An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
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Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs:
The Post-School Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs

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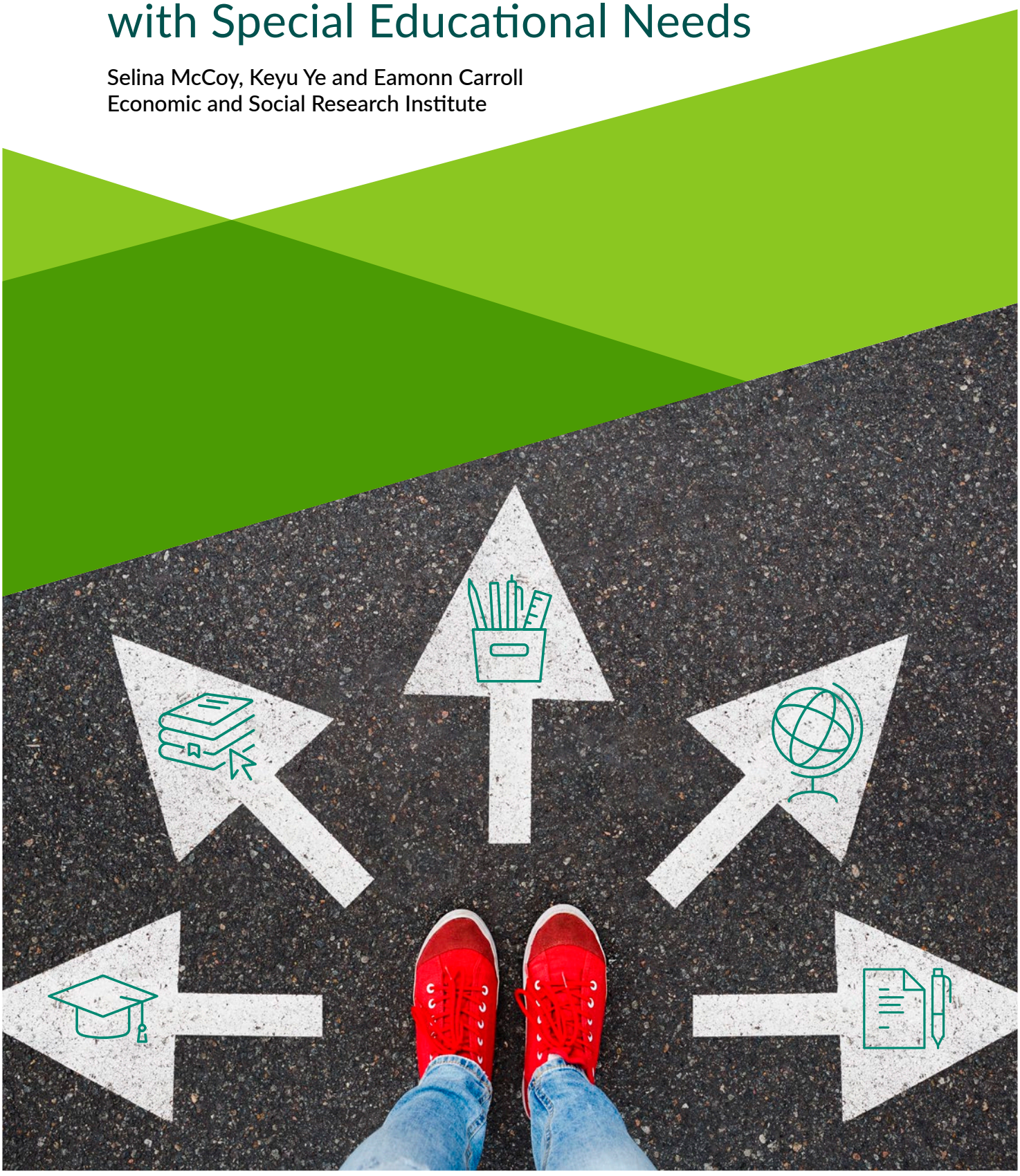
Economic and Social Research Institute



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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
AON	Assessment of Need
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CAO	Central Applications Office
CCL	Certificate in Contemporary Living Skills
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Teams
CDNTIMS	Children's Disability Network Teams Information Management System
CES	Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EAL	English as an additional language
EAS	Equal Access Survey
ELD	Educational Longitudinal Database
ELS	Educational Longitudinal Survey
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FSD	Fund for Students with Disabilities
GC	Guidance counsellors
GDLP	General Learning and Personal Development
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HRB	Health Research Board
HSE	Health Service Executive
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
JC	Junior Cycle
JCPA	Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement
JCSP	Junior Certificate School Programme

LC	Leaving Certificate
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NABMSE	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
NASS	National Ability Support Systems
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NDI	National Data Infrastructure
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIDD	National Intellectual Disability Database
NILS	Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
NLN	National Learning Network
NPSDD	National Physical and Sensory Disability Database
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Oide	Organisation supporting the professional learning of teachers
OT	Occupational therapy
PCP	Person-centred planning
PDS	Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People Programme
PDST	Professional Development Service for Teachers
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System
POD	Primary Online Database
P-POD	Post-Primary Online Database
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RACE	Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations
SC	Senior Cycle
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN	Special educational needs
SENO	Special educational needs organiser
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
SIM	School Inclusion Model
SNA	Special needs assistant
STIAL	Supported Transition Planning Including All Learners
TY	Transition Year
UNCRPD	UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WALK	Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability
WHODAS II	World Health Organisation Disability Assessment Schedule II

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FOREWORD

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is pleased to publish this research report that maps and tracks the post-school pathways of young people with special education needs (SEN). Using a mixed methods approach alongside secondary data analysis, this report conveys a broad picture of post-school transitions for young people with SEN. The longitudinal research has two distinct phases. The first phase maps current sources of data about young people with SEN who leave the school system, identifies what we can learn from this data, as well as the gaps in these sources. The second and core phase tracks a sample of young people with special educational needs who are about to leave school, identifying what post-school options are chosen, the factors for such selections, and experiences of their transition. They are then followed up after they have left school to explore if they took their chosen pathway.

Deciding which post-school pathway to choose is a poignant time in every young person's life. This study illustrates that young people with SEN found it challenging to decide on their pathway; personal interests or taking a particular job or career path were the main drivers of decision making. In terms of supporting young people with these decisions at the school level, the findings indicate that effective guidance is personalised, and students indicated a preference for individualised rather than group-based support. Special schools tend to focus more on engaging with parents and taking a collaborative approach to preparing for transitions and this was positively perceived. However, young people with multiple conditions were less likely to report feeling encouraged to pursue education or training, or to feel adequately supported.

For the most part, respondents in this report describe their transitions as successful. However, some young people with SEN reported receiving more information about higher education pathways, rather than information about the range of other possible pathways. In direct contrast, others reported feeling funnelled into Post Leaving Cert Courses and apprenticeships rather than higher education.

The research findings suggests that young people with SEN are on the whole pursuing different post-school pathways than their non-disabled peers, though with significant variation by type of need and at the individual level. The mapping phase of this study demonstrates that young people with SEN appear to be over-represented in Further Education and Training and under-represented in Higher Education, while many are engaging with services specifically for disabled people as recorded in the National Ability Support System (NASS).

The NCSE supports an inclusive education system that enables everyone with special educational needs to achieve their potential. This research tells us that there was a high level of positive engagement and reflections on school experiences. However, young people with multiple conditions fare less well and having a SEN was associated with having negative social experiences when it marked students out as different. The report concludes with some recommendations, including at the school level, those who support young people around their post-school decision making use of more inclusive and individualised support strategies and curricular approaches that accommodate diverse student needs. At the student level, self-determination skills development would help all young people to set their own goals and pathways.

This research provides a unique evidence base to inform the NCSE's and other stakeholders' work to support planning and service provision for the inclusion of young people with SEN at this important juncture in their life. I would like to thank the research team at the Economic and Social Research Institute, and in particular the students, parents, school principals, SEN coordinators/guidance counsellors and other school staff members, as well as other stakeholders who participated in the study.

John Kearney
Chief Executive Officer
NCSE

NCSE Disclaimer

The findings in this research report represents the opinions of the authors and is the product of professional research. It is not meant to represent the position or opinions of the National Council of Special Education.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), maps with greater breadth the pathways of a representative sample of students with special educational needs (SEN), through surveys and interviews with a range of stakeholders in school and post-school settings and through secondary data sources like Growing Up in Ireland (GUI). The sample over-represented DEIS schools and those providing high levels of additional support to students in order to reach those with the most complex needs. It engages in depth with students on pathways currently under researched and poorly understood. Interviews were used to capture the diverse experiences characterising these pathways, involving a range of key stakeholders while centring the young adults' own accounts of their trajectories. The use of a mixed methods approach and a range of secondary data sources allowed us to engage with the wider picture of post-school transitions for young adults with disabilities and the nuance of individual pathways. The study examined the following research questions:

1. What national data sources exist on where young people with special educational and learning needs go when they leave school?
2. What do these data sources tell us about:
    - Who these young people are
    - Where they come from
    - Where they go
    - Their reasons for going there.
3. What gaps exist in these data sources?
4. Why do young people end up on particular post-school pathways? What factors influence their decisions about post-school life?
5. What are the experiences of young people on different post-school pathways?
6. What are the views of schools, families, post-school providers on post-school options for young people with special educational and learning needs?
7. What lessons can be identified to support planning and service provision for the inclusion of young people with disabilities in post-school life?

1.1 Methodology

The study comprises a mapping phase and a tracking phase. The former examines a range of existing national data sources and provides an overview of current sources of data on young people with special educational needs who leave the school system and identify gaps in those sources.

The tracking phase comprises two stages across school and post-school settings, including young adults experiencing a wide diversity and complexity of special educational needs leaving different school contexts across the State mainstream, special class and special school settings. The first phase comprises a School Leavers' Survey conducted in mainstream schools in summer 2022, qualitative findings from these students in mainstream schools (from open-ended survey responses and interviews) and eight special school case studies. The same cohort was subsequently followed in spring/autumn 2023 to understand their school and post-school experiences. The second phase involves interviews with young people not in any form of education, training or employment (NEET) and additional longitudinal research in special schools with a particular focus on young adults' own voices. The second phase also explores the experiences of young adults attending various Further Education and Training (FET) and adult services through surveys and in-depth interviews. Key stakeholder interviews were conducted at different time points across school and post-school settings to further understand the current support system (see Figure 2.2 for an overview of the data collection process).

We use a broad definition of students with special educational needs. Any student currently or recently receiving additional support in school, such as special needs assistants (SNAs), special education teacher assistance, participation in special classes, specialised equipment, therapy support, reasonable accommodations, Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) scheme application, or other targeted support, falls under our SEN category. Our achieved sample aligns with the national population of mainstream second-level schools in Ireland, in terms of type, size and social mix. The sample of eight special schools, identified following a census of all special schools, included a mix in terms of geographic location and nature of disability/need. They serve a diversity of special educational needs including physical, intellectual and sensory disabilities, with many students having multiple disabilities. The research with school leaving populations was supplemented with survey research which targeted all National Learning Network (NLN) centres, a cross-section of Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) providers, and research with young adults in day services and with NEET status. The mixed methods approach and secondary data sources allowed us to engage with the wider picture of post-school transitions for young adults with special educational needs and the nuance of individual pathways for those experiencing diverse needs.

