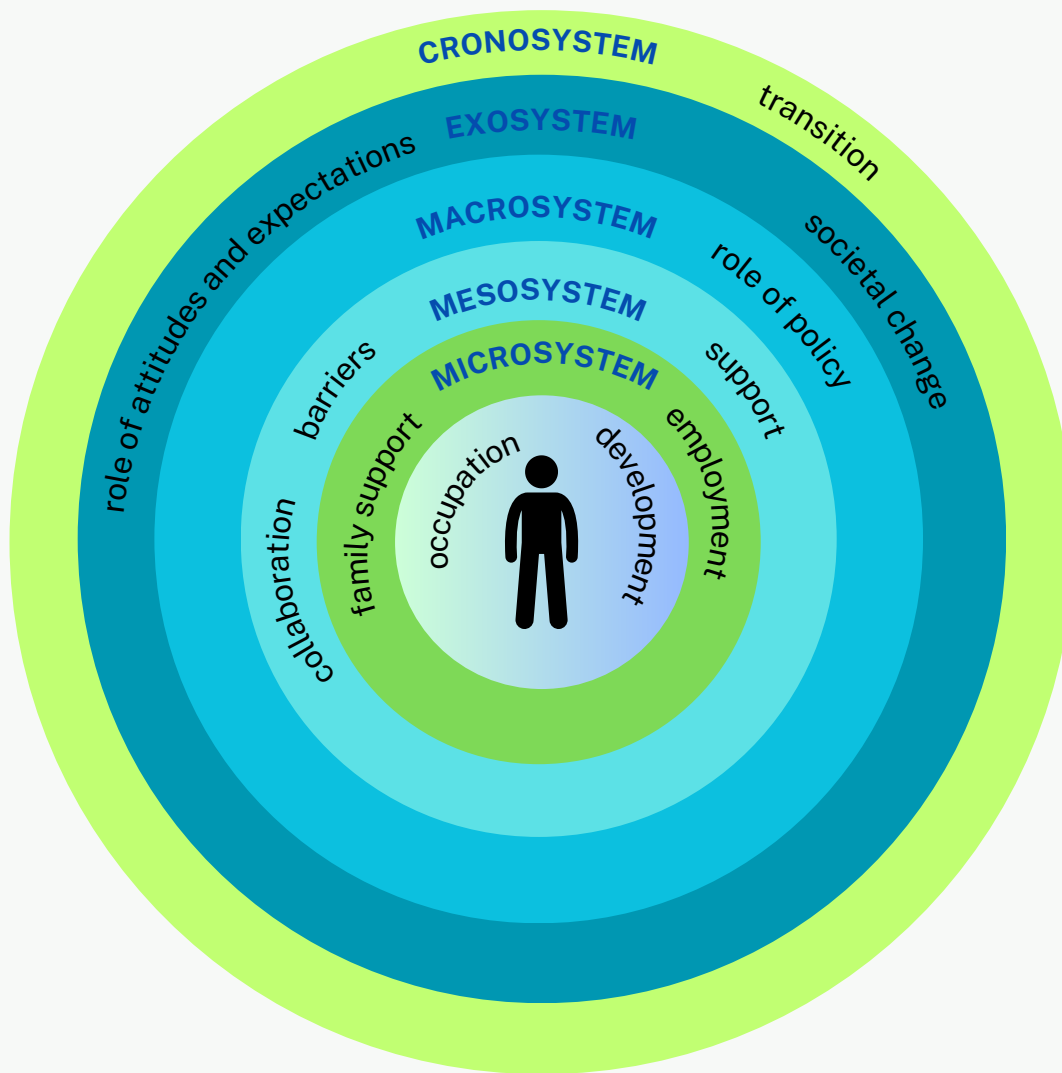


Yeah it took a year, yeah. And then they (said) yeah, she's right for the job, come in. And then get work experience and start and then got the job.

These quotations reflect the perspectives of individuals with intellectual disabilities regarding their life goals, college experiences, and employability. Participants express a strong desire to attend college as a pathway to meaningful work and independence. They convey motivation and ambition in pursuing their career aspirations.

As college students, they face the pressures of academic life, worrying about assignments, deadlines, and practical issues like travel and attending lectures. Their insights indicate that student life is marked by both stress and uncertainty.

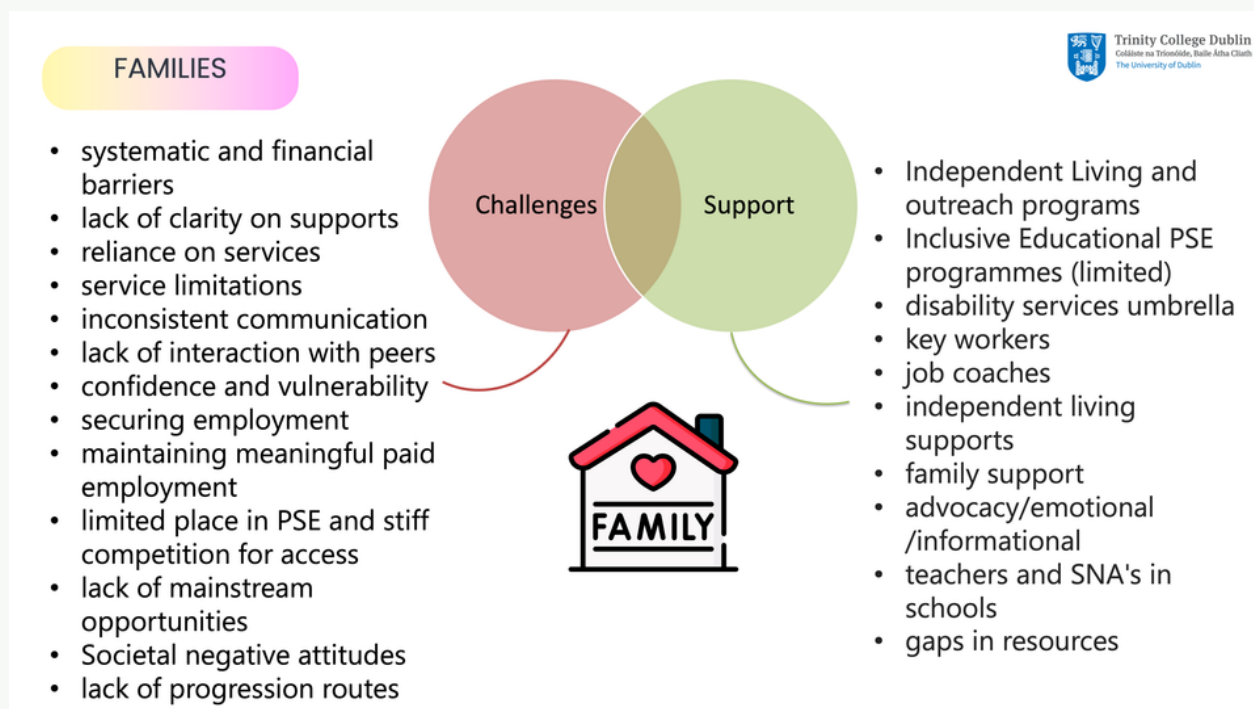
Regarding employability, participants describe the job search as slow and challenging. One individual noted it took a year for a position to be offered, but once given the opportunity, they gained valuable experience and successfully found employment. Their responses highlight the determination and resilience of individuals with intellectual disabilities, who regard education as a crucial step toward achieving their employment goals, despite the obstacles they encounter.



