

Inclusive Pathways in Further Education and Training for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Enhancing Access to Employment

Introduction

This report examines the educational opportunities and course provision within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector that are accessible to learners with intellectual disabilities and that support progression towards employment. The report explores the relationship between education, qualifications and workforce participation, drawing on relevant policy, legislation, research and theory.

Despite national commitments to inclusion, people with intellectual disabilities continue to experience significant barriers to both education and employment. Research consistently demonstrates that lower levels of educational attainment contribute to poorer employment outcomes and increased social exclusion among this group. While policy frameworks advocate for inclusive lifelong learning and participation in the workforce, concerns remain regarding the availability of accessible, accredited and employment-focused programmes, particularly at QQI Levels 1–3.

Through an analysis of existing literature, policy and qualification frameworks, this report identifies gaps in educational provision that may limit employment opportunities for learners with intellectual disabilities. In particular, it highlights the scarcity of industry-specific vocational programmes and qualifications at lower NFQ levels that align with the interests, abilities and progression pathways of many learners with intellectual disabilities. The report argues that increasing access to meaningful, accredited vocational learning opportunities is essential to supporting greater inclusion, participation and achievement in both education and employment.

Inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the workforce

Access to paid employment has been identified as a key priority by people with intellectual disabilities themselves (Garcia Iriarte et al., 2014, cited in Magee et al., 2018). Despite this, individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to experience significant exclusion from the labour market. Research suggests that one contributing factor is their comparatively lower levels of educational attainment (Watson et al., 2015, p. 5).

Social exclusion is a complex and multidimensional issue, with some scholars identifying exclusion from the labour market as a significant contributor to poverty (Robo, 2014, p. 193). The relationship between disability, unemployment and poverty is evident in data showing that, in 2011, the income poverty rate among people with disabilities was 45 per cent compared to 13 per cent among those without a disability (Watson et al., 2015, p. 1). The evidence indicates that people with intellectual disabilities remain substantially underrepresented in the workforce, with limited access to appropriate and accessible educational opportunities acting as one of several barriers to employment.

At the same time, research highlights the value that employees with disabilities can bring to the workplace. Vashishth and Jhamb (2021, p. 14) found that employees with disabilities often demonstrate a strong work ethic and make positive contributions to their organisations. In their examination of disability inclusion within the hospitality sector, the authors identified several benefits associated with employing people with disabilities, including increased employee retention, reduced staff turnover and related savings in recruitment and training costs. Their findings also suggest that employees with disabilities frequently display high levels of dedication and loyalty to their employers. Collectively, this evidence demonstrates that people with disabilities can make a significant and valuable contribution to the workforce, particularly within the hospitality industry (Vashishth and Jhamb, 2021).

The link between Education and Employment

People with intellectual disabilities are significantly more likely to experience social exclusion than their non-disabled peers, with progression to further education often representing a key point of exclusion and segregation (Magee et al., 2018, p. 6; p. 20). Consequently, individuals with intellectual disabilities frequently encounter barriers to inclusion in both education and employment, limiting their opportunities for full participation in society.

Educational attainment is closely associated with income levels and employment prospects, making access to education a critical factor in promoting social and economic inclusion (Watson et al., 2015, p. 1). However, Walk (2015, p. 7) argues that people with intellectual disabilities face structural barriers within the education system, including a lack of available courses and qualifications at appropriate levels, particularly QQI Level 3 and below. These educational barriers have a direct impact on employment outcomes, with difficulties accessing education significantly contributing to challenges in securing employment (Corby et al., 2022, p. 2).

The importance of provision at lower qualification levels is further highlighted by recent CSO data indicating that more than 400,000 people in Ireland hold qualifications below QQI Level 4 (Solas, 2021, p. 24). This reinforces the need for accessible and meaningful learning opportunities at QQI Levels 1–3, particularly for learners with intellectual disabilities. Education is widely recognised as a key mechanism for promoting social inclusion and reducing disadvantage (Robo, 2014, p. 191). Therefore, fostering inclusivity within the education system should be viewed as a vital step towards increasing inclusion, participation and opportunities within the workforce.