1.2 Main Findings

1.2.1 Reflections on School Experiences and Transition Preparation

Survey data and qualitative evidence from mainstream settings reveal a high level of positive engagement and reflections on school experiences, although students with multiple conditions fare less well. Students reported liking school's social aspects, the feeling of belonging to a community and their enjoyment of specific subjects. Access to supports, particularly meaningful involvement in accessing them, was important to students. Having a SEN was linked to negative social experiences when it marked students out as different. The results pointed to intersectionality – with greater risks among students with additional needs and from families with fewer resources and attending DEIS schools, as shown in earlier research (Carroll et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Transition preparation at school was generally perceived positively particularly among young adults and their parents in special schools. However, the results suggest schools are doing less well in preparing students for adult life, independent living and career decisions. Compared to other domains, self-determination skills were less positively reflected on by students with special educational needs (see also Ye and McCoy, 2024). Further, these students, especially those reporting multiple conditions, were less likely to report being encouraged to pursue education or training and to feel adequately supported.

Students preferred individualised rather than group-based supports. They saw high-quality support as timely and tailored, meeting their individual needs as soon as they became apparent. The positive impact of good support could be life changing. Criticism of supports focused on those reliant on formal diagnosis, which othered the student or which they or their families had to wage a protracted struggle to access. Unmet need was evident in mainstream settings, linked to lack of awareness of available supports, lack of availability of supports or family preferences. Resource constraints emerged as a particular factor in DEIS schools.

1.2.2 Planned and Realised Pathways

Most students surveyed either planned to continue their education or progress to work after leaving school. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those attending a DEIS school or not having a degree-educated parent, were less likely to apply to the CAO system (found by Carroll et al., 2022b). Family background also plays a role in DARE application rates with students from more highly educated families more likely to apply. Additionally, a significantly higher percentage of non-DEIS school students made a DARE application (57 per cent of non-DEIS vs 13 per cent of DEIS students). The gap by school social mix is concerning as students from families with limited resources traditionally rely more on school supports than their families to access educational and employment opportunities.

More than half of students found it difficult to decide what to do. Interest or fulfilment in a job or career path were the main drivers of their decisions. Overall, participants in the School Leavers' Survey were less positive compared to the nationally representative population in the GUI study. A higher proportion found a range of information sources (school career guidance, teachers, CAO) 'not helpful' in making choices. Calls for open days in non-mainstream settings, including adult day services and the NLN programme, were also made.

There was considerable diversity in preferences for guidance. Overall, the results show effective support is personalised, student-led and supportive rather than prescriptive, encouraging recipients to decide for themselves what they want to do with their lives while helping them along the way. In terms of expectations, only a third of students felt their expectations were consistent with their teachers'; the majority was either neutral (47 per cent) or disagreeing (22 per cent). This gap might indicate a lack of teacher awareness on options for students with special educational needs, particularly considering their diverse needs profile. Positive teacher expectations are also linked to students being more likely to approach their teacher with a problem. Overall, where students cannot access guidance support through school they often turn to family and friends, exploiting their social capital to find people to talk to. Hence unequal social capital leads to socioeconomically differentiated pseudo-mentorship opportunities, and inequality is thus reproduced through the absence of public provision. Decision-making that is constrained or shaped by context surfaced throughout the study. In some schools, students reported a dearth of information on non-higher education pathways, pushing them in that direction. In others, mostly DEIS schools, students reported the opposite problem, feeling funnelled into PLCs and apprenticeships rather than having access to the guidance they wanted for higher education.

Across special schools, there was a focus on engaging with parents and taking a collaborative approach to transition preparation – raising awareness of opportunities and services was an important goal. Young adults and parents generally appreciated the thorough Health Service Executive (HSE) system for assessing the needs and interests of young adults preparing to leave which typically began at the start of their school year. Concerns were noted, however, highlighting the need for improved access, visits and comprehensive support throughout the process. There was also a desire for greater participation in work placements, but schools reported growing barriers to organising and supporting student work experience and placements. Overall, school leavers and their parents were much more likely to reflect positively when both were familiar with and informed on the chosen pathway, where everyone decided together. There was a recognition that the goal is to find the most appropriate available placement within the resources available, which may fall short of the best placement that aligns with the young adult's needs and interests. Options for those with behaviour and communication needs were seen as particularly weak in some areas.

When exploring student experiences with their post-school settings, positive responses emerged from mainstream settings and those attending PLC and National Learning Network (NLN) programmes, where evidence was gathered for the first time. On supports at post-school settings, while appreciated by most students, limited access to emotional and mental health support was evident, despite high levels of need. Masking or reluctance to share SEN in post-school life emerged as an important issue for young adults in our study.

Overall students reflected positively on their chosen pathways, emphasising personal enjoyment, high-quality teaching and opportunities for personal development. Most NLN learners were satisfied with their programme, stemming from making new friends, being in a friendly environment, supportive and approachable centre staff, appropriate course difficulty level and content and a good mix of classroom teaching and practical work experiences. Concerns related to not having enough opportunity to engage with peers due to age gaps, finding the course boring and being passive recipients rather than active learners.

Most PLC students were satisfied with their choices, although students reporting a special educational need and those who struggled academically were more likely to report programme regret (13 per cent in each case, compared to 5 per cent). In terms of the difficulties PLC students encountered in the first year of their programme, most found it challenging to balance study and other commitments, to finish coursework on time as well as adapt to difficulty levels. Close to half struggled with paying fees or other study costs. Students with special educational needs, particularly those with multiple conditions, were more likely to find course difficulty levels a problem, to struggle with public transport to attend and to report difficulties in fitting in and making new friends compared to their peers. Those with special educational needs were more likely to find inflexible study options problematic. The results highlight the importance of accessible public transport and flexible study options, such as online courses, to accommodate increasingly diverse student needs.

While many special school leavers successfully progressed to education/training programmes or services, others experienced delayed or disrupted transitions. School personnel repeatedly spoke of challenges around staff turnover in day services affecting the readiness of service providers to enrol young adults as planned and the intensity of the service provided. Meanwhile, transport support and continuity of support remain two major issues for many young people transitioning to post-school settings.

1.2.3 Outlook for the Future

SEN status, complexity of need and family background together play a key role in shaping young people's expectations. PLC students with special educational needs were less likely to feel confident in making decisions for themselves, to know what to expect after finishing their course and feel prepared for life. Fewer such students, particularly those with multiple conditions, believed they had the same opportunities as their peers and were less likely to feel they had the same plans as them. Notably, over a third of PLC students were worried about their future. Similar patterns emerged among students tracked from the School Leavers' Survey, with around three in ten either (really) worried or neutral about it. Conversely, NLN learners were less likely to be worried about this.

Among PLC students, despite an equal proportion of girls and boys reporting being excited about their future, girls were more likely to report feeling worried (found recently by Carroll et al., 2024). In terms of SEN status, students with multiple conditions were particularly concerned about their future. Those with more positive PLC course experiences and who felt their skills were well-developed were more optimistic.

Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction with friendships and accommodation, but lower satisfaction with workload, employment prospects and, particularly, financial well-being. Notable gaps are found across all five domains by SEN status, with 84 per cent of students without SEN compared to 64 per cent of those with multiple conditions satisfied with their friendships. In total, 62 per cent of students without SEN compared to 41 per cent of those with multiple conditions and 46 per cent with a single condition were satisfied with their employment prospects. The results highlight the distinct challenges facing young adults with different types and complexity of SEN as they embark on adult life.

1.3 Policy Implications

This study raises implications for policy across the educational system and for HSE service provision.

1.3.1 Data on Pathways of Disabled Young Adults

This study has highlighted the importance of effective data gathering and linkage to support timely and robust policy provision. Recent moves towards inclusive education, however, have seen resources for school SEN provision automatically provided via a frontloading system based on an individual school's profiled need. As a result, schools have additional autonomy in distributing resources internally based on need rather than disability category, making mapping and tracking exercises more challenging. Any SEN indicators would need to be based on receipt of support and/or school/class placement rather than (solely on) formal SEN diagnosis. This approach makes the monitoring of educational outcomes, engagement and progress particularly important. Reflecting an international trend away from formal assessment or SEN diagnosis and towards needs-based supports, means resources currently put towards assessment can be diverted into provision and long waiting times for assessment and the negative impacts from labelling children as having a disability or impairment can be avoided. However, monitoring outcomes and acting on this information to tackle inequality becomes more important.

This study has shown that linking or matching administrative data sources does not provide answers to key questions on why someone pursued a specific post-school pathway and what their experiences of it were. In this context, targeted, longitudinal, qualitative and mixed methods research has the potential to fill the gaps in existent data sources. This could offer insights into the reasons young people with special educational needs pursue their chosen pathways, their experience on those pathways and insights into the dynamics associated with options other than education or work (for instance day services, NEET). The GUI study provides the opportunity to understand how a nationally representative sample of young adults, including those with special educational needs, fares in post-school transitions and trajectories. Critically, the data's longitudinal nature allows insights into processes over childhood and adolescence and not simply at the point of school completion. Post-school outcomes do not arise from decision-making at a moment in time; they are the product of cumulative ecological factors over time, requiring a longitudinal perspective at policy level (noted by Carroll et al., 2022b).

1.3.2 Curriculum, Guidance and Supports at School

Ensuring all young people have appropriate and challenging curricular provision throughout their school careers is central to equipping them with the knowledge and skills to support fulfilling post-school lives. For students with special educational needs, such provision may need to be more flexible and tailored to their particular needs. While the introduction of Level 1 and 2 programmes has provided schools and young people with inclusive curricular pathways at Junior Cycle, the lack of follow-on provision at Senior Cycle (SC) remains a serious weakness and an important issue for SC redevelopment. This study has highlighted notable challenges in providing an appropriate and challenging curriculum for young adults in special schools that point to significant policy issues around school organisation and design, classification of special schools as primary schools, teacher allocation, funding, insurance and programme/curricular provision and guidance.

On transition preparation in special schools, many schools reflected on the absence of a template transition programme for them, leaving them to develop their own without any overall guidance from the Department of Education (DE). In terms of readiness to leave school, the findings reflect rigidity within the system and lack of flexibility where a young person is considered not ready to leave school – such flexibility should be guaranteed in all schools, special and mainstream. The absence of formal guidance was an issue for some but not all special schools, suggesting a flexible approach is needed. Young adults and their parents reflected positively on the HSE profiling process, but this could improve with earlier decision-making, greater input from parents, ongoing communication with school personnel and opportunities for families to visit settings. Support for work placements is key in supporting young adults at this critical juncture – resources for schools and employers (particularly insurance costs) are clearly needed. Programmes to provide mentors (in education, training and workplace settings) would be of enormous benefit to young adults with a disability in making informed choices and supporting their transitions. The 2023-2026 Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People (HSE, 2023) will be important in addressing these issues, given its focus on enhancing integrated services among various organisations and partner agencies, and development of inter-disciplinary Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) across geographic areas.

Students with special educational needs in mainstream schools are less likely to feel prepared for leaving school and less confident in their decision-making. Social disadvantage such as limited family resources and social capital (Carroll et al., 2022a) can compound these issues. The findings suggest a need for more responsive guidance provision and enhancement of social capital, especially for under-resourced students with special educational needs, important issues for the National Policy Group for Lifelong Guidance. Across mainstream and special schools, the importance of high expectations for all students is clear and young adults across the study pointed to SEN labels unfairly affecting the expectations others had of them. It is vital to address these low expectations at a whole school level through more inclusive and individualised support strategies and curricular approaches that accommodate diverse student needs. Developing flexible and appropriate plans, ensuring joined up provision across settings and promoting high ambitions to progress in learning and development are important to ultimately support all students in reaching their full potential.