Family interviews' findings, organised by the ecological systems theory lens, show how various environmental layers affect an individual's development, as seen from the familial viewpoint here. The individual dimension of occupation, development, and skills depends on the immediate environments like family support, education, employment, and available services. The interactions between different elements of the systems highlight the importance of collaboration, resources, barriers, and support. Wider cultural influences, including societal values, beliefs, norms, and the impact of policies, are also crucial from the family's point of view. The broader social structures indirectly influence the individual, such as prevailing attitudes and expectations are interconnected with the dimension of time, illustrating how life changes and transitions affect development.

The primary emerging themes highlighted by the families were challenges and supports.

05



Family members identified several challenges related to the transition from school to education and or employment, including systemic and financial barriers, limited services, and a lack of mainstream opportunities.

Competition for post-secondary placements was identified as intense, leading to feelings of envy among those who secured spots. Family members expressed concerns about the absence of direct progression routes and inconsistent communication, which sometimes resulted in a lack of information.

Additionally, they highlighted the difficulties in securing meaningful paid employment, often requiring support from families or services.

The lack of peer interaction and negative societal attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities were also noted. Families emphasised that PSE contributes to confidence-building, which is crucial for their vulnerable members.

CHALLENGES

SUPPORT

Families have emphasised both the available and needed supports for individuals with intellectual disabilities. While there are some post-secondary education programmes, the number of available places is severely limited.

Although there are gaps in the services that facilitate this transition, some specific support roles take time to become effective.

School teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a vital role in providing support, along with disability umbrella services, key workers, job coaches, and independent living supports.

Additionally, programmes such as Independent Living and outreach initiatives are in place.

Families view themselves as essential, natural supports, and they recognise that advocacy, emotional assistance, and informational support are crucial components of the overall support system, and this type of support is limited.



Open quotes from families

05

Families are increasingly concerned about the limited options available for their loved ones with intellectual disabilities after secondary school.



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FAMILIES

TRANSITION AFTER SECONDARY SCHOOL



I think choice has always been poor anyway, I just think choice has always been, you know, 'this is great for you (name redacted) so go for it' [...]

IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO 3RD LEVEL EDUCATION

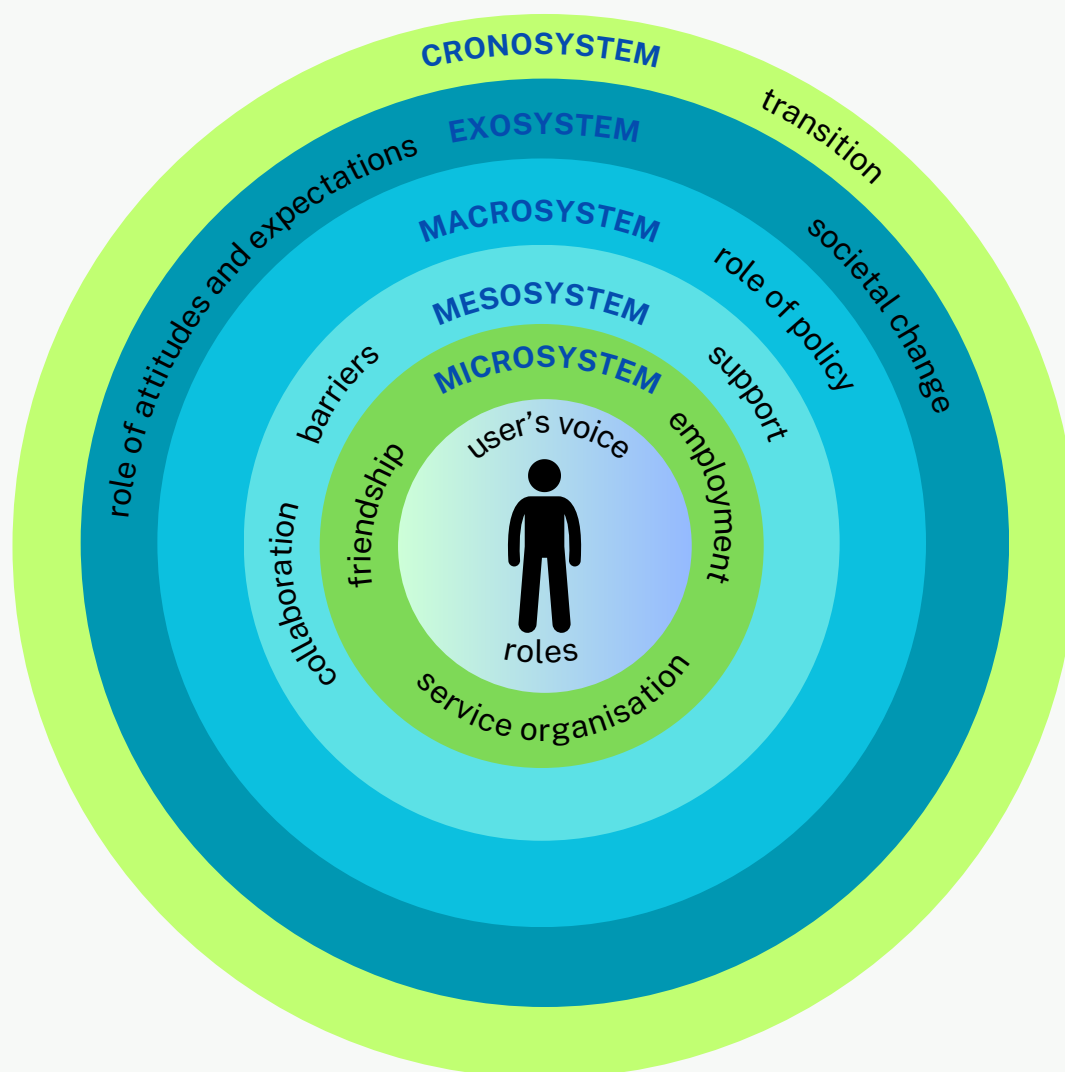


It's extremely important to us because we just feel that she should be given every opportunity like every other child, everybody deserves an education. And I often felt for her when (sister's name redacted) was going to college [...]

They emphasise the critical need for equal access to higher education, believing that all opportunities should be equitable and not predetermined by one's abilities.

Families want their family members to have the same chance to pursue higher education as their siblings and as other students do.

Families see themselves as vital supports, yet limited resources leave significant gaps in the transition to further education, work, and independent living for individuals with intellectual disabilities.



Findings from service provider interviews highlight how environmental factors shape opportunities and barriers to inclusion. At the individual and organisational levels, limited resources, time, and staffing, together with negative societal attitudes and transport difficulties – especially in rural contexts – constrain access and participation. Financial disincentives, such as the risk of losing Disability Allowance or medical cards when taking up full-time work, further restrict possibilities. In contrast, the presence of coordinated support roles, including transition officers, job coaches, and employment officers, enables more person-centred, responsive pathways. Collaborative, flexible, and adaptive support, along with employer and co-worker awareness training, emerged as essential to fostering inclusive employment environments.



Emerging themes from service providers include challenges and support. Challenges identified were a lack of resources, time, and staffing, alongside negative societal attitudes and transportation issues, especially in rural areas.

The financial trap was noted, as accepting full-time work can jeopardise Disability Allowance and medical cards, which are considered valuable.

Additionally, there was limited work experience and informed decision-making.

The highlighted support roles included transition officers, job developers, job coaches, employment officers, teachers and trainers.

Support was tailored, responsive, and client-centred, utilising active listening and adaptive approaches. Awareness training for employers and co-workers was deemed essential and beneficial.

SERVICE PROVIDERS



BARRIERS OF EXCLUSION



It's historic. I think we need another generation. But yes, attitude is a barrier, and then a barrier that has come up from listening to our.. National Advisory Council, and our Region Advisory Council. Previous years. Their top topics were; employment, education, having your voice heard, in the past year and a half, number one has been transport and educate and access.

