



**EQUITY AND  
INCLUSIVITY FOR ALL:**  
A Position Paper for a  
National Progression  
Framework for students  
with additional care  
needs in Ireland

# Terms of reference

<b>CRPD</b>	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
<b>DARE</b>	Disability Access Route to Education
<b>HEAR</b>	Higher Education Access Route
<b>FSD</b>	Fund for Students with Disabilities
<b>HSE</b>	Health Service Executive
<b>EPIC</b>	Empowering People in Care
<b>EPSEN Act</b>	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
<b>NCSE</b>	National Council for Special Education
<b>CSO</b>	Central Statistics Office
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>Students with additional care needs</b>	inclusive term to encompass all students with a form of intellectual, emotional, sensory, mental health, or physical disability, and autistic students.



*"Many of our students are capable [of progression into further or higher education] but unless they are completely self-motivated and know what they want to do, there's just no support for them."*

SNA, Limerick

## Supporting students with additional care needs to succeed

Students in the Republic of Ireland with intellectual or other disabilities, including autistic students, that require additional care needs are entitled to an equitable and inclusive education as part of the EPSEN act of 2004 (Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs)<sup>1</sup>. However, take up of further and higher education pathways by these students is low, with many students with more complex needs excluded entirely due to inaccessible information. In turn, this contributes to poor economic and community involvement for students with additional care needs, who experience extremely high rates of unemployment upon entrance to the labour market. This trend is further compounded by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, which continue to be felt in the Irish economy and education services sectors, since lock downs significantly hindered continuity in care services, and traditional methods of disseminating information on post-secondary access were disrupted.

Preliminary research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) on behalf of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2022 found that despite the existence of a plethora of both financial and academic schemes for entrance into further or higher education, progression information is largely left to the schools to coordinate autonomously. Although secondary schools possess a career guidance office, students and staff reported a lack of detailed information and support for the specific pathways available to students with additional care needs<sup>2</sup>. For those students with more complex care needs that may be in a special education school, progression support is completely inaccessible since those schools do not have a career guidance office, leaving information gathering and support up to highly motivated staff. The current patchwork of uncoordinated progression assistance leaves many students with additional care needs and their families in a precarious situation at the end of their mandatory education.

1 Oireachtas (2004) 'Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act', available at ACTS04#U30 (oireachtas.ie) [Accessed 24 March 2023].

2 Carroll, E., McCoy S., and Ye K. (2022) "Mapping and Tracking of Students with SEN after They Leave School; Initial findings from an NCSE commissioned study" [PowerPoint], NCSE 2022 Annual Conference, ESRI, 10 November, available at; Research Conference - National Council for Special Education - Working to deliver a better special education service (ncse.ie) [Accessed 24 March 2023].



Fórsa, which represents the Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) charged with caring for many of these students, is calling on the Minister of Education and the Special Education Minister to fulfil its remit to provide equitable access to post-secondary programs for all with the creation of a comprehensive national progression framework for students with additional care needs. Such a framework should include the following:

1. Allocation of additional funding to enhance career guidance offices and establish them in schools where they currently do not exist.
2. Continuing professional development for career guidance counsellors and relevant staff.
3. Creation of a recommended timeline of actions for progression information beginning in junior cycle for students and families.
4. Relaunch of progression information in an accessible format for students with intellectual disabilities.
5. A centralised tracking system for all primary and secondary schools to report school leaving plans for each student.
6. Evaluation method for assessing the success of new supports and improving them year after year.

Implementing these reforms into policy will aid significantly in addressing equity for students with additional care needs to progress successfully into a post-secondary program and build back stronger supports in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper will further demonstrate that while a form of these supports and tracking mechanisms exists in certain settings and organisations, the uncoordinated expansion of policy for students with additional care needs has left large gaps in reporting and information accessibility that is hindering progress. Our National Progression Framework recommendations will re-centre students with additional care needs in policy.