Including students' own voices is crucial when facilitating their post-school planning, decision-making and longer-term pathways. In this context, the results highlight a need for stronger focus on self-determination skills development at school. It is notable that a third of students felt their school 'did not help' develop an interest in learning. These domains – independent learning, self-determination as well as broader life skills – require much greater focus as part of Senior Cycle redevelopment and across second-level provision more widely.

In terms of supports for young people with special educational needs, ensuring they are adequate, individualised and responsive to their wishes is paramount in their progression and development. Students value individual or small group support, raising questions about the ongoing proliferation in special class provision, and are vocal on the lack of psychological supports. Finally, the findings highlight frustration with the availability of specialised supports like occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and socio-emotional supports, as children and young people progressed through school, a situation exacerbated in the context of COVID-19.

1.3.3 Post-School Adult Services

The decision-making process would benefit from running open days for students progressing to non-mainstream education and training settings. In some special schools there was a perception that schools were doing a lot of work in preparing young adults for leaving, but that very little work was happening at the other end (service providers) to give an insight into their service or prepare for the school leaver's arrival. Parents should be part of the sampling and visits to settings to support their awareness and allow them to back their young adult's decision-making.

Significant challenges with resourcing and staffing adult day services were noted, particularly by school personnel preparing young people for transition. Across the country, difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in adult day services was noted. This impacts the readiness of service providers to enrol young adults as planned and the intensity of the service provided. This underscores the need for a comprehensive workforce plan for the sector. Such a plan should address issues such as competitive compensation, professional development opportunities and improved working conditions to attract and retain qualified staff. Difficulties in diversity of provision available in different geographic areas was also noted, emphasising the importance of policies to ensure equitable access. This may involve expanding services in underserved areas or implementing strategies to make existing services more accessible. The HSE needs to address these issues as a matter of urgency given their effect on young adults achieving meaningful adult lives. This might involve immediate measures to alleviate staffing shortages and long-term strategies to improve service provision and accessibility.

Finally, transport support and the continuity of specialised supports remained major issues for many school leavers, particularly those leaving special schools. The need to ensure transport support is in place where necessary is urgent, and greater coordination between relevant government departments, including the Department of Transport, local authorities, the Department of Education and the HSE may be the first step in achieving this.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach and collaboration between relevant stakeholders including the HSE, other government departments, service providers, school personnel, the young adults themselves and their families. Policies should therefore promote such collaboration and ensure all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making processes and pathways available.

1.3.4 Postsecondary Education

The findings from the mapping chapter suggest young people with disabilities are, on the whole, pursuing different post-school pathways to their non-disabled peers, though with significant variation by type of impairment and at the individual level. Overall they are over-represented in FET and under-represented in higher education. It is welcome to note that the ambition of the National Access Plan extends beyond access to a greater focus on participation and student success and includes specific targets for new entrants to HE with a disability, including students with intellectual disabilities. The study has highlighted the important role of DARE and HEAR in supporting access for young adults with disabilities, but the dominance of socially advantaged young people among DARE applicants warrants attention.

Given the positive experiences with PLC (and NLN) programmes, the findings underscore the importance of a unified tertiary system where adults can move through and across programmes with ease. Ongoing development of a unified tertiary system are to be welcomed and will hopefully achieve the goals of offering a wide range of more joined-up learning and development opportunities to learners and nurture equality, diversity and inclusion across the system.

Finally, and to reiterate, across all pathway groups, the need for responsive and accessible socio-emotional and mental health services was highlighted repeatedly and vociferously, a particularly important issue for the CDNTs.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Research Questions

This report presents findings from a multi-phase mixed-method study of students and young adults with special educational needs across the state. Commissioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), it comprises two distinct components: a mapping phase and a tracking phase. The former examines current data sources on young people with special educational needs who leave the school system and identifies gaps in those sources. The tracking phase seeks to track both a sample of these young school leavers and a sample of others in post-school FET and adult services settings. The research questions are:

1. What national data sources exist on where young people with special educational and learning needs go when they leave school?
2. What do these data sources tell us about:
    - Who these young people are
    - Where they come from
    - Where they go
    - Their reasons for going there.
3. What gaps exist in these data sources?
4. Why do young people end up on particular post-school pathways? What factors influence their decisions about post-school life?
5. What are the experiences of young people on different post-school pathways?
6. What are the views of schools, families, post-school providers on post-school options for young people with special educational and learning needs?
7. What lessons can be identified to support planning and service provision for the inclusion of young people with disabilities in post-school life?

1.2 Motivation for the Report and Research Context

1.2.1 Difficulty in SEN identification and Prevalence Estimation

Internationally, assessing the post-school transitions of young adults with special educational needs and disabilities is not a straightforward process, even less so with an increasing move towards inclusive provision that removes the need for identification and labelling (Griffin and Shevlin, 2008; McCoy et al., 2016b; Kenny et al., 2020). For example, in the UK students can receive SEN supports without a formal diagnosis across all education levels from early years to further education[1]. An application can be made for an education, health and care assessment if support is insufficient. Analysis of Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) data reveal a SEN prevalence rate of 25 per cent at the peak mid-primary school stage (McCoy et al., 2016b), but the rate is likely to be somewhat lower by school leaving stage. However, international evidence points to variation in prevalence depending on the resource allocation systems in place, with such allocation based on learner profile and SEN diagnosis being linked to the over-identification of students with additional needs in schools (Kenny et al., 2020). Resource allocation systems and supports for students with disabilities differ too in further and higher education systems within and across countries, all of which makes comparative research on the educational experiences and pathways of this cohort problematic.

The calculation of SEN/disability prevalence is further complicated by the inconsistent definition and categorisation of disability across data sources, as well as its evolving definition over time within data sources. Meanwhile, opportunities to track students from special schools into postsecondary pathways and to identify those with special educational needs from secondary schools are limited. Non-disclosure of disability due to concerns about acceptance, belonging and (perceived) othering (Meeks et al., 2021; Meeks et al., 2018), the late diagnosis of disability (Hart and Healy, 2018) and associated high costs (Smith et al., 2021) along with perceived harm to future career prospects (AHEAD, 2023a) contribute to difficulties in data collection.

The data available on post-school education and training provision for those with additional needs tends to be fragmented and, in some cases, small scale in scope (RSM and NDA, 2017). There is some information on these students who enter higher education (HEA, various years) and FET (SOLAS, 2021) settings. Both the GUI study and the CES Transition Study Pilot Evaluation, commissioned by the NCSE, provide insights into young people's post-school pathways to different settings. Most current data sources and research studies, however, are unable to offer insights into the transition from school to post-school settings as well as the experiences of young adults with additional needs within them. Even when such information is available in the GUI study, it has its own limitations in understanding the experiences of young adults with more complex needs, particularly from special school settings.

1 https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/where-to-get-educational-support

1.2.2 Challenges Facing Young Adults with Special Educational Needs

National and international research has highlighted that outcomes for young adults with disabilities are poor across a range of domains, including access to learning and employment (Riddell, 2018; Kelly and Maître, 2021), participation in physical and social activities (Active Disability Ireland, 2024) and preparation for postsecondary education (Grigal et al., 2023).

In the Irish context, research has highlighted the challenges faced by young people with special educational needs during primary education (McCoy and Banks, 2012) and transition to second level (McCoy et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016a). These students, except for those with a physical disability, tend to score lower in the Junior Certificate (Mihut et al., 2021). They also fare less well than their peers in terms of school attendance at age 17, early school leaving levels and post-school planned pathways (Carroll et al., 2022a). The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) and Census data show that a much smaller percentage of people with disabilities have a third-level qualification compared to working-aged people without (Kelly and Maître, 2021). They generally pursue different post-school pathways than their non-disabled peers, being over-represented in FET and under-represented in higher education (CSO 2021, Carroll et al., 2022a). Many engage with services specifically designed for disabled individuals as recorded in the National Ability Supports System (NASS). A large proportion are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET), and are thus not on any particular pathway.

Focusing on the transition experiences of this group, key studies in the Irish context can be noted, each shedding light on different aspects of the educational experiences and challenges individuals face. Cosgrove et al.'s study (2014, 2018) provides insights into the transition, engagement, attendance, happiness, wellbeing and achievement of children with special educational needs aged nine to 13 using GUI data. Squires et al.'s study (2016) further reveals challenges related to school curriculum, social relationships and inclusion, emphasising the need for student-centred planning and decision-making for post-primary students with special educational needs . When examining the preparedness of this group for life after formal schooling in Ireland, the NCSE and NDA (2018) identify challenges related to continuity and appropriateness of supports in post-school environments, access to reasonable accommodations and transport needs. Among the studies examining the transition experiences of students with additional needs in the Irish context, many focus on the challenges facing those with intellectual disabilities (Banks et al., 2022; Moloney et al., 2021; Scanlon and Doyle, 2018; Gillan and Coughlan, 2010). Many fall out of adult services after a few years, with most placed in care centres and only a few receiving assistance for paid work or community support (McConkey et al., 2017). At a broader policy level, the Inclusive Research in Irish Schools study (Rose et al., 2015) reveals systemic gaps in student access to assessments, therapeutic supports and teacher expertise. It underscores the importance of collaborative efforts at system and school levels, particularly between education and health services. This echoes Connolly's (2023) study which criticises the segregated support system for people with disabilities, especially those transitioning from school to further and higher education in Ireland (also noted by Mac Domhnaill et al., 2020).

These challenges can be further compounded by social disadvantage and limited social capital. Social disadvantage, such as lower parental education levels, financial constraints and limited access to social supports and healthcare, further disadvantage young people with disabilities and the resources on which they can draw. Limited social capital further restricts their access to information, resources and pathways thereby exacerbating the challenges faced in their educational journeys.

1.2.3 Factors Shaping Special Educational Needs Students' Post-School Opportunities

Despite continuous policy effort in the past few decades (see Chapter 2), there remains a lack of transition support for students with special educational needs moving from second level to FET or employment (Scanlon et al., 2020). The process of successful transition planning for these students is multifaceted involving a combination of factors. Early educational experiences such as engagement, attendance, expectations and attainment as well as parental involvement are crucial in shaping the later educational transitions for disabled adults (Carroll et al., 2022a, 2022b). The expectations of parents, teachers and the students themselves play a pivotal role in shaping post-school trajectories (McCoy et al. 2016a; Martinez et al., 2012) and have significant implications for later achievement and outcomes (Engels et al., 2021; Rubie-Davies, 2006).

The inclusion of students' own voices is crucial when facilitating post-school planning (Bohan, 2023). Equipping them with social, self-advocacy and self-determination skills is essential in preparing them for post-school life (Dakwat, 2023; Ye and McCoy, 2024). Successful transition planning requires a collaborative profiling and transition process (Inclusion Ireland, 2022), high-quality career guidance (NDA, 2023c) and a person-centred approach with stakeholders advocating for inclusive mainstream education to break social barriers and reduce stigma (McAdam et al., 2021). When effectively addressed, these factors can facilitate the post-school planning and transition experiences of students with special educational needs.

1.2.4 Contribution of Our Study

Existing research provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by students with additional needs in Ireland's education system. They offer insights into the transition from school to adult day services and underscore the ongoing need for inclusive and collaborative support structures at the school and wider educational system levels. Inconsistent definition and categorisation of disability across different data sources, however, makes matching and comparing these data sources difficult and largely restricts the implications we can draw on the profile of these students and their post-school pathways. Further, existing data sources do not answer key questions on the reasons for pursuing a specific post-school pathway and experiences of it.