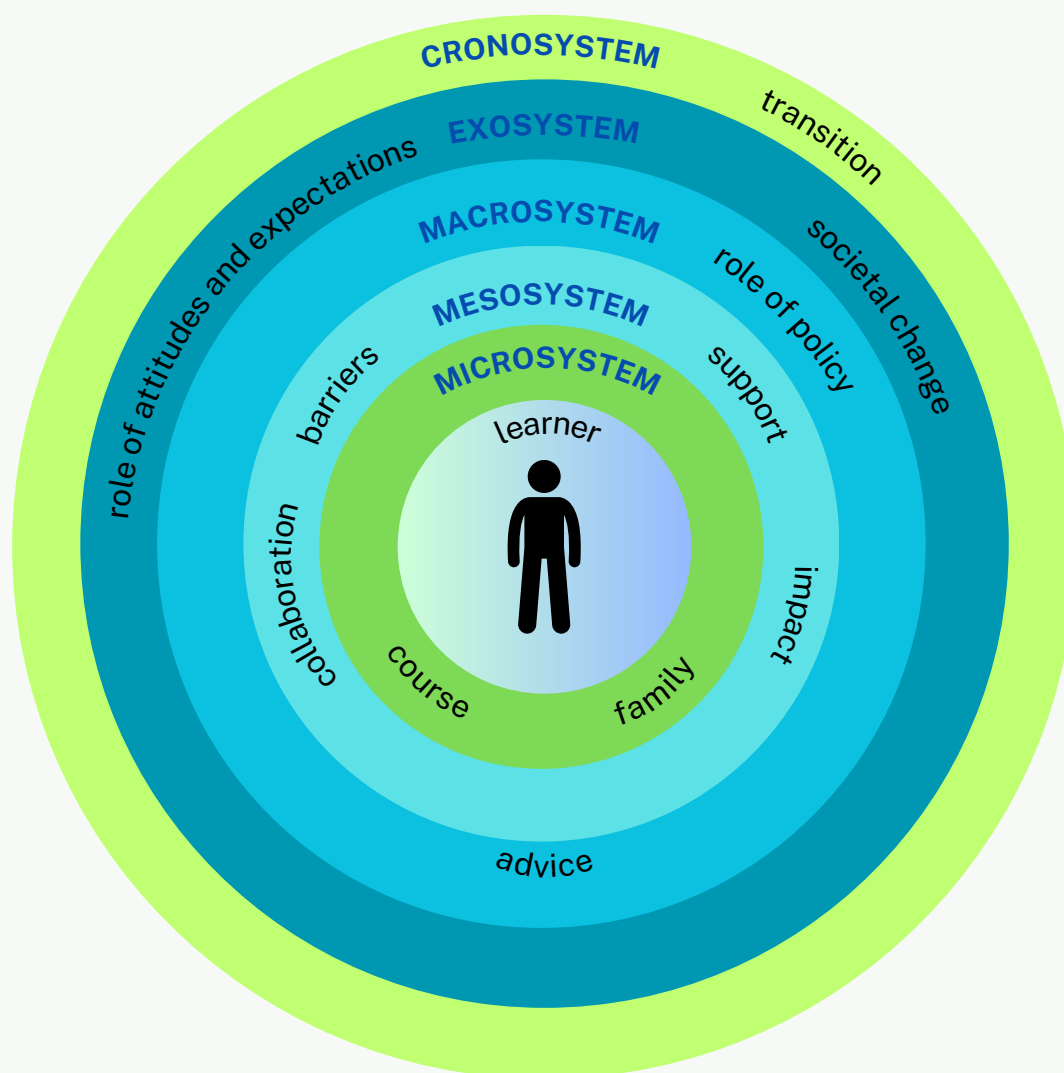
STRUCTURED TRANSITION PATHWAYS



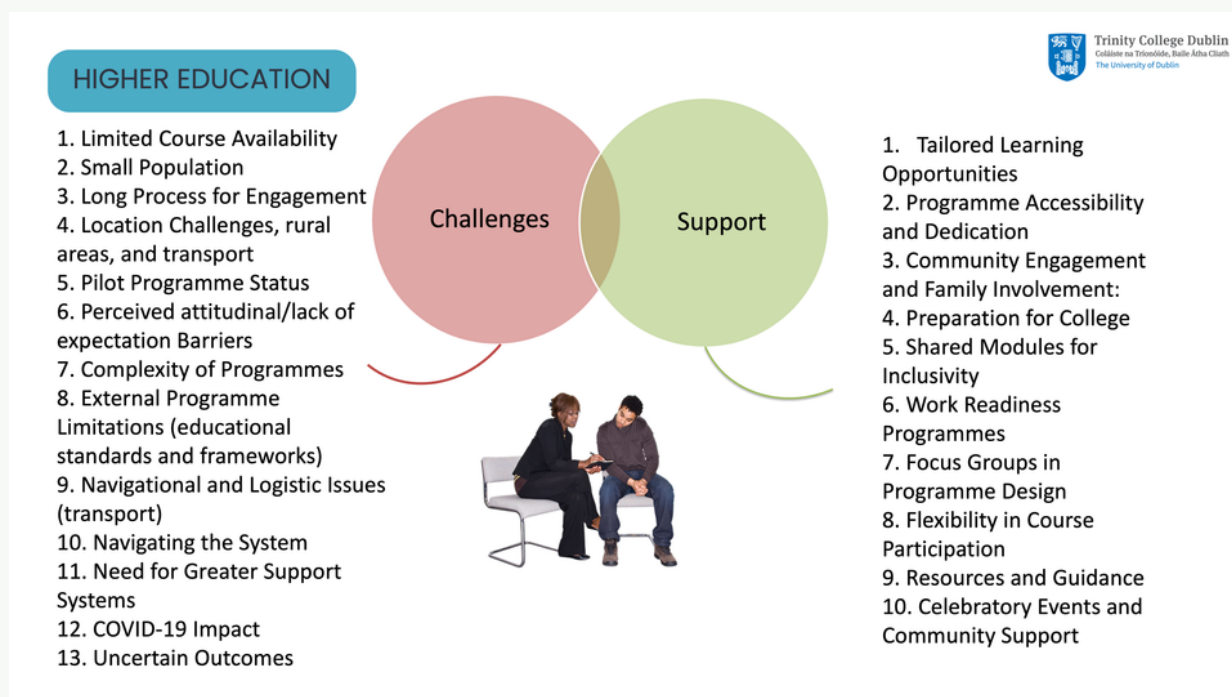
Like from the school leavers coming in, It's asking them what they want about what they want. We provide an individualized program. So it's all about the person and all about their needs. And that starts really, really early on, even from when the school leavers are leaving

Service providers have described the current barriers of exclusion as historic, emphasising the need for more time to overcome attitudinal barriers. Advocates for individuals with intellectual disabilities have previously focused on issues such as employment, education, and the importance of being heard. However, in the past year, they have shifted their attention to raising concerns about transportation, education, and accessibility.

The supports designed for individuals transitioning from school to education or employment are tailored to each person's unique needs, placing them at the forefront of the process. Starting this transition as early as possible is beneficial, and some services are now available to initiate this process while students are still in school, allowing for earlier intervention than in the past.



Findings from Higher Education Institution (HEI) staff interviews show that multiple factors shape inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities. Learners' abilities, motivation, and support networks influence participation, while course design, teaching practices, and family involvement are key to fostering access and belonging. Collaboration among educators, families, and services is essential, though limited funding and inconsistent awareness can hinder progress. Broader attitudes, resources, and policies also affect inclusion. Overall, inclusive higher education depends on strong collaboration, institutional commitment, and a shared culture of flexibility and respect.



Results highlight a strong commitment to inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities in the higher education institutions interviewed, supported by tailored learning opportunities, family engagement, and flexible participation.

Programmes emphasise preparation for college, shared inclusive modules, and work-readiness initiatives, while community involvement and celebratory events foster belonging and confidence.

However, challenges persist, including limited course availability, small student numbers, complex programme structures, and logistical barriers such as transport, particularly in rural areas. Attitudinal barriers, uncertain outcomes, and the temporary status of some pilot programmes further restrict progress.

Continued investment in coordinated support systems and accessible pathways remains essential to ensure genuine and lasting inclusion.

HIGHER EDUCATION



INCLUSIVE TEACHING



So I'm learning about how to, how to teach students with intellectual disability, how to use universal design, really, that's what it's mostly about. And you know, the rights-based approach to education, inclusive education. So, it's had a huge impact on me.