## Committing to equity and inclusion: A timeline of the Republic of Ireland's international and domestic commitments

The establishment of a national progression framework for students with additional care needs ensures that Ireland fulfils its domestic and international commitments for securing equity and access for people with disabilities. In 2004, the Dáil passed the EPSEN Act, which enacted the legal framework for NCSE and dictated that children with special educational needs must have access to an inclusive education wherever possible and possess the same rights to an appropriate education as children without additional care needs<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Oireachtas (2004) 'Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act', available at ACTS04#U30 (oireachtas.ie) [Accessed 24 March 2023].



In 2006, as part of the United Nations, Ireland signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which outlined an international commitment to pursuing quality of life and dignity for all persons with disabilities<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, Ireland also subscribes to the European Union (EU) Disability Strategy (2021 - 2030) which was created to advance the CRPD agenda and create an EU led plan to address accessibility, non-discrimination, independent living, and employment for people with disabilities.

To address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vulnerable learners and post-secondary access, A *Statement of Strategy: 2021-2023* was published by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to outline its goals and values for achieving access and equity for all learners. It is from this strategy highlighting tertiary education pathways and employment that the Higher Education Authority (HEA) published its National Access Plan (NAP) 2022-2028, which outlines the commitments and resources allocated to making further and higher education more representative of traveller students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and students with additional care needs.

The NAP depicts a positive increase of students with additional care needs participating in further and higher education over the last decade, with an increase from about 6% in 2012 to 12.4% in 2021<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, over €750 million is allocated to financial support schemes for qualifying students and institutions to facilitate access to further and higher education over the life course of the plan.

However, students with additional care needs are still underrepresented in further and higher education and continue to face challenges after leaving school. The Minister for Special Education launched a consultation for the review of the EPSEN act in January 2023 to ensure that all parts of the act are fully implemented. Fórsa's call for a National Progression Framework for students with additional care needs is directly related to the full implementation of the EPSEN act and will ensure that the Irish government is accountable to its entire remit for access and equity for these students.

## What happens to students with additional care needs on entry to the labour market?

The stats for people with disabilities on the Irish labour market are shocking poorly. According to census data recorded in 2016 by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) people with disabilities between ages 15-50 are employed at a rate of 46% on average, extremely lower than the national average of 72% for the general population recorded in the same period. Additionally, 13.7% of people with disabilities in Ireland have only completed a primary school education, triple the national average of 4.2%<sup>7</sup>. Despite efforts from the Irish government to combat employment and education inaccessibility with the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (2015-2024), the gap between policy developments and take up of supports persists. **Ireland's disability employment is double that of the OECD average<sup>8</sup>.**

The Department of Social Protection announced a one-million-euro expansion in Budget 2023 of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund for employers, which provides funding for accessibility modifications and assisted employment, such as equipment adaption and interpreters, and a retention grant. However, in a small employer survey conducted by the OECD in 2021, just 10% of employer respondents were aware of the fund's existence<sup>9</sup>.

4 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2006) 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities', available at; Article 1 - Purpose | United Nations Enable [Accessed 23 March 2023].

5 Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Higher Education Authority (2022) *National Access Plan: A strategic plan for equity of access, participation and success in higher education, 2022-2028*, available at; gov.ie - National Access Plan, 2022 to 2028 (www.gov.ie) [Accessed 22 March 2023].

6 Central Statistics Office (2016) 'Census of Population 2016 - Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers', available at Disability - CSO - Central Statistics Office [Accessed 23 March 2023].

7 Central Statistics Office (2016) 'Census of Population 2016 - Profile 9 Health, Disability and Carers', available at Disability - CSO - Central Statistics Office [Accessed 23 March 2023].

8 OECD (2021), Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland: Engaging and Supporting Employers, OECD Publishing, Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/74b45baa-en> [Accessed 27 March 2023].