While studies describe the post-school educational options for this cohort (Scanlon and Doyle, 2021; McAdam et al., 2021; Duggan and Byrne, 2013), less is known about how many of these students progress to different settings when they leave school, their reasons for choosing particular paths and their experiences of them. Most research has focused on mainstream higher and further education (for example McGuckin et al., 2013 in the Irish context), with less attention on vocational training and rehabilitative services (Duggan and Byrne, 2013). 'Vocational rehabilitation'[2] typically focuses on delivery of coordinated services tailored to individual need, with aspects of this approach evident in the work of the National Learning Network (NLN), for example (Duggan and Byrne, 2013). While day services and rehabilitative training programmes, focused on the transmission of social rather than vocational skills, are the responsibility of the Department of Health or Health Service Executive (HSE), further and higher education provision falls within the remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

In this context, our study aims to address these gaps. Adopting a targeted, longitudinal, mixed-method approach, it provides a deeper examination of the experiences of young adults with special educational needs across a wide range of school and post-school settings. We focus on their support and guidance experiences, factors influencing their post-school planning decisions, the unique challenges they face, their experiences on their chosen pathways and insights into the dynamics associated with pathways other than education or work (day services, NEET). This allows us to offer a more comprehensive understanding of their post-school planning and transition experiences.

1.3 Policy Context

Since the early 1990s, notable changes to Irish policy and legislation in special education can be observed. Increasingly, Irish special education policy has been influenced by international developments underpinned by human rights-based (instead of needs-based) principles. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) provides a strong and legally binding framework to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education provision and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The Convention on the Rights of the Child created obligations for the rights of all children, including those with disabilities (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009; McCoy et al., 2016b). In 2018, Ireland ratified the convention marking a significant step towards ensuring equal access to inclusive, quality and free education for children with disabilities. The NCSE's 2019 progress report on education provision for students in special schools and classes highlights the UNCRPD Committee's consistent interpretation of Article 24 (Education) – a separate special education system alongside a mainstream one is not considered inclusive. The report considers Ireland's recent ratification of the UNCRPD as a significant influence on future policy development for special schools and classes.

2 Vocational rehabilitation is designed to assist individuals with functional, psychological, developmental, cognitive and emotional disabilities or health impairments. It aims to help these individuals overcome barriers to accessing, maintaining or returning to employment or other useful occupations.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 set out important changes – although not all implemented – followed by a series of changes in resource allocation. This culminated in removing the requirement for students to be diagnosed in order to access school supports (Kenny et al., 2020; NDA, 2023a). The EPSEN Act is being reviewed, primarily through a process of public consultation[3,4].

EU and Irish further and higher education policy has placed a growing emphasis on widening access for under-represented groups, including disabled people. The fourth National Access Plan, A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028, was published in August 2022 (HEA, 2022). Its ambition extends beyond access to a greater focus on participation and student success and includes specific targets for new entrants with a disability to higher education, including those with intellectual disabilities. The plan's two overarching ambitions are:

- That the higher education student body, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.
- That higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments that support student success and outcomes, equity and diversity.

Finally, the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) programme offers reduced points places in higher education to school leavers who, as a result of having a disability, have experienced additional educational challenges[5].

In October 2015, the Government published a ten-year Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) (2015-2024) to support access to the labour market. This aligns with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy 2020-23 specifying indicators and targets (ILO, 2021). The CES states that national action should aim to develop vocational rehabilitation and employment services, in particular for disabled persons. This should include appropriate and effective vocational guidance, developing provision in rural areas and training and availability of rehabilitation counsellors and other suitably qualified staff (Duggan and Byrne, 2013). Progress on the CES has been reported (NDA, 2024). Notably, the first phase of the PATH 4 initiative introduced initiatives applying a Universal Design for Education approach. Its second phase allocated funds to HE institutions to facilitate inclusion of learners with intellectual disabilities. The newly funded WorkAbility programme aims to bridge the gap between individuals with a disability and employment, providing funding to local, regional and national projects that focus on achieving improved employment outcomes for them. Intreo's designated disability employment personal advisers offer an early engagement process to assess the employment support needs of young people on disability allowance.

3 In a submission to the review, the NDA points to a need for balance between school autonomy, accountability and individual rights for students with disabilities and an evaluation of the existing placement decision process. See details at: https://nda.ie/publications/nda-submission-to-the-department-of-children-equality-disability-integration-and-youth-statement-of-strategy-2023-2025

4 Department of Education. (2024a). EPSEN Review Consultation. https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/e3842-epsen-review-consultation/

5 https://accesscollege.ie/dare/

Finally, the AHEAD Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) initiative includes a work placement programme to promote labour market access for graduates with disabilities and helps employers integrate them into the workplace (AHEAD, 2020). Under Action 1.5 of the CES, in 2022 the Department of Education (DE) announced a two-year pilot programme across 20 schools to support the transition for young people with special educational needs disabilities to improve access to, and opportunities for, post-school options[6]. Overseen by the NCSE, the target group is young people with intellectual disabilities and other complex needs in post-primary and special schools whose progress will be tracked over three years. They have access to supports in their final two school years and during six to nine months post-school in whatever pathway they choose. Schools will be supported to complete skills audits with students and their families to facilitate the transition.

The Department of Education is leading a second transition pilot programme in partnership with the Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK), funded by dormant account funds. WALK runs two innovative programmes to raise the employment rate for people with intellectual disabilities and autism. WALK is implementing its existing Peer Ability Programme in ten schools statewide[7]. It aims to support young people over a five-year period, during their school years and beyond as they transition to mainstream opportunities. Each partner school hosts a WALK careers and employment facilitator who engages with students and their parents and collaborates with teachers on complementary activities such as mini-companies, work experiences and transition planning (NDA, 2024).

The STIAL or Supported Transition Planning Including all Learners is a collaborative initiative between Dublin City University (DCU), the WALK Peer Ability Programme and the Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI)[8]. Funded by the Irish Research Council, it offers information and transition supports to guidance counsellors and Senior Cycle (SC) teachers working with students with disabilities and their parents in mainstream and special schools. The YAPAbility community-based support services includes a 12-month intensive support programme for young people aged eight to 24 years with disabilities/special educational needs[9]. Supports include enhancing independent living skills, facilitating active participation in family, school, education, community life and reducing risk of placement breakdown.

The HEA administered Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) provides funding to higher and further education institutions to help them offer supports and services to students with disabilities[10]. In December 2023, an increase of €2 million was announced to expand the fund's scope in FET. In addition, the NCSE's annual budget has risen by 55 per cent in 2024 compared to the previous year allowing for provision of an extra 161 staff (NDA, 2024).

6 Department of Education (November 2022) https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/58fb9-ministers-foley-and-madigan-announce-pilot-project-to-support-young-school-leavers-with-disabilities/

7 Specifically, these schools are located in Louth, Dublin, Westmeath, Cavan, and Cork.

8 See details of STIAL at https://stial.ie/about-us/

9 This programme targets young people diagnosed or who are awaiting diagnosis of an intellectual or physical disability, behavioural disorders or who have a mental health diagnosis. See details at: https://yapireland.ie/what-we-do-yap-ireland/our-services-yap-ireland/disability-support-service/

10 https://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/fund-for-students-with-disabilities/

In December 2023, the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026 was published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). It aims to enhance disability services by increasing capacity, improving access and addressing the deficits identified in the Disability Capacity Review to 2032[11]. It outlines actions for 2024-26 in three areas: providing better access to services, maximising service delivery impact and enhancing planning and management through better information and systems. The plan focuses on developing person-centred supports and services and aims to empower individuals with choice and control, supporting those with disabilities to live ordinary lives in ordinary places.

Finally, on guidance provision the NDA published a policy advice paper on effective career guidance for all learners with disabilities, including those with special educational needs (NDA, 2023b). A National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance, including five departments (DE, DFHERIS, DCEDIY, DSP, DETE), was formed in 2022. It focuses on person-centred supports, early and regular development of transition plans, equal access to career guidance for students in special schools and high-quality, impartial career information. Objectives were published in the National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland (2024-2030)[12] and its accompanying Strategic Action Plan[13]. Through four pillars and eight objectives, the framework aims to streamline existing services and structures, particularly in schools, higher education, FET and adult guidance services. Key actions include student guidance in 130 special schools for the first time, providing more work-shadowing and work-experience placements for people with disabilities and running more regional career fairs and workshops for students, parents and teachers.

In January 2024, the NCSE published a policy advice paper on special schools and classes (NCSE, 2024)[14]. It included guidance on educational provision for students and recommendations for future provision to enable them to achieve better outcomes. The paper suggest the system should be configured specifically for the Irish context and notes existing good practices in Ireland. It should, for example, build on the potential of the continuum of support process, and the current resource allocation models for teachers, SNAs, special transport, specialist equipment and school buildings. It advises substantial increases in resources for psychological and therapeutic supports.

More recently, in February 2024, the Minister announced the roll-out of higher education courses for students with an intellectual disability[15]. These will be delivered in ten HE colleges statewide and provide 150 places annually, starting in 2024-25. In addition, €1.8 million was announced for inclusion measures including to roll out sensory maps of college campuses to support learners with autism and for anti-racism measures.

11 The Disability Capacity Review to 2032 is a review of social care demand and capacity requirements (published in 2021). It identifies demand for specialist community-based disability services arising from demographic change, and considerable levels of unmet need. The focus is on people with more complex needs, encompassing about 80,000 service users, or about one in five of those reporting a disability 'to a great extent' in the 2022 Census. https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d3b2c-disability-capacity-review-to-2032-a-review-of-social-care-demand-and-capacity-requirements-to-2032/

12 National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland (2024-2030): https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/316075/60d8eca0-a791-472a-918b-b8c357d3d044.pdf

13 National Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance in Ireland: Strategic Action Plan (2024-2030): https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/279196/ac7dfa38-00fb-4dcf-8285-0f187b76469c.pdf

14 NCSE (2024). An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society Policy Advice Paper on Special Schools and Classes Policy Advice Paper No.7. https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/An_Inclusive_Education_for_an_Inclusive_Society_NCSE_Policy_Advice_Paper_7.pdf

15 https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/dee21-minister-harris-announces-introduction-of-transformational-higher-education-courses-for-students-with-an-intellectual-disability/

New Directions, the HSE's approach to supporting adults with disabilities using day services in Ireland (HSE, 2012), sets out 12 individualised, outcome-focused supports that should be available to such users. In 2018 the HSE published the National Framework for Person-Centred Planning in Services for Persons with a Disability (Gadd and Cronin, 2018). The National Person-Centred Planning (PCP) group has developed an information module for persons with disabilities and their circles of support along with an e-learning training module for staff in adult disability day services[16].

The HSE is rolling out its Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People Programme (PDS). Established in 2010, it will provide therapeutic services for children and young people from birth to 18 years with a disability or developmental delay. Services may be extended to completion of secondary school up to the 19th birthday, if appropriate, to address specific needs. This programme supports the reconfiguration of children's disability services to provide equitable, child and family-centred services based on need rather than diagnosis. The programme aims to[17]:

- Provide a clear pathway and fairer access to services for all children with a disability and their family based on their need, regardless of their diagnosis, where they live or go to school.
- Make the best use of available resources for the benefit of children and their families.
- Work in partnership with families and education staff to support children with a disability to reach their full potential.

In October 2023, the HSE published the 2023-2026 Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People . It aims to provide quality, accessible, equitable and timely services for children with complex needs and their families. The roadmap details actions to enhance integrated services among various organisations and partner agencies, including disabilities, Primary Care, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Tusla[18], the Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) Service Access and the Department of Education. These actions will focus on improving service access and quality including assessment of need (AON), workforce retention and recruitment, communication with children and families and engagement of staff in disability services with education and support for special schools.