GROWING CONFIDENCE



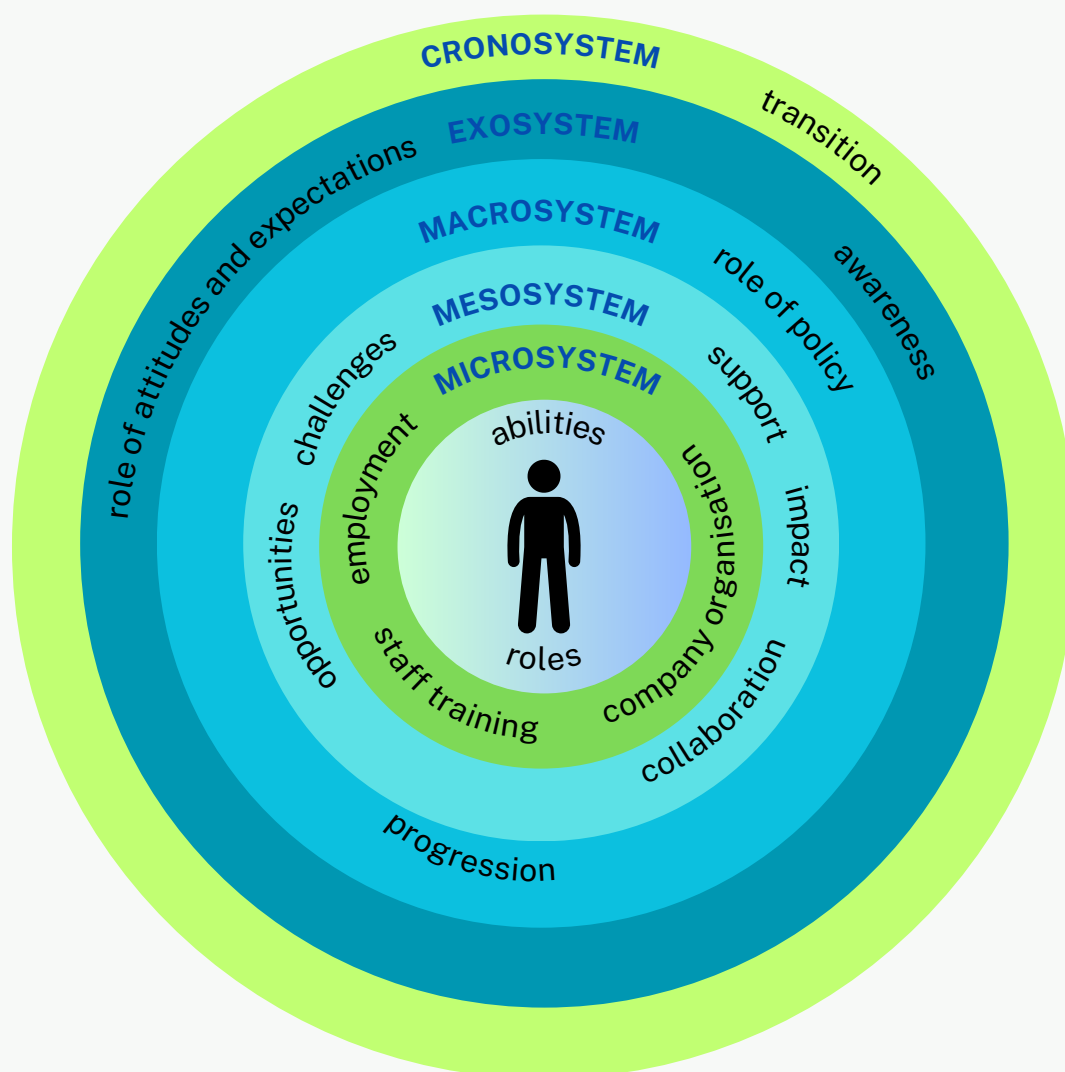
At the start, two or three of the students were very reluctant to join the inclusive modules... but now they've no problem with them at all. They were interacting... and not wanting to leave early or feeling overwhelmed.

EMPLOYABILITY



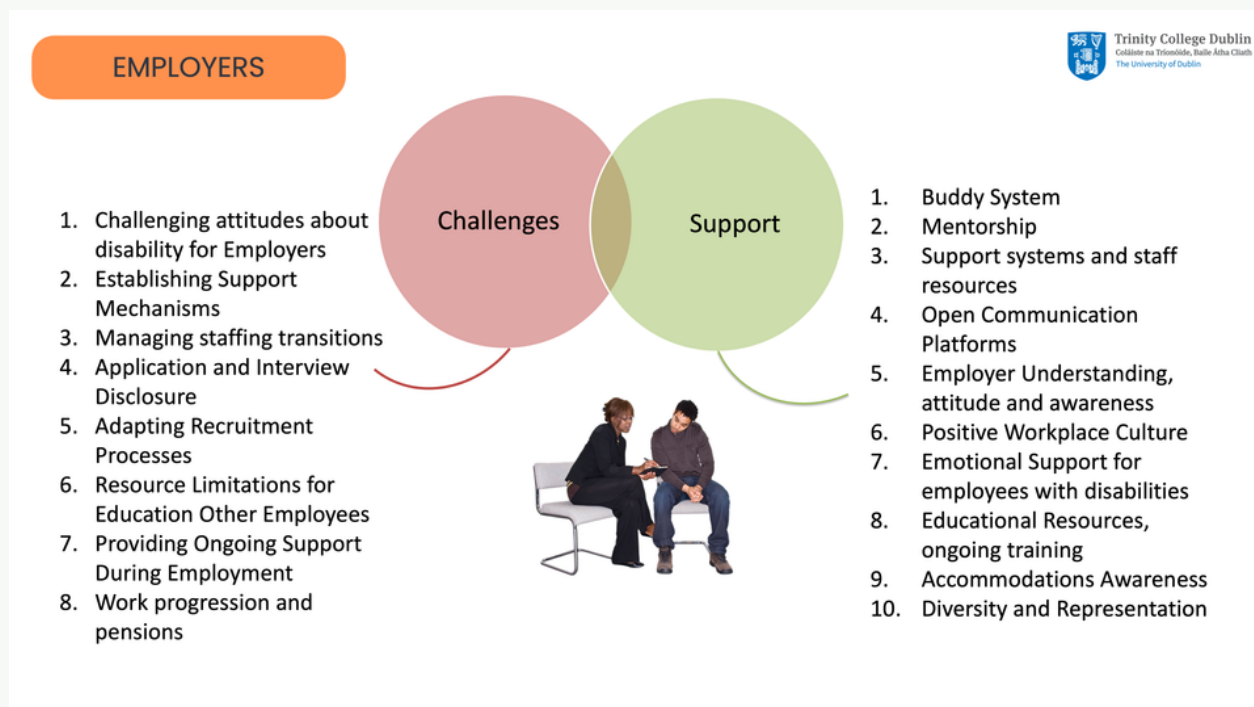
There's a huge growing emphasis on work readiness... preparing students for the prospect of employment after college.