9 OECD (2021), Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland: Engaging and Supporting Employers, OECD Publishing, Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/74b45baa-en> [Accessed 27 March 2023].





*"60% of early school leavers cited illness/disability and special educational needs as one of their reasons for leaving school in 2019."*

Growing up Ireland, 2019

These labour force trends continue to make people with disabilities more vulnerable to crisis, as those who are employed are more likely to be in involuntary part time employment or low wage work with high exposure to instability<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, the volatile nature of poor employment and unemployment contributes to their experience of higher rates of social exclusion. Low take up of further education, higher education, and trades training programs by students with additional care needs will continue to widen the employment gap. Shifting focus to what these students can do, rather than focusing on what they are presumed to be unable to do, should be a key objective in the Irish governments policy efforts.

## What happens to students with additional care needs after secondary school?

Take up of further and higher education by students with additional care needs is insufficient. In 2021, students with additional care needs comprised only 12.4% of new entrants into further and higher education. Additionally, for those students whose care needs are more significant, post-secondary placement is more complicated and requires stronger individualized planning. There are several core pathways students can avail of after schooling.

### Higher education access

#### DARE (Disability Access Route to Education)

The DARE scheme functions as an alternative admissions strategy for school-leavers under 23 years of age. DARE offers reduced points places into higher education institutions for those students whose additional care needs may have impacted their secondary education experience and Leaving Cert scores. Higher education institutions set aside a certain number of places for DARE scheme applications every year. In 2020, over 4000 students were offered placements via DARE<sup>11</sup>.

10 OECD (2021), Disability, Work and Inclusion in Ireland: Engaging and Supporting Employers, OECD Publishing, Paris, available at <https://doi.org/10.1787/74b45baa-en> [Accessed 27 March 2023].

11 Oireachtas (2020) 'DARE HEAR Summary Report 2020' available at; 2021-07-13\_pq512-13-07-21\_en.pdf (oireachtas.ie) [Accessed 30 March 2023].



## HEAR (Higher Education Access Route)

Like the DARE scheme, HEAR provides reduced points places into higher education for students' part of a traditionally underrepresented economic, social, or cultural background. While not specifically designed for students with additional care needs, many students possess intersecting eligibility criteria and apply to both schemes. Higher education institutions set aside a certain number of HEAR applicant places every year for these students.

## SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland)

SUSI is a means tested grant for any Irish student in a further or higher education institution.

## 1916 Bursary Fund

The 1916 Bursary fund was established in 2017 to increase access to higher education for those socio-economic groups who are severely underrepresented. It is a means tested grant. As an underrepresented group in higher education, many students with additional care needs can avail of this financial program.

## Further education

Further education is a strong alternative for students who may not desire to pursue higher education. The ETB (Education and Training Boards) across Ireland operate dozens of PLC (post leaving certificate) courses for students to gain a Level 5 or 6 qualification with work experience training included in many programs. Topics of study are diverse, from courses on administration and agriculture, to cosmetology and business.

Funding schemes for higher education are often shared with further education. Additionally, PLC students who later go on to higher education on average have more success transitioning, since PLC can provide a manageable program to adapt to more independent forms of study and training which students with additional care needs often find difficult<sup>12</sup>.

## HELS (Higher Education Links Scheme)

The higher education links scheme provides a pathway for students who completed a QQI level 5 or 6 PLC to apply for a place in a higher education institution through the CAO (Central Applications Office).

## EPIC (Empowering People in Care)

EPIC is a community organization which provides advocacy support for children in the care system in Ireland. Protecting their rights and involving children in the decision-making process for their lives is essential to EPIC's mission. In 2021, over 10,000 children were in the care of the state or foster care services<sup>13</sup>. For children with additional care needs in this system, the absence of a family support structure creates a significant barrier to accessing information on progression options and advocating for their personal interests and needs. Among other services, EPIC provides trained advocates for children to assist them with progression and transition into an appropriate further or higher education program, apprenticeship, or jobs training, and will aid them in finding out more about their rights to equity accommodations.