Specifically, the CDNTs, comprising inter-disciplinary teams of health and social care professionals, are being set up to consolidate resources and assist children and their families with planning, decision-making and goal setting. Services are provided by the team assigned to the designated geographical area, determined by the child's primary residence. The programme seeks to shift service provision from diagnosis- to needs-based so that all children with a disability or developmental delay have access to the most appropriate services based on their needs. Children with non-complex needs will receive services at Primary Care level. For those with needs beyond this level, specialist services will be developed to support and work with the CDNTs and Primary Care services.

16 https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/#:~:text=The%20National%20Person%2DCentred%20Planning,Rabitte%20on%2029th%20May%202024

17 https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/progressing-disability/pds-programme/progressing-disability-services-for-children-and-young-people-programme-2020.docx

18 Tusla, the child and family agency, is Ireland's dedicated state agency responsible for improving the wellbeing and outcomes of children. https://www.tusla.ie/about/

As of May 2022, the HSE managed half of the 91 CDNTs with the remainder managed by section 38/39 funded disability service providers (CDNT, 2022). The Children's Disability Network Teams Information Management System (CDNTIMS)[19] is being rolled out to standardise and streamline service administration across CDNTs. They face several challenges, however, including a waiting list of over 16,500 children (HSE, 2023) and staffing difficulties reflecting retention challenges, inadequate staff numbers, limited therapy hours and funding shortfalls (FUSS, 2023)[20]. The HSE retained only 61 per cent of its staff in 2022 with a national average vacancy rate of 34 per cent in CDNTs. Some CDNTs offer as few as 6.2 to 10.4 therapy hours per child per year. Overall disability services funding in 2022 was €105 million, well below the recommended €350-€600 million. A revised Policy Framework for Service Delivery of Children's Disability Network Teams was published in 2023, outlining CDNTs' delivery.

1.4 Report Outline

Following this introductory chapter, setting out the study's policy and research context as well as its overarching objectives, we describe the main components of this mixed method, multi-phase study and the research questions addressed. Chapter 3 consists of the mapping phase and provides an overview of existing Irish data on the school and post-school pathways of young adults with special educational needs and disabilities. Chapter 4 examines the school experiences of the young adults who participated in our study, across the multiple school and post-school strands. Chapter 5 focuses on their decision-making and how they reflect on the pathways and options available to them. Chapter 6 examines the diversity of pathways taken and how young people experience these settings, with a focus on the supports available. Chapter 7 looks at their expectations for the future and their career and life plans. Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the key findings across the chapters and looks at some policy implications.

19 Children's Disability Network Teams Information Management System (CDNTIMS) Project – eHealth Ireland.

20 PRESS RELEASE: National Report on Children's Disability Network Staff Census & Workforce Review 2022 (fussireland.com)

CHAPTER 2

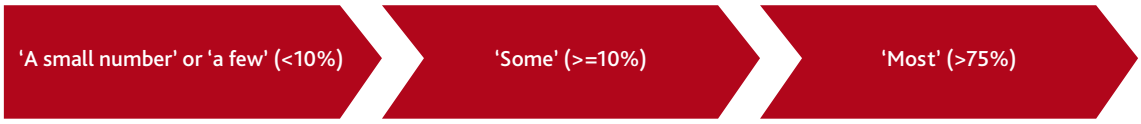
Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-phase mixed-method study of students and young adults with special educational needs across the state. It comprises a mapping and a tracking phase. The first gives an overview of current sources of data on these young school-leavers and identifies gaps in data gathered. The second seeks to track a sample of young people about to leave school and a sample of those in post-school FET and adult services settings. The study aims to identify young people's post-school plans, what post-school options are chosen, the factors involved in their selection and their experiences in their chosen paths.

Surveys captured student experiences in school and post-school settings across a wide range of key areas. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect in-depth evidence on emerging themes, based on school engagements or student/parent reflections. Survey data were analysed using Stata 17, presenting descriptive and inferential statistics where feasible. Where appropriate, survey results were compared with Growing Up in Ireland. When describing the results, all descriptive differences between groups included in this report were statistically significant at 5 per cent level unless otherwise noted. Members of the ESRI research team conducted all interviews with students, key personnel and stakeholders. All interviews were recorded, with consent, using the relevant technology (voice recorders or online recording software), and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data were analysed using NVivo to identify themes and address commonalities or differences between schools, programmes, pathways and young adults with differing needs.

Figure 2.1 Guidance for Reader



Note: In this report, 'most' typically refers to more than 75%, 'some' refers to more than 10%, and 'a small number' or 'a few' typically refers to less than 10%.

2.2 Mapping Phase

The mapping phase aims to provide an overview of national data sources in Ireland on the school and post-school pathways of young people with special educational needs. Guided by cross-national comparative reviews and Irish research, our definition includes three broad areas of SEN: learning disabilities, physical impairments and mental health disorders (OECD, 2019). Our primary objective in this phase is to assess what existing data tell us about these young people in terms of who they are; where they come from; their post-school pathways after leaving school; and the reasons for progressing to these destinations.

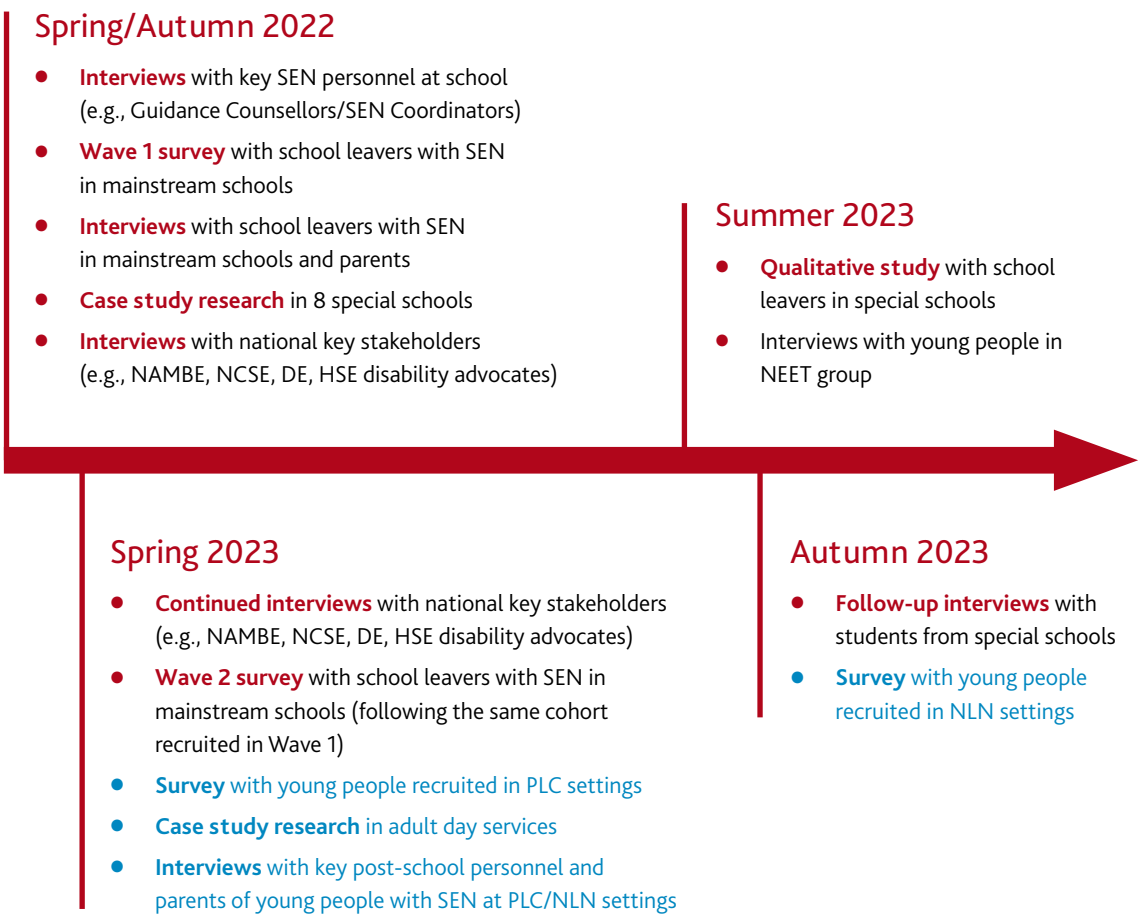
The introduction of each data source includes a description of that source, questions or items used to identify students with disability or special educational needs and a brief overview on what the data tell us. Where possible, the research team conducted secondary data analysis on several data sources. This included analysis of GUI and Census data. For several data sources, only information publicly available is reported. This report includes the following data sources:

- Census for 2011 and 2016.
- Primary Online Database (POD) and Post-Primary Pupil Database (PPOD).
- State Examination Commission (SEC) Reasonable Accommodations Data.
- Growing Up in Ireland '98 Cohort Wave 1 to Wave 4.
- Equal Access Survey (EAS).
- Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).
- AHEAD survey on higher education students.
- Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS).
- National Ability Support Systems (NASS) database, the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) and National Physical and Sensory Disability Database (NPSDD).
- Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD).

2.3 Tracking Phase

The school leaver tracking study takes a two-phase approach across a range of school and post-school settings. The first comprises a sample of students receiving additional educational supports in mainstream and special schools. In the second phase, the same cohort was subsequently followed in spring or autumn 2023 to understand their school and post-school experiences. In this phase, we also explored their experiences attending various post-school FET and adult service settings through surveys and in-depth interviews. Key stakeholder interviews were conducted at both time points across school and post-school settings to further understand the current support system. The research process is summarised in Figure 2.2 below. Details of responses across all data phases and sources are summarised in Appendix Table A1.7.

Figure 2.2 Tracking phase of study



Note: In this study, we included a broad range of school and post-school settings. Colour coding has been used to differentiate these settings, with fieldwork in post-school settings being highlighted in blue.

Note: Primary data collection was supplemented by detailed analysis of the Growing Up in Ireland child cohort at ages 17-18 and 20 years.

Tracking Phase 1: School Settings and Interviews with Key National Stakeholders

Wave 1 of Longitudinal Survey with School Leavers with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools

When tracking students' post-school pathways, the first stage comprised a sample of mainstream schools, selected using a stratified sampling approach from the list of second-level schools provided by the Department of Education (DE). They were selected based on key school characteristics (including Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)/non-DEIS status, presence of senior cycle special classes, regional distribution, school type, school size, school gender, and prevalence of those receiving additional supports) to ensure a representative sample, with a focus on schools with special classes at Senior Cycle and DEIS schools.

To facilitate survey design and administration, and to better understand how the data collection process could best be organised at each school, a call was organised with the SEN coordinator or principal at all participating mainstream schools before data collection. Schools were approached for information including SEN supports available, presence of special classes, how the school could identify and distribute consent forms to students with special educational needs (and their parents) and how the research team could support this process, the number of sixth year students considered to have SEN and instrument design considerations. All sixth year students identified by the SEN coordinator as receiving additional help or having additional needs were invited to participate in the study through email contact with their parents to ensure explicit parental consent for all participants.

In this study, we use a broad definition of students with special educational needs. Any student receiving (or who has received in the past two years) additional support in school falls under our SEN category. This support can be in the form of a special needs assistant (SNA), special education teacher support, time spent in a special class, specialist equipment or assistive technology, therapy support, reasonable accommodations from the State Examinations Commission (SEC), application to the DARE scheme or any other targeted support. The broad definition of SEN is used throughout the report unless otherwise specified. Taking this definition, school personnel were asked to send survey details and online link to parents who could then discuss participation with their son/daughter.