The respondents from HEIs shared valuable insights on teaching students with intellectual disabilities, emphasising the concepts of universal design and a rights-based, inclusive education approach. Initially, some students showed reluctance to engage in inclusive modules; however, over time, their attitudes shifted significantly, resulting in increased interaction and participation. Furthermore, there is a growing emphasis on work readiness within HEI programs, highlighting the importance of preparing students for employment opportunities after college.



Findings from employers reflect how interconnected environmental layers influence inclusion and participation in the workplace. At the immediate level, company organisation and staff training shape daily interactions and opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Collaboration and communication across different systems enable or hinder progress and inclusion. Wider cultural and policy contexts, together with prevailing attitudes and expectations, create additional layers of influence that either support or constrain inclusive employment. Over time, these relationships evolve, showing how change, adaptation, and experience can foster more inclusive practices.



Emerging themes in the workplace emphasise the importance of creating an inclusive environment for all employees. A range of supports and challenges were highlighted. Key initiatives, such as mentorship programmes, buddy systems, and open communication platforms, are being developed to offer guidance, emotional support, and educational resources, all while fostering a positive and diverse workplace culture. Nonetheless, challenges remain, including recruitment, helping employers comprehend and effectively implement inclusion programmes, managing the emotional impact when support personnel depart, and addressing mixed attitudes among colleagues. Furthermore, it is essential to facilitate open discussions about disabilities, adapt recruitment processes for inclusivity, and provide ongoing support for employees with disabilities. Career progression and pensions were also mentioned in line with the financial trap and the Disability Allowance. These emerging themes illustrate the complexities involved in establishing a truly inclusive workplace that accommodate individuals with diverse needs.

EMPLOYERS



COMMUNITY 	We feel it's a very responsible business to ensure that we are reflecting our community and people with intellectual disabilities are reflected in the community.
IMPACT 	And what I've heard from other employers, it's the impact it has on your colleagues and the workforce within the business. It's almost immeasurable and certainly very beneficial.
GROWTH 	I would say we aren't conscious of proactively targeting many groups of prospective employees and intellectual disabilities. We're trying to build up partnerships with various organisations like the Trinity programme and do that in all of our geographies. But I would say at the inefficiency stage of having kind of well-established practices, we're very keen to do more in this space.

Employers in their interviews emphasise the significant, often immeasurable impact that employing people with intellectual disabilities has on colleagues and the overall workforce.

They view it as a responsible business practice to reflect the community's diversity.

Although they are not currently focused on proactively targeting prospective employees with intellectual disabilities, they are working to establish partnerships with organisations like the programme in Trinity College Dublin based in TCPID, and are eager to enhance their efforts in this area as they develop more effective practices.

Employers expressed the potential to broaden these initiatives within their branches in the UK and the USA.

The project focused on identifying the major challenges and opportunities encountered during these transitions. It aimed to inform policies that enhance support systems, promote inclusive employment, and improve higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, it sought to foster inclusive environments that enable individuals with intellectual disabilities to succeed both academically and professionally. The project involved three research questions;

- 1.What challenges do individuals with intellectual disabilities face when transitioning from school to further education, training or employment?
- 2.What challenges do stakeholders face while facilitating these transitions?
- 3.What resources are out there to support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities?

RQ1



CHALLENGES FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

RQ2



CHALLENGES FOR STAKEHOLDERS FACILITATING TRANSITIONS

RQ3



RESOURCES TO SUPPORT EDUCATIO-TO-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITIONS

Research Question 1 focused on the challenges individuals with intellectual disabilities face when transitioning from school to further education, training, or employment. Five categories of challenges were identified: (1) personal and emotional, (2) structural and systemic, (3) institutional and environmental, (4) employment-related, and (5) social and attitudinal.

1

What challenges do individuals with ID face when transitioning from school to further education, training, or employment?



Personal & Emotional Challenges

- Academic comprehension difficulties and organisational stress
- Communication, confidence, and identity struggles
- High mental load and lack of tailored support



Structural & Systemic Barriers

- Limited pathways and places in post-secondary education (PSE)
- Inadequate government initiatives and unclear support systems
- Bureaucratic, tax, and disability allowance (DA) disincentives



Institutional & Environmental Obstacles

- Lack of inclusive structures in further/higher education
- Overemphasis on traditional academic expectations
- Sensory overload and campus navigation issues
- Inconsistent support and communication across services

Personal and emotional challenges can significantly impact students' ability to adapt to post-school settings. Some struggle with academic comprehension and feel overwhelmed by organisational demands, which are often intensified by a lack of tailored support for their individual needs.

Structural and systemic barriers include limited opportunities in post-secondary education, insufficient government programmes, unclear support systems, and bureaucratic or financial disincentives, such as those linked to disability allowances.