Relevant Policy and Legislation

There is a substantial body of legislation, policy and national strategies aimed at promoting the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities within the further and continuing education system. These include Article 42 of the Irish Constitution, the *Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*, the *Disability Act 2005* and the *Equal Status Acts 2000–2011* (Walk, 2015, p. 9). Collectively, these legislative and policy frameworks establish the right of people with disabilities to access education and participate fully in society.

The *National Disability and Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021* identifies participation in further education as a key mechanism through which people with disabilities can develop their potential and achieve their employment ambitions (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017, p. 26). Similarly, the *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015–2024* sets out a vision whereby “each person with a disability will have the education, skills and competence and independence to obtain employment” (Government of Ireland, 2015, p. 16). These strategies recognise the important role that education plays in supporting employment, independence and social inclusion.

However, a gap remains between policy aspirations and the lived experiences of many people with intellectual disabilities. As discussed previously, Walk (2015, p. 7) identified significant barriers to educational participation arising from the limited availability of courses and qualifications at appropriate levels, particularly QQI Level 3 and below, that support progression towards employment. This suggests that, despite a strong legislative and policy commitment to inclusion, challenges remain in translating these commitments into accessible educational pathways that meet the needs of learners with intellectual disabilities. Consequently, the implementation of policy objectives requires continued attention to ensure that educational provision aligns with the stated goal of improving employment opportunities and outcomes for this cohort.

Qualifications

Research indicates that “people with disabilities have fewer educational qualifications than non-disabled people” (Watson et al., 2015, p. 2). Given the strong relationship between educational attainment and employment outcomes, this places many people with intellectual disabilities at a disadvantage when seeking and securing employment. Consequently, access to appropriate qualifications is an important factor in supporting labour market participation and reducing social exclusion.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the state agency responsible for promoting the quality, integrity and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education system (QQI, 2022a). QQI's quality assurance framework incorporates equality standards which require education and training programmes to accommodate diversity, combat discrimination and promote equality of opportunity (Walk, 2015, p. 10). Furthermore, QQI's Statement of Strategy emphasises a commitment to inclusivity and the provision of diverse, high-quality learning opportunities. As stated by QQI, “We will play our part in ensuring that all learners are enabled to access accredited qualifications in learning environments suitable to their needs, including in the workplace” (QQI, 2022b, p. 12).

Accreditation is important not only because it recognises and validates learning, but also because it provides employers with a tangible measure of an individual's knowledge, skills and achievements (Aston, 2019, p. 18; p. 25). However, people with intellectual disabilities continue to have lower levels of educational achievement and qualifications than both non-disabled people and other disability groups (Watson et al., 2015, p. 3). This highlights the need for accessible, high-quality educational opportunities that enable learners with intellectual disabilities to attain recognised qualifications and have their achievements formally acknowledged.

To examine the availability of accredited pathways, a review of QQI awards in the fields of hotel, restaurant and catering services was undertaken. The findings are outlined below.

QQI awards available in the field of hotel, restaurants and catering at QQI Levels 1 – 5.		
NFQ level	Number of QQI awards available	Examples of such awards
QQI Level 5	18	Accommodation Techniques, Code: 5N1851 Bar and Restaurant Services, Code: 5S2103 Beverage Service, Code: 5N2019 Hospitality Operations, Code: 5M2083 Restaurant Hospitality, Code: 5N2082 Restaurant Skills, Code: 5N2080
QQI Level 4	9	Catering Support, Code: 4M2805 Hotel Front Office, code: 4M2015 Catering operations and Systems, Code: 4N1133
QQI Level 3	8	Dishwashing, Code: 3N0884 Restaurant Service, Code: 3N0577 Room Servicing, Code: 3N0558
QQI Level 2	0	N/A
QQI Level 1	0	N/A
(QQI, 2022b)		

The analysis demonstrates a significant disparity in the availability of awards across qualification levels. While there are 18 hospitality-related awards available at QQI Level 5 and nine at Level 4, the number decreases to eight at Level 3, with no awards available at Levels 1 or 2 that are directly linked to the hospitality sector (QQI, 2022c).