Each student was asked to complete a brief questionnaire online using a LimeSurvey link unique to their school, either on their personal device or a school-provided one. Two versions of each survey were prepared, one more accessible for young adults with more complex needs to ensure accessibility for all. In total, 233 mainstream schools with varying SEN prevalence were contacted and 59 schools agreed to participate, yielding a response rate of 25 per cent. A total of 421[21] school leaving students responded to the survey in May-June 2022 (almost all using the online survey link, with a small number completing paper versions).

The Wave 1 survey focuses on student school engagement, perceptions of teaching and learning, perceptions of skills development, nature of supports received and satisfaction with supports, expectations of parents and teachers, as well as their plans and expectations for the future. The survey also collects their demographic characteristics (e.g. gender and SEN) and socio-economic information (e.g. parental education level). Several survey items or questions from the GUI study are included to allow comparisons with its data. The survey concludes with a question on respondent availability for a follow-up interview.

School-level data were collected from external sources and during the call with schools. When compared to national statistics, our sample generally mirrors the national pattern. Slight differences exist, however, when it comes to the prevalence of DEIS and Education and Training Boards (ETB) schools. In Wave 1, 24 per cent of sampled schools were in the DEIS programme,

21 In total, we received 562 survey responses. The number of valid responses reduced to 421 after we restricted the sample to where responses were given to at least two questions (specifically, those asking date of birth and gender), to exclude empty entries (i.e. 'invalid responses').

lower than the 32 per cent reported in the school 2023-24 enrolment data from DE[22]. Similarly, ETB schools make up 27 per cent of our sample, which is lower than the national figure of 34 per cent. The profile of schools included in the Wave 1 survey, as well as responses by school characteristics (including school gender, size, location, whether it is fee charging, type, DEIS status, language medium and ethos/religion) are included in Appendix Tables A1.3 and A1.4[23].

Interviews with Parents of School Leavers with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools

In September-October 2022, follow-up qualitative interviews were conducted with young adults with a diversity of special educational need types and complexity, after completion of Wave 1 of the data collection process with mainstream school leavers. In total, 20 interviews with those in mainstream schools and five with parents of young people who completed the survey were conducted. All interviews were by phone.

At this point students had left school with many in their new setting. Interviews were guided by semi-structured schedules informed by our original research questions and findings from the School Leaver's Survey. Only students and parents who indicated a willingness to participate in follow-up interviews were invited. Parental consent was sought for participants under 18 at the time of the interview and for those with the most complex needs. The selected interviews included respondents in diverse school contexts and post-school pathways. These pathways included higher education in Ireland and abroad, a range of FET settings, those taking a gap year, those directly entering the labour market and those with NEET status. Student interviews mainly explored school-based experiences and perceptions, their preparation for transition out of school and the initial experiences and perceptions of post-school pathways.

Parent interviews focused on gathering a better understanding of their perceptions of the pathways available to young adults with different complexities of need, as well as guidance, learning and other supports in place across different settings and any developments they would like to see.

Interviews with Key SEN Personnel

In March 2022, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key SEN personnel, including teachers, SEN coordinators and guidance counsellors (GCs) across a diverse range of schools, either by phone or online. These gathered information on students' typical post-school pathways now and in previous years, factors influencing those pathways, the extent to which school and curriculum in final year prepare students, continuity of school-based supports after leaving school and the associated impact, particular challenges students with special educational needs face at school and supports in place to assist them through these challenges. They were invited to reflect broadly on the current support system, considering its effectiveness in preparing students for post-school life and whether special schools were the optimal setting for those with complex needs.

22 Department of Education. (2024). 2023-24 post-primary school enrolment data (provisional) https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/#20232024

23 These school characteristics (i.e. school gender, size, location, whether the school is fee charging, type, DEIS status, language medium and ethos/religion) are only captured in Wave 1 of the School Leavers' Survey.

Case Study Research in Eight Special Schools

In addition to mainstream students, our study includes a sample of young adults in special schools preparing to leave in 2022. As part of this first phase, we carried out a census of all such schools in February that year, asking school leaders to indicate if they had young adults preparing to leave in the 2021-22 academic year. We received responses from 23 special schools (out of a population of 125) that had young adults preparing to leave school enrolled. Due to difficulties engaging with these schools in mid-2022 (in the context of COVID-19), we decided to shift to a case study approach. Drawing on a theoretical sampling approach, we identified eight case schools for inclusion in our research study. The strategy was designed to ensure a school mix in geographic location and nature of disability/need. The schools serve a diversity of SEN and disabilities, including physical, intellectual (mild general learning, moderate/profound) and sensory disabilities, with many having multiple disabilities. The schools serve a diversity of geographic locations and catchment areas across the state.

This part of the tracking study adopted a qualitative approach seen as better suited to understanding the experiences of students in different special school settings. For each case study school, a range of stakeholders reflected on the experiences of students who left school in June 2022. Numbers of leavers ranged from two in one setting to nearly 30 in another. We conducted interviews with eight principals, seven teachers or co-ordinators of transition planning, 11 parents and five young adults in September 2022. All students in these special schools aged over 16 and leaving school in that academic year were invited to participate. A flexible approach was used to plan for and collect qualitative data with young adults with a range of special educational needs and communication profiles. Information gathered from school personnel was used to design interview schedules to meet individual participant need. Semi-structured interviews with individualised elicitation supports (such as photo-elicitation) aided engagement depending on their communication or cognitive profiles. Their parents accompanied the students.

Both were asked to reflect on preparation for leaving school and special school experiences (e.g. their attitudes to school, relationships with their peers as well teachers and staff, their programme and subject choice, supports they received at school and the supports they required). They were also asked about their post-school plans, factors influencing their post-school decisions, perceived opportunities open to them and the extent to which their school prepared them for life after school. Personnel were asked about school curriculum, programme and guidance provision and their reflections on post-school opportunities and pathways available for and followed by students and the student profiling process. Owing to the distinct nature of many special school settings, preserving anonymity is of utmost importance in presenting results. Consequently, for much of the evidence presented we cannot attribute findings to individual schools, even using pseudonyms.

Qualitative Study with Students from Special Schools

Due to the challenges for schools operating during COVID-19 restrictions, we experienced difficulties engaging with them in mid-2022. Therefore, alongside the case study research in eight special schools, we conducted additional longitudinal research in them. This involved a new phase of engagement with young people in spring-summer and autumn 2023, with a focus on young adults' own voices. In total, 11 in-depth student interviews and ten with their parents were conducted in May-June 2023.

Similar to previous interviews for students included in the case study research on special schools, they were asked to reflect on their school experiences, supports received, their planned pathways and factors influencing their post-school decisions. They were also asked to reflect on the opportunities open to them. Follow-up interviews with parents/young adults mainly focused on the actual post-school pathways taken, their experiences with the current setting, supports received at that setting and their plans and expectations for the future.

The same cohort was subsequently followed in October-November 2023 through ten follow-up interviews with young adults and/or their parents. Interviews with Key National Stakeholders.

In autumn 2022 and spring 2023, additional interviews were conducted with national stakeholders to understand the emerging challenges at national level. In total, six interviews were conducted with senior officials of the NCSE, HSE, National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE) and programme umbrella organisations and other departments and agencies. Interviews variously explored the status of special schools as primary schools, guidance counselling provision, views on HSE profiling and transition supports, regional variation in post-school settings and specialised settings, adequacy of therapy and other supports, adequacy of teacher professional development and SNA expertise, curricular provision (such as Junior Certificate Level 1 and 2, Leaving Certificate Applied [LCA] options at SC) and availability of qualified teachers. Additionally, interviews explored support continuity once students left school, short versus longer-term placement and support options, and key campaigns currently underway. They were also asked to reflect on the EPSEN review and School Inclusion Model (SIM).

Interviews with key personnel in post-school settings collected information on the profile of those settings (location, staff to student ratio) and young people attending them (their gender, age, needs profile), current programme and service provision (programmes offered and preparation for life), supports received and continuity of key supports once they leave the current setting, students' typical pathways after the post-school setting, as well as factors influencing their decisions. They were also asked about the key challenges facing young adults with special educational needs and challenges facing the post-school settings supporting them. In addition, they were asked to consider how well the current system supports and prepared these young people for life.

Tracking Phase 2: Post-School Settings

Wave 2 of Longitudinal Survey with Young People Recruited in Mainstream School Settings

A second-wave online survey was administered to the same sample of young adults recruited in mainstream schools in spring 2023, using contact details gathered in Wave 1. Similar to that survey, two versions of each survey were prepared, one more accessible for young adults with specific needs to ensure inclusivity. The version completed at Wave 1 (including any further alterations) determined which survey participants received at Wave 2. In total, 80 responses were received out of the 178 students who agreed to take part (44 per cent response rate). This survey focuses on respondents'/young people's progression in their chosen pathway and their expectations and plans for the future. Information on their demographics, socioeconomic background, planned post-school pathways, whether they achieved their plans and reasons for that, along with supports received at school was collected. They were also asked to reflect on their experiences in their current post-school settings, whether they regret their pathway, the supports received and their plans and expectations for the future.

In total, ten follow-up interviews with parents/young adults were conducted. These mainly focus on their post-school pathways, experiences at the current setting, supports received and their plans for future.

In the study's second phase, we focus particularly on young adults participating in post-school pathways, recruited in three main FET/HSE settings: Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes, NLN centres[24] and Adult Day Services. Within the PLC programmes, ETB services directors were asked to distribute the survey link to current students. The focus is on recording information about the post-school experiences of the young adults.

Interviews with Key Post-School Personnel and Parents of Young People with SEN at Post-School Settings

In May 2023, we conducted three interviews with key personnel at three diverse PLC settings. These gathered information on student experiences in PLC settings, programme(s) provided and supports available for students. Participants were asked how well the centre and programme prepared students for their next step, support continuity once they left the setting, typical pathways afterwards and factors affecting student plans. They were asked to reflect on challenges facing these students and, more broadly, how well the current system prepared them for an independent life along with possible improvements to the current system.

24 NLN centres are overseen by one provider.

PLC Student Survey

A survey was sent to all students attending PLC courses across a subset of FET colleges in spring 2023, aiming to capture their post-school experiences. The survey collects data on demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and information on SEN type. The survey asked about students' school and post-school supports, familial relationships, reasons for choosing the pathway, their experiences, as well as plans after finishing the course and expectations for the future. Where possible, several survey items or questions from the GUI study on 20-year-olds were included to allow comparisons. In total, we received 951 responses across a wide diversity of PLC settings. Given that our study focuses on exploring the post-school pathways of young people, we restrict the sample to under 25s, resulting in a sample size of 742 students.

National Learning Network (NLN) Learners' Survey

The third component of the Phase 2 study in post-school settings includes a sample of learners in NLN centres providing flexible training programmes and support services for individuals with disabilities or special educational needs. All NLN centres were invited via email to participate. Younger learners who had joined the NLN programme in the previous two to three years were invited to take part. The research team relied on centre staff (managers, programme instructors or course tutors) to identify eligible learners. Data collection was guided by programme providers, determining the mode of survey administration (online, paper, in-person) and use of an easy-to-read version or other modes of engagement.