Institutional and environmental obstacles also hinder access: inclusive structures remain scarce, traditional academic expectations dominate, and sensory or navigational difficulties on campus can exacerbate exclusion. In addition, communication gaps and inconsistent service provision make transitions more complex.

1

What challenges do individuals with ID face when transitioning from school to further education, training, or employment?



Employment-Related Issues

- Long delays, reliance on unpaid work experience
- Parental dependence to find opportunities
- Lack of job-match, inadequate support in the workplace
- Employer fears around productivity and misunderstanding of abilities



Social & Attitudinal Barriers

- Low expectations and negative attitudes from staff, employers, and society
- Limited interaction with non-disabled peers

Employment-related issues include long wait times for job placements, overreliance on unpaid internships, and the expectation that parents facilitate work opportunities. Employers' concerns about productivity and limited understanding of workers' abilities often compound these difficulties.

Finally, **social and attitudinal barriers**—such as low expectations, negative societal perceptions, and limited interaction with non-disabled peers—further restrict participation and reinforce exclusion.

Research question 2 examined the obstacles stakeholders encounter in facilitating transitions from school to further education, training, or employment. Five key categories emerged: (1) knowledge, training, and awareness; (2) employment-specific challenges; (3) financial disincentives; (4) Resource and capacity constraints; and (5) Systemic and structural issues.

2

What challenges do stakeholders face while facilitating these transitions?

**Knowledge, Training & Awareness**

- Need for lecturer and staff training in inclusive practices
- Employer bias, low expectations, and lack of awareness
- Fear and stigma around intellectual disability

**Employment-Specific Challenges**

- Difficulty matching skills to jobs
- Sustainability issues when support structures (e.g. buddies) change
- Need for long-term employer commitment

**Financial Disincentives**

- Medical card and disability allowance (DA) can act as a 'financial trap'
- Transitions risk loss of benefits and security

Knowledge, training, and awareness gaps remain widespread. Educators and employers preparedness in inclusive practices is crucial, while a limited understanding of intellectual disabilities reinforces stigma and low expectations.

Employment-specific challenges include difficulties in matching skills to suitable roles, limited long-term employer commitment, which undermines job stability and inclusion, especially combined with frequent changes of support personnel.

Financial disincentives continue to discourage individuals and families from pursuing education or employment, as the potential loss of disability allowances or medical cards creates a “financial trap” that limits autonomy and opportunity.

Resource and capacity constraints demonstrate that services are currently under-resourced, suffering from insufficient staff time and a need for additional support that surpasses what is currently provided by disability services. Much of the assistance relies on the goodwill of staff and temporary measures rather than lasting solutions.

2

What challenges do stakeholders face while facilitating these transitions?



Resource & Capacity Constraints

- Under-resourced services and limited staff time
- Additional supports needed beyond existing disability services
- Support often reliant on staff goodwill and short-term fixes



Systemic & Structural Issues

- Lack of clear pathways into and out of post-secondary education (PSE)
- Limited feeder routes and progression options
- Long delays in accessing grants (e.g. assistive technology)
- Policy gaps and absence of strong government initiatives

Systemic and structural issues hinder individual progression both in postsecondary education and employment.

There are unclear pathways for entering and exiting post-secondary education, with few feeder routes or options for progression, as well as significant delays in obtaining essential grants like those for assistive technology.

Broader policy shortcomings and a lack of strong government initiatives make it even more challenging to establish smooth and equitable transitions.

Research question 3 explored the resources available to support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities. Six categories were identified: (1) specialised roles and support staff; (2) inclusive education supports; (3) programmes and initiatives; (4) interagency and community collaboration; (5) family and school-based support, and (6) employer training and awareness.

3

What resources are out there to support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities?



Specialised Roles & Support Staff

- Transition officers, job coaches, job developers, employment officers
- SNAs, year heads, keyworkers, and lifelong learning teachers
- Responsive, client-centred staff with adaptive approaches



Inclusive Education Supports

- Student-centred planning and inclusive teaching strategies
- Access to mainstream supports (e.g. counselling)
- Induction programmes in PSE
- Inclusive post-secondary programmes (though limited in number)



Programmes & Initiatives

- OWL (Oireachtas Work Learning) Programme
- WorkAbility funding for projects improving employment outcomes
- Independent living and outreach programmes

Specialised roles and support staff are important. Education-to-employment pathways are strengthened by a range of professionals, including transition officers, job coaches, job developers, employment officers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs), year heads, keyworkers, and lifelong learning teachers. These staff members adopt responsive, client-centred, and adaptive approaches to meet the unique needs of each individual. **Inclusive education supports** are advanced through student-centred planning, inclusive teaching methods, and access to mainstream supports such as counselling. Induction programmes in post-secondary education help ease transitions, while inclusive programmes—though still limited—offer valuable learning and engagement opportunities.

Several targeted **programmes and initiatives** enhance transitions from education to employment. The OWL (Oireachtas Work Learning) Programme, WorkAbility funding for employment-focused projects, and independent living and outreach programmes all promote autonomy and long-term inclusion in education and work settings.

3

What resources are out there to support education-to-employment pathways for people with intellectual disabilities?



Interagency & Community Collaboration

- Collaboration between schools, disability services, employers, and PSE institutions
- Peer and community support
- Support from disability organisations and feeder networks



Family & School-Based Support

- Emotional, informational, and advocacy support from families
- Teachers and SNAs playing a key role during school transitions