This finding is particularly significant given that Walk (2015) identifies Levels 1–3 as the qualification range most relevant to many learners with intellectual disabilities. The absence of industry-specific qualifications at Levels 1 and 2 creates a gap in educational provision and limits opportunities for learners to engage in accredited vocational learning that aligns with employment aspirations. This lack of progression opportunities is especially concerning when considered alongside evidence that the hospitality sector benefits from employing people with disabilities through improved staff retention, loyalty and workplace performance (Vashishth and Jhamb, 2021).

The findings therefore suggest a disconnect between policy commitments to inclusion and the availability of appropriate vocational qualifications for learners with intellectual disabilities. While employment opportunities exist, the educational pathways needed to support progression into these roles are not always available at accessible qualification levels. This reinforces Walk's (2015) assertion that “people with intellectual disabilities are amongst the most disadvantaged in the educational system” and contributes to the reality that “people with disabilities have fewer educational qualifications than non-disabled people” (Watson et al., 2015, p. 2).

The lack of hospitality-specific awards at QQI Levels 1 and 2 highlights a significant gap within the qualifications framework and suggests a need for the development of accessible, industry-focused programmes that provide learners with intellectual disabilities with recognised pathways towards employment.

Access

Adult and continuing education programmes play a critical role in addressing the social and educational exclusion experienced by learners with intellectual disabilities within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector. However, the availability of such programmes remains inconsistent. Research indicates that programmes for learners with intellectual disabilities are often developed locally rather than through a coordinated national approach, resulting in significant variations in provision across geographical regions (Duggan and Byrne, 2012, cited in Magee et al., 2018, p. 21). Consequently, learners may have access to educational opportunities in one area of the country that are not available elsewhere.

This inconsistency highlights a gap between policy aspirations and educational practice. Despite the extensive legislation, policies and strategies designed to promote inclusion, as discussed throughout this report, “actual practice can fall far short of the legislative prescription” (Duggan and Byrne, 2012, p. 161, cited in Magee et al., 2018, p. 21). As a result, many learners with intellectual disabilities continue to encounter barriers when seeking to access meaningful educational pathways that support progression towards employment.

Evidence suggests that participation in post-secondary education can have a significant positive impact on employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. Moore and Schelling (2015) found that individuals with intellectual disabilities who participated in post-secondary educational programmes achieved substantially better employment outcomes than those who did not. Their research further identified that a high proportion of students who completed a specialised programme in food preparation subsequently gained employment within their field of study (Moore and Schelling, 2015, p. 144). These findings demonstrate the value of industry-specific vocational education in supporting successful transitions from education to employment.

The positive outcomes associated with such programmes reinforce the importance of providing learners with opportunities to develop practical, employment-related skills alongside recognised learning achievements. This aligns with the principles outlined in the *Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education*, which states that schools should assist students “to become economically active and provide them with the skills needed in everyday life, offering training in skills which respond to the social and communication demands and expectations of adult life” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 10, cited in Hornby, 2015, p. 243).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that accessible, industry-specific educational programmes can play a vital role in improving employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities. However, for these benefits to be realised more broadly, such opportunities must be available in a structured and consistent manner across the FET sector, ensuring that learners can access programmes that support both their educational development and employment aspirations regardless of their geographical location.

Models of Inclusive Education

Hart et al. (2006, cited in Aston, 2019, p. 15) identify three principal models of educational provision for students with intellectual disabilities:

- a) Mixed/Hybrid model
- b) Totally inclusive model
- c) Substantially separate model

These models reflect differing approaches to balancing inclusion, specialised support and learner needs within educational settings. The debate regarding the most effective model of provision remains prominent within both policy and practice.