Each student received an online LimeSurvey link unique to their centre and was asked to complete a brief questionnaire. A total of 23 centres agreed to participate and 152 learners responded in October/November 2023, all using the online link. In addition to demographic characteristics, SEN conditions and family background, the survey records reflections on school experiences (including the school programme), post-school plans and reasons for attending the NLN. Learners were also asked to share their experience with NLN centres, supports received, plans after finishing the course, overall satisfaction with their life and personal relationships, and feelings about the future.

Case Study Research in Adult Day Services

The final element of the Phase 2 tracking study in post-school settings involves case study research in day services and assisted living facilities which provide support networks for individuals with various disabilities, including physical, sensory and learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, autism, intellectual disabilities, or life-changing illnesses such as heart attack and stroke[25]. The services aim to help people with a disability to make choices and plans to support their personal goals; to have influence over the decisions affecting their lives; to achieve personal goals and aspirations; and to be active, independent members of their community and of society[26]. The research comprises five interviews with young adults attending day services,

25 HSE, (2012). New Directions: Review of HSE Day Services and Implementation Plan 2012-2016. Personal Support Services for Adults with Disabilities. Working Group Report. Dublin: Health Service Executive. [Viewed 15/01/2025]. Available from: https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/215139/newdirections2012.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

26 NCSE. (2014). Post-School Education and Training: Information and Options for Adults and School Leavers with Disabilities. Trim, Co Meath. IRL: National Council for Special Education. [Accessed 15/01/2025]. Available from: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/NCSE-Post-School-Education-Training.pdf

three with parents (where young adults consented), and four with centre staff. Day service settings were identified through contacts in special schools visited. All interviews were conducted in March 2023. Young adults were asked about the programme they followed in the centre, their experiences, relationships with peers and staff, supports received, and plans after finishing. With their consent, their parents were approached to supplement the learner's reflections. Similarly, parents were asked about their own and their child's experiences with adult day services, reasons for attending, supports received and their adequacy, as well as progression plans.

Finally, staff interviews at adult day service centres focus on the needs profile of young people, current programme and supports provision at the centre, additional supports or changes they would like to see, the extent to which the centre prepared young adults for their next step, continuity of supports after leaving and key challenges in supports for these young people. Staff were also asked to reflect broadly on how the current support system prepares young people for life.

Interviews with Young People in NEET group

Despite many students progressing to the next stage of their education and training, some did not transition to any post-school education, training or employment (NEET). In July 2023, we conducted interviews with three young adults from the NEET group and four interviews with their parents (with student consent). Contact with disability advocacy groups and youth services facilitated identification of these young adults. Their consent was obtained as all were over 18 at time of interview. In addition to considering their school experiences (supports available and relationships with peers and teachers), young adults in the NEET group were asked about their current situation, original post-school plans, whether they achieved those plans and the reasons for success or non-progression. They were also asked to reflect on current supports, plans, expectations for the future and opportunities available to them.

2.4 Student Profiles

The study includes a diverse student profile in terms of needs and intended post-school pathways, a key element when interpreting findings in subsequent chapters. This section provides an overview of those attending the different school and post-school settings using quantitative data from our surveys, specifically the two waves of the School Leavers' Survey, the PLC Students' Survey and the NLN Learners' Survey.

The Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey was administered to final year students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, with most aged 17-18 (85 per cent) or 19 (13 per cent)[27]. About six in ten surveyed were boys, 37 per cent were girls and 4 per cent reported themselves as non-binary or other. This gender pattern also emerges in the survey with learners at NLN settings, where 60 per cent of respondents were boys. This is in line with national and international research (Van der Veen et al. 2010; McCoy et al., 2016b) which finds a higher prevalence of SEN for boys. For Wave 1 respondents, most completed the survey alone (83 per cent) while others did so with a friend, parent, interviewer or someone from school[28].

27 Respondent age is calculated based on the survey close date (31/06/2022) minus their date of birth.

28 The number cannot be reported due to disclosure control.

Tracking this cohort in spring 2023, we received 80 responses, with a slightly higher proportion from girls (46 per cent girls, 49 per cent boys and 5 per cent reported themselves as non-binary or other). Ages ranged from 17 to 21, with most aged 18-19 years. Many were Dublin based (38 per cent) or Leinster (28 per cent).

The profile of all respondents in our PLC survey differed slightly. In December 2022 and January 2023, 742 students under 25 in these settings were surveyed, with 67 per cent girls, 29 per cent boys, and 4 per cent identifying as non-binary or other. About 29 per cent were based in Ulster/Connacht, 24 per cent in Leinster, 24 per cent in Dublin and 23 per cent were in Munster. Nationality information was additionally collected for students in post-school settings (except for NLN learners). In the school leavers' follow-up survey, most were Irish (98 per cent); 89 per cent in the PLC survey.

Social and Economic Profile of Students with SEN

Social capital refers to the resources available to individuals derived from their social networks and relationships (Leender, 2018). These include information, ideas, supports, trust and cooperation. Consistent with international studies where parental education is used to measure such capital (McNeal, 1999; Vryonides, 2007; von Otter and Stenberg, 2015), our study includes parental education to capture the social capital for students.

In the Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, 57 per cent reported at least one parent with a university degree. Almost 44 per cent of students surveyed were attending a DEIS school. Compared to school leavers with special educational needs in mainstream schools, a lower proportion of PLC students reported having at least one degree educated parent (57 per cent in Wave 1 vs 50 per cent in PLC settings). The proportion of young people with degree-educated parents was lower among those attending NLN settings where only 43 per cent reported this level of education.

Students were additionally asked to report whether they experienced any difficulties making ends meet and their living conditions. This information was not collected from NLN learners to minimise survey burden. Compared to students from the school cohort, a higher proportion in PLC settings reported economic difficulties (40 per cent in Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey vs 61 per cent in PLC Survey). Similar to mainstream school students followed in Wave 2, around three-quarters of PLC students were living with relatives (73 per cent in PLC vs 74 per cent in Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey) rather than independently.

Additional/Special Educational Needs

Table 2.1 below shows the number of students identified with special educational needs or disability in each survey wave. They were allowed to choose more than one option if applicable, thus a student with multiple conditions will be counted more than once.

In the Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, 280 students reported receiving some additional supports at school (including attending a special class, any kind of school support, receiving an exam accommodation and any extra subject help). About a third indicated they were currently attending a special class. The figure was much lower for students attending DEIS schools (20 per cent) when compared to their peers attending non-DEIS schools (42 per cent). This contrasts with the national study of special classes showing DEIS post-primary schools are more than twice as likely as non-DEIS schools to have special classes, based on data gathered almost a decade ago (46 per cent compared to 21 per cent in non-DEIS schools), suggesting a growing presence of special classes in non-DEIS schools (McCoy et al., 2014, p78).

Across all settings, learning difficulties (including general and specific) and socio-emotional/ behavioural conditions stood out as the two most prevalent SEN types. Notably, there was a significantly greater prevalence of psychological or emotional conditions among PLC students surveyed and school leavers tracked in Wave 2. This is consistent with HEA data findings where students with specific learning difficulties and psychological or emotional conditions were the most represented among students with disabilities (see Chapter 3 for HEA data details).

Figure 2.3 illustrates the complexity of student need, measured by the number of conditions students reported. A higher prevalence of young adults with multiple conditions was reported in NLN settings, with close to half having multiple conditions. Meanwhile, a sizeable proportion of school leavers from the Wave 1 survey reported multiple conditions. It should be noted that not all students indicated having a SEN when asked, In this study non-reporting may reflect students not seeing themselves as having additional needs (even if they receive support), not being aware of receiving support or being unwilling to disclose their status. Consistent with international studies, non-disclosure of SEN appears to be higher among postsecondary students (Macleod and Cebula, 2009, in Scotland; Lindsay et al., 2018 in Canada; and Pearson and Boskovich, 2019 in the US).

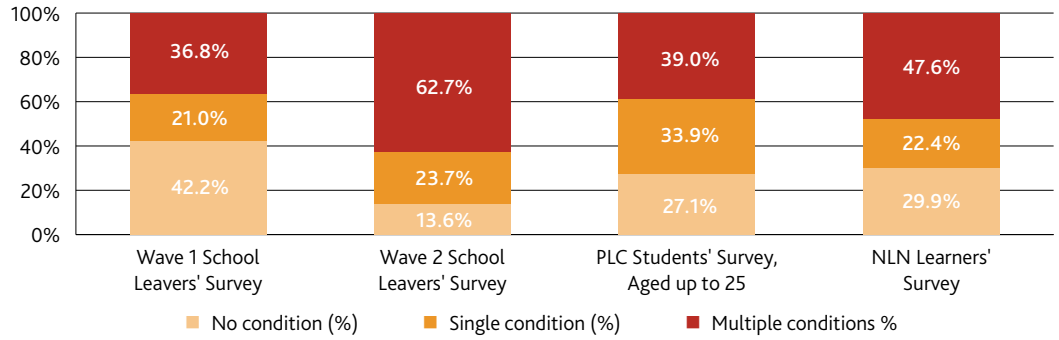
Table 2.1 Number and percentage of students by SEN type reported

	Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey	Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey	PLC Survey, Under 25s	NLN Survey
Learning Difficulties*	34%	26%	23%	32%
Socio-emotional/Behavioural Difficulties	32%	39%	45%	29%
Physical/Visual/Hearing/Speech Difficulties	21%	22%	21%	28%
Other	13%	13%	12%	10%
None Reported	26%	17%	30%	26%
N of Students in Special Class	116	24	74	N/A

Data sources: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey, PLC Students' Survey, NLN Learners' Survey.

Note: students can choose more than one option so a student with multiple conditions will be counted more than once. Intellectual or general learning difficulties are merged with specific and other learning difficulties as the N of students with intellectual/general learning difficulties is too small to report.

Figure 2.3 Students' SEN profile by complexity



Data sources: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey, PLC Students' Survey, NLN Learners' Survey.

2.5 Research Ethics

A detailed research plan was submitted to the ESRI Research Ethics Committee in January 2022, to ensure the study adhered to the highest ethical standards. The committee approved the approach to surveying and interviewing young participants and the protocols for data storage. Additionally, the study was approved by the Rehab Group[29] Ethics Committee regarding data collection with learners at NLN centres.

In the case of student participants, parents/guardians received an information sheet outlining the study's nature, aims and background. They were then asked to demonstrate their consent by sharing the information and survey link with their child only if they agreed to their participation. Young adults also received a consent form along with the online survey invitation. For FET settings, as recruited respondents are adults, the consent form was included with the online survey directly and no parental consent sought.

To avoid distress due to SEN identification, the language of consent forms and other project materials refers to additional needs. Where the survey asks about SEN or disability type or complexity, it does so using Census questions. The focus is on the additional supports students are receiving and their satisfaction with them rather than on exact diagnostic information. As the survey was distributed to parents and completed online or on paper, in-school group identification by peers was also avoided. Both young people and their parents were explicitly informed, in plain and understandable language, about their participation in the survey research and qualitative interviews. They were assured, clearly and comprehensibly, that all gathered information would be confidential and not disclosed in ways as to allow individual participants to be identified. Actual names and other identifying information (for all participants) were not linked to collected data.

Confidentiality was similarly assured for school personnel and staff in post-school settings. At no time do we identify any participating case study schools/settings/centres. For this reason, we do not attribute quotes to individual settings (even using pseudonyms), but rather to broad type of settings (such as mainstream or special school, NLN or PLC).

29 Rehab is a non-profit organisation in Ireland that provides a wide range of services to support individuals with disabilities and those marginalised or at disadvantage of healthcare, education, employment assistance and residential care. It aims to promote inclusion, independence and equality for all individuals (https://rehab.ie/).