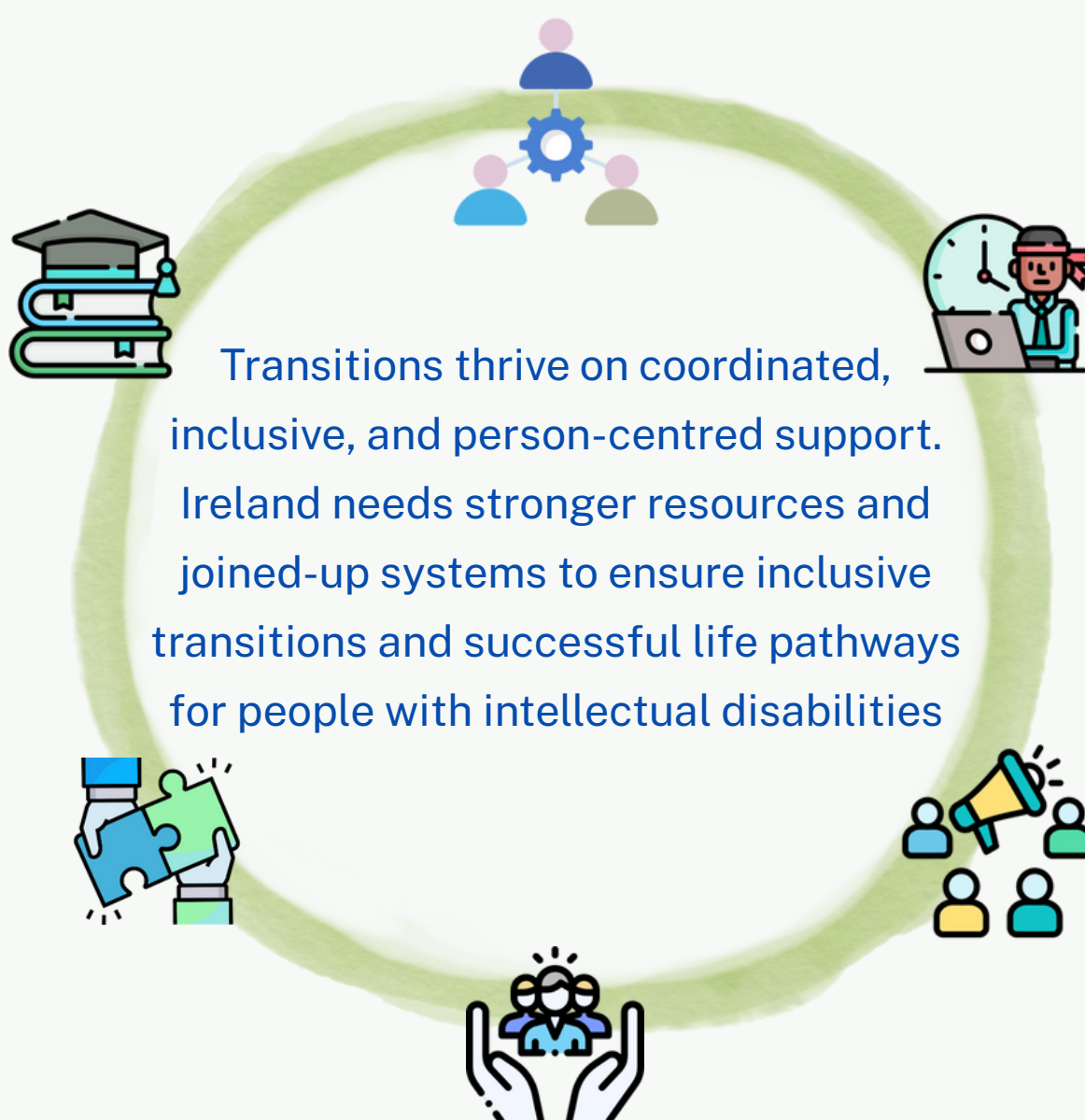
Employer Training & Awareness

- Awareness programmes for employers, coworkers, and families
- Supports to create more inclusive workplaces

Effective **interagency and community collaboration** among schools, disability services, employers, and PSE institutions is key to successful transitions. Peer and community networks, along with the involvement of disability organisations and feeder services, provide important additional layers of support.

Family and school-based support offer essential emotional, informational, and advocacy support, recognised as a cornerstone of successful transitions. Teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) also play a vital role during this stage, often extending their responsibilities beyond formal expectations.

Finally, **training and awareness** initiatives for employers, coworkers, and families are essential to building inclusive workplaces. Although some structured pathways and training exist, stakeholders emphasised the need for broader and more consistent efforts to ensure meaningful inclusion in employment settings.



SOME CONSIDERATIONS



Transition to Education & Employment

- Lack of choice, limited exposure, limited progression
- Over reliance on families, lack of guidance



Fragmented Responsibilities

- Policy frameworks like PATH 4, Workability, how do they link?
- Multiple departments involved: HSE, DEFHERIS, Dept. of Education, Dept. of Children, Disability, and Equality
- No unified, cross-sectoral strategy or leadership



Structured Pathways

- Non-consistent structured pathway
- Where structured pathways and partnerships exist, outcomes improve



Gaps in National Coordination

- Successful local initiatives (e.g. TCPID, INHEF) show potential
- Lack of national, network-focused policy or coordinated strategy
- Inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in policy making processes

Young adults with intellectual disabilities continue to encounter limited options, minimal exposure, and few opportunities for advancement when transitioning into further education or employment. Guidance and support are often insufficient, leaving families to carry much of the responsibility. Fragmented services, unclear connections between frameworks, and the involvement of multiple departments without cohesive leadership contribute to disjointed provision. Although some structured pathways have been developed to improve outcomes, significant gaps remain in national coordination and targeted policy. Promising local initiatives highlight the importance of ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities are meaningfully involved in shaping the policies that affect their lives. This research has highlighted the need to further explore transitions from multiple perspectives, keeping the voices, experiences, and insights of people with intellectual disabilities at the centre of future inquiry.

THANK YOU

08

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the people with intellectual disabilities, their families, higher education staff, employment staff, and service providers who took part in this research. Their time, experiences, and insights were central to the PEER4ID project and to the findings presented in this report.

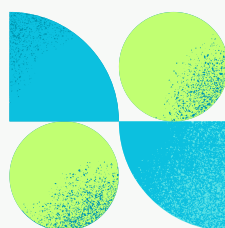
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We hope this report will serve as a valuable resource to support ongoing research and collaboration in this area at a national level and beyond.

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Contacts

Dr Donatella Camedda
cameddad@tcd.ie



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
[The University of Dublin](http://www.tcd.ie)