Professor Garry Hornby highlights the value of the substantially separate model for some learners with intellectual disabilities (Banks and Hornby, 2022). Drawing on his experience, Hornby argues that specialised vocational programmes can provide learners with the confidence, skills and support required to progress towards their employment goals. Such programmes may offer tailored learning environments that are responsive to individual learning needs and enable students to develop practical skills relevant to future employment opportunities.

In contrast, de Beco's (2014) analysis of Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasises the right to inclusive education. Article 24 states that "States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning" (de Beco, 2014, p. 274). The UNCRPD advocates for the inclusion of all learners within the general education system through the provision of reasonable accommodations and inclusive practices. This approach aligns with the social model of disability, which places responsibility on educational systems to remove barriers to participation rather than expecting individuals to adapt to existing structures (de Beco, 2014).

While these perspectives may appear contrasting, research suggests that both approaches can lead to positive outcomes. Moore and Schelling (2015) found no significant difference in employment outcomes between students with intellectual disabilities who participated in specialised programmes and those who participated in inclusive programmes. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of educational provision may be less dependent on the model itself and more closely related to the quality of support, learning opportunities and employment preparation provided within the programme.

This conclusion aligns with Hornby's (2015) view that educators should draw upon the strengths of both specialised programmes and inclusive education. Rather than viewing the two approaches as mutually exclusive, Hornby advocates for a holistic model that combines elements of specialised support with inclusive educational practices to maximise student engagement, achievement and progression.

Regardless of the model adopted, educational provision must be centred on the individual learner. All programmes should provide reasonable accommodation and appropriate supports to address students' unique needs, ensuring they can participate fully in learning and achieve meaningful outcomes (Walk, 2015). Ultimately, the success of any educational approach should be measured by its ability to support access, participation, achievement and progression towards employment and wider social inclusion.

Access, Participation and Achievement

Alves et al. (2020, p. 281) identify three key pillars of inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities: access to, participation in and achievement in education. This framework provides a useful lens through which to examine the issues discussed throughout this report and highlights the key factors required to support successful educational and employment outcomes for learners with intellectual disabilities.

- Access to education: Learners with intellectual disabilities must have access to inclusive, accredited programmes at appropriate qualification levels, supported by legislation, policy and available progression pathways that lead towards employment.
- Participation in education: Learners should be able to actively engage in meaningful learning through reasonable accommodations, inclusive practices and vocational programmes that develop practical, employment-related skills.
- Achievement in education: Learners should have opportunities to attain recognised qualifications and vocational competencies that validate their learning and support progression to employment, independence and social inclusion.

The evidence reviewed throughout this report suggests that meaningful employment outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities are most likely to be achieved when all three pillars—access, participation and achievement—are addressed simultaneously. Ensuring that learners can access appropriate programmes, participate fully in learning and achieve recognised qualifications is fundamental to creating more inclusive educational pathways and improving workforce participation for people with intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion

This report has examined the relationship between further education and employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. The evidence reviewed demonstrates that educational attainment is closely linked to employment outcomes and that limited access to appropriate educational opportunities contributes to the continued underrepresentation of people with intellectual disabilities in the workforce. As a result, many individuals remain at greater risk of social exclusion, unemployment and poverty.

While Ireland has a strong legislative and policy framework promoting inclusion in education and employment, the findings presented in this report suggest that significant gaps remain between policy aspirations and educational practice. In particular, the limited availability of accredited, industry-specific programmes at QQI Levels 1–3 represents a barrier to progression for many learners with intellectual disabilities. This is especially significant given the evidence that vocational education and employment-focused training can lead to positive employment outcomes and increased independence.

The report has also demonstrated that effective educational provision is underpinned by the principles of access, participation and achievement. Learners with intellectual disabilities require access to appropriate programmes, opportunities to participate meaningfully through inclusive practices and reasonable accommodations, and pathways to achieve recognised qualifications that support progression to employment.

Ultimately, if the goals set out in national disability, education and employment policies are to be realised, there must be greater investment in accessible, accredited and employment-focused learning opportunities. By strengthening educational pathways and removing barriers to participation, the Further Education and Training sector can play a central role in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to achieve their employment ambitions and participate more fully in society.

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