12 Guckin, C., et al (2013) 'Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs' NCSE, 14, available at; [Moving to Further and Higher Education: An Exploration of the Experiences of Students with Special Educational Needs \(ncse.ie\)](#) [accessed 22 March 2023].

13 EPIC (2021) Impact Report 2021, available at; [Annual report \(epiconline.ie\)](#) [accessed 4 April 2023].



*“People with intellectual disabilities are often excluded at the first rung of the ladder because the information isn’t made accessible for them.”*

Representative from  
Inclusion Ireland

## Accessibility

Students with additional care needs who participate in further or higher education have a right to reasonable accommodations that ensure their needs are properly met while enrolled in a program. Students can avail of these resources through the access office at their college, technical institute, or university. Accessibility accommodations are numerous, including assistive technologies for the deaf/hard of hearing or blind, extra time in exams, sign language interpreters, non-medical assistants, transport assistance, and a note taker. In 2021, an AHEAD report confirmed that in the 2019/2020 academic year, over 15,800 students engaged with higher education support services<sup>14</sup>.

Access offices are primarily funded through the recurrent grant allocation model, tying funding to the number of students registered with the access office the year prior. This model can cause difficulties in securing accessibility needs since registration numbers and student need complexity changes from year to year. Students with additional care needs in higher or further education training programs can also apply to the FSD (fund for students with disabilities) to receive extra financial support for assistive equipment and transportation. Lastly, the Student Assistance Fund is available to all Irish resident students currently enrolled in higher education who experience an onset in financial difficulties that could threaten their ability to remain enrolled in school.

## HSE school leaver referral

The HSE School Leaver Referral program is open to all students with a form of intellectual, physical, sensory, mental health, or autism spectrum disorder disability by age 16. Students with additional care needs can receive an assessment that results in a referral to fully funded programs for mainstream education services, rehabilitation training services, and adult day services.

For those students with complex care needs where adult day services are the appropriate placement, interviews conducted by ESRI in 2022 revealed that although families welcomed the relationship with the HSE, they experienced issues with the continuity of services that hinders their student’s quality of life progress. For instance, students receiving physical therapy are often serviced by a different professional at each visit, typically repeating the same cycle of exercises rather than building upon previous visits to work toward a goal. Additionally, many students who receive placements in an adult facility are unable to take their spot for months at a time due to severe staffing issues, prolonging transition phases<sup>15</sup>.

Adult disability services are provided through a patchwork network of HSE managed sites and community and voluntary organisations, like Enable Ireland, that work to fill community care gaps. However, much like the issues surrounding further and higher education access, this uncoordinated approach often leaves people with additional care needs without a goal oriented or productive support plan as the state struggles to meet demand.

14 Ryder, D. (ed.) (2020) ‘Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland 2019/20’ AHEAD, AHEAD Educational Press, available at; Data / Statistics - AHEAD [Accessed 25 March 2023].

15 Carroll, E., McCoy S., and Ye K. (2022) “Mapping and Tracking of Students with SEN after They Leave School; Initial findings from an NCSE commissioned study” [PowerPoint], NCSE 2022 Annual Conference, ESRI, 10 November, available at; Research Conference - National Council for Special Education - Working to deliver a better special education service (ncse.ie) [Accessed 24 March 2023].





# Department of Education pilot program for young school leavers with disabilities

In November of 2022, Minister of Education Norma Foley, and Minister for Special Education Josepha Madigan announced a pilot program on progression for students with additional care needs. The program should advance the goals of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy 2015-2024 by allocating additional resources to a select cluster of mainstream and special schools in Dublin and Galway that will assist them in progressing students to further or higher education, apprenticeship programs, trades, employment, or adult day services where appropriate<sup>16</sup>.

The pilot program is ongoing and involves the creation of a half time post dedicated to progression in each school, where said personnel is charged with profiling each student for their needs and interests and then identifying pathways and skill targets with students and families. Communication with local businesses to increase possible offers of employment and connecting those businesses with the reasonable accommodation fund for those students that require assisted employment is also part of the pilot remit. This program is available for two years, from age 16 or fifth year for students, with a tracking component to monitor progress continuing up to three years after students have transitioned.

The Department of Education hopes that the additional resources provided to the pilot will significantly bridge the gap between services and programs available and take up of those programs, as well as the creation of a more inclusive approach to progression planning for students and families which can better respond to the diversity of need with more individualized, goal oriented, and fulfilling school leaving plans.

## Delivering for all students with additional care needs: Fórsa's concluding recommendations

Policy developments for programs targeting students with additional care needs have expanded enormously in the last two decades, yet the low participation rate in these programs persists. As part of its international commitments and review of the EPSEN act, The Irish government has a continued responsibility to pursue consultation and improvement strategies until students with additional care needs are supported in an equitable and inclusive manor.

The Department of Education pilot program is a strong advancement toward a more coordinated approach to progression and Fórsa welcomes this as a positive development. Integration of a dedicated post for progression of students with additional care needs in all school settings will facilitate equity. However, while the goals of the program overlap strongly with our own analysis, there are two missing elements: integration of progression planning in junior cycle, and the relaunch of progression materials in a completely inclusive format for those students with an intellectual disability.

Testimony from Fórsa members working in education and research conducted by ESRI both concluded that when students are unsure of their next steps, current forms of school guidance in the senior cycle is often ineffective. The introduction of an incremental progression support plan in the junior cycle could help students with additional care needs and their families think more critically about what they enjoy doing and which pathways and support structures currently exist for them to achieve those goals.

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<sup>16</sup> Department of Education (2022) 'Press Release: Ministers Foley and Madigan announce pilot project to support young school leavers with disabilities' available at; gov.ie - Ministers Foley and Madigan announce pilot project to support young school leavers with disabilities (www.gov.ie) [Accessed 31 March 2023].





*"The minute they hit that age group of 13-14 years old, they should be given a pack with all the information about their options so it's available to them."*

SNA, SCDL

As part of Ireland's commitment to non-discrimination in the CRPD the delivery of accessible information for students with additional care needs who have an intellectual disability is fundamental for progression. ESRI noted that according to Growing Up Ireland, a longitudinal research study, by age 20 young people with an intellectual disability only participated in higher education at a rate of 28%, compared to the cohort average of 61%<sup>17</sup>. Fórsa would like to see this issue included as part of the next department strategy to better prevent exclusion at the first stage of the process for students with additional care needs who have an intellectual disability.

Ultimately, while the Irish government strives to meet its obligation for people with additional care needs as set forth in international and domestic legislation, progress is inconsistent across the range of additional care needs that exist. Fórsa believes strong integration of our recommendations for a national progression framework into the Department of Education's current efforts to bridge these education and employment gaps will more consistently and effectively support students with additional care needs to access further and higher education, apprenticeships, jobs training programs and care services where appropriate, so that they may enjoy inclusion and fulfilment with their peers.

17 Carroll, E., McCoy S., and Ye K. (2022) "Mapping and Tracking of Students with SEN after They Leave School; Initial findings from an NCSE commissioned study" [PowerPoint], NCSE 2022 Annual Conference, ESRI, 10 November, available at; Research Conference - National Council for Special Education - Working to deliver a better special education service (ncse.ie) [Accessed 24 March 2023].

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-  [Fórsa trade union](#)
-  [forsa\\_union](#)
-  [forsa.ie](#)

**AUTHOR**  
Juliette Cooper,  
Policy Research Officer,  
Fórsa.

**DEPARTMENT**  
COMMISSIONING RESEARCH  
Fórsa's Education Division,  
Andy Pike, National Secretary.