For individual interviews, the research team followed best practice around sensitivity. Our approach was adapted to render it appropriate and accessible for the profile of young participants. It was developed before the interview with the appropriate staff in the school and post-school setting or the young persons' parent/guardian, where appropriate. For participants under 18 or with complex needs two researchers conducted interviews. All data collection took place in surroundings people were familiar with (such as their school or post-school setting or online/by telephone at their home environment), thus the approach was unlikely to upset them or lead to disclosure of abuse or risky behaviour. Comprehensive protocols were established before the fieldwork in case such disclosures did occur, however. Parents/guardians and young people were advised that if researchers obtained information that put a student at risk, they would have to disclose it to relevant authorities. We emphasised that participation was completely voluntary and participants could choose not to answer any questions or withdraw at any point. Researchers provided their contact details should participants have any questions about the research or decide to withdraw consent at a later date.

The project team maintains exclusive control over the quantitative and qualitative data. Anonymised data are securely stored on a server accessible solely to research team members. At the study's end, audio files will be deleted.

2.6 Summary

The report draws on multifaceted, mixed method quantitative analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the post-school pathways of young people with special educational needs and factors influencing their decisions. The study comprises a mapping and a tracking phase. By investigating a range of existing national data sources, the mapping gives an overview of current data sources on these school leavers and identifies data gaps on who they are, where they come from, where they go and the reasons for going there. The tracking phase comprises studies across different time points in school settings including mainstream and special schools, and in post-school settings including PLC and NLN settings, adult day services, along with those in the NEET group. Given the study's breadth of findings, key items are noted by different settings (e.g. mainstream and special school) throughout, with chapters taking a thematic approach across the in- and post-school phases. The longitudinal design allows us to understand student experiences and supports received in school and post-school settings and compare their planned pathways and the ones taken. The report highlights the implications for policy development to support planning and service provision for the inclusion of young people with special educational needs in post-school life.

CHAPTER 3

Mapping Existing Data Sources: Data on SEN/Disability and Profile of Young People with a Disability

3.1 Introduction

Here we examine data sources on the school and post-school pathways of young people with special educational needs[30]. Guided by Irish and international research, our definition includes three broad areas of SEN: learning disabilities, physical impairments and mental health disorders (see OECD, 2019). Some of the most common specific learning disabilities include dyslexia, dyscalculia and dysgraphia. Separately, some have general learning disabilities that are mild, moderate, severe or profound. The most common physical impairments are in mobility, vision and hearing. Mental health disorders include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, attention deficit disorder, depressive disorders, anxiety, and disruptive, impulse-control and conduct disorder (Brussino, 2020). Our goal is to assess what existing data tell us about who these young people are; where they come from; where they go on leaving school; and the reasons individuals progress to these destinations. For each data source we include a description of the data, questions that identify students with disability/SEN, and an overview on what the data tell us. This included secondary analysis of two sources: *Growing Up in Ireland* and Census data. The data sources included are:

Census for 2011 and 2016.

- Primary Online Database (POD) and Post-Primary Pupil Database (P-POD).
- SEC Reasonable Accommodations Data.
- *Growing Up in Ireland* (GUI) '98 Cohort Wave 1 to Wave 4.
- Equal Access Survey (EAS).
- Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD).
- AHEAD survey on disabled students in higher education (HE).
- Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS).
- National Ability Support Systems (NASS) database (and the National Intellectual Disability Database [NIDD] and National Physical and Sensory Disability Database [NPSDD]).
- Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD).

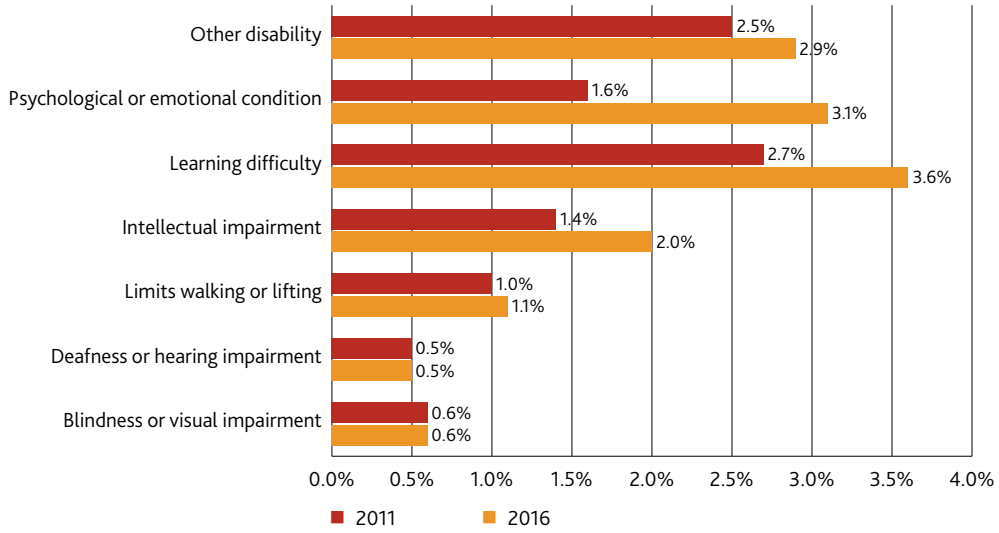
30 The language used to describe SEN or disability varies between sources; we use the language adopted in each data source when discussing that source. In the general discussion, we use young people with special educational needs while discussing school-age young people and disabled young people while discussing young people post-school.

3.2 2011 and 2016 Census

The Census is a cross-sectional data source that collects individual-level information and allows identification of people with disabilities. It also allows disaggregation by a suite of characteristics (sex, age, nationality, education level, occupation status and so on). The Census does not allow for tracking persons over the life course but in offering population-level measures at multiple time points on educational and employment status, it allows identification of differences by disability status and across cohorts. Across the three most recent Census editions, respondents were asked about experiencing different types of long-lasting conditions or difficulties, followed by questions on specific daily activities. There was a change in 2022 compared to 2011 and 2016 editions (see Appendix Table A1.5), with implications for the prevalence rate. In 2022 respondents were asked if they had specific conditions and additionally the extent to which they experienced the condition (great or some extent). Some disability categories were also revised.

At the time this report was being finalised, the 2022 Census data were not available[31]. Given the study's focus, our analyses focus on those aged 20-24 years. Figure 3.1 shows the incidence of disability, rising from 7.3 per cent of young adults in this grouping in 2011 to 9.1 per cent in 2016, driven by increases in the numbers with a psychological or emotional condition (from 1.6 per cent in 2011 to 3.1 per cent in 2016), a learning and an intellectual disability. Reflecting question changes in Census 2022, 19.4 per cent of the population reported having a disability with 13.5 per cent 'to some extent' and 5.9 per cent 'to a great extent'. Psychological or emotional conditions continue to be the most prevalent disability type reported. In contrast to 2011 and 2016 results, the 2022 results show a higher prevalence of disability among women aged 20-24 (55 per cent) compared to men (45 per cent).

Figure 3.1 Incidence of disability by type among those aged 20-24 in 2011 and 2016

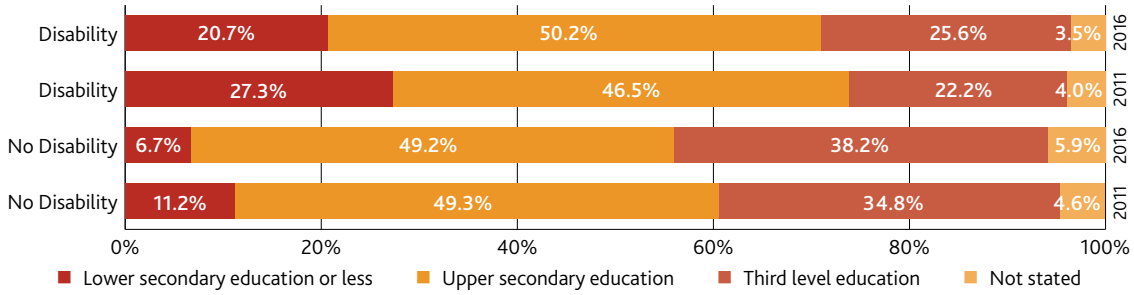


Data sources: Census 2011 and 2016.

31 A detailed breakdown of young people's educational and employment results by their disability status and type is only available using the Research Microdata Files (RMFs). At the time of writing, the Census 2022 RMF data are not yet available.

Educational attainment increased for young adults with a disability and their peers without despite the rise in disability incidence. While 27.3 per cent of 20- to 24-year-olds with a disability did not progress beyond lower second-level education in 2011, this decreased to 20.7 per cent in 2016. Completion of third level education among disabled young adults rose from 22.2 per cent in 2011 to 25.6 per cent in 2016, but compared to their non-disabled peers the gap grew from 13 percentage points to 24. Hence, although disability prevalence increased, those identified with a disability are not becoming less disadvantaged.

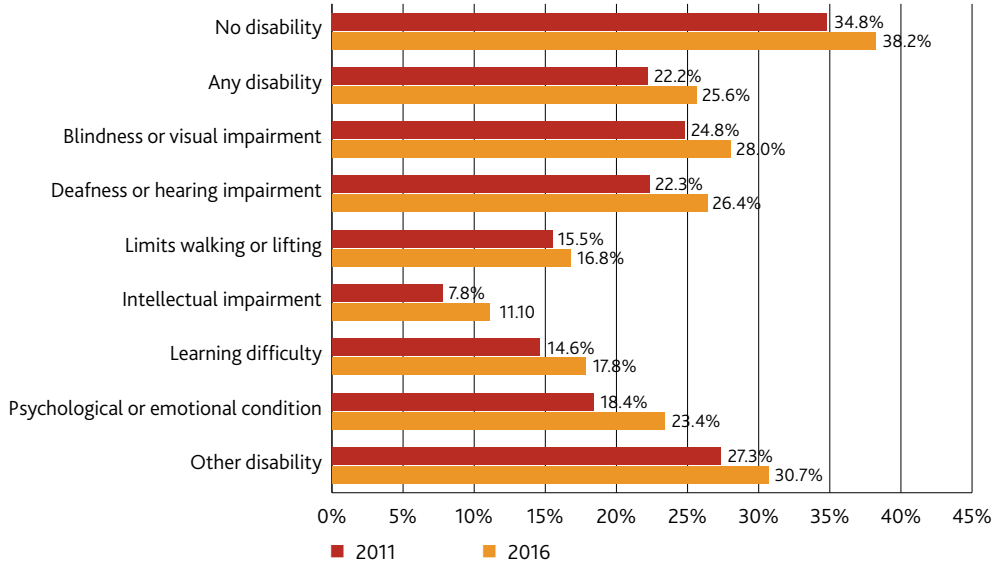
Figure 3.2 Educational achievement by disability status among those aged 20-24 in 2011 and 2016



Data sources: Census 2011 and 2016.

Young adults with a learning disability were four times more likely to have completed up to lower second-level education (31.2 per cent) compared with their non-disabled peers (6.7 per cent). While 43.8 per cent of those with a reported physical impairment completed up to lower second-level education in 2011, this dipped to 38 per cent in 2016. The fraction of young adults with an intellectual disability with lower second-level education or less decreased from 55.3 per cent in 2011 to 46.2 per cent by 2016. Finally, completion of third level education increased over the period, but remained strongly differentiated by disability type. Young adults with an intellectual disability were least likely to complete third level education, with numbers rising from 7.8 per cent in 2011 to 11.1 per cent in 2016 (Figure 3.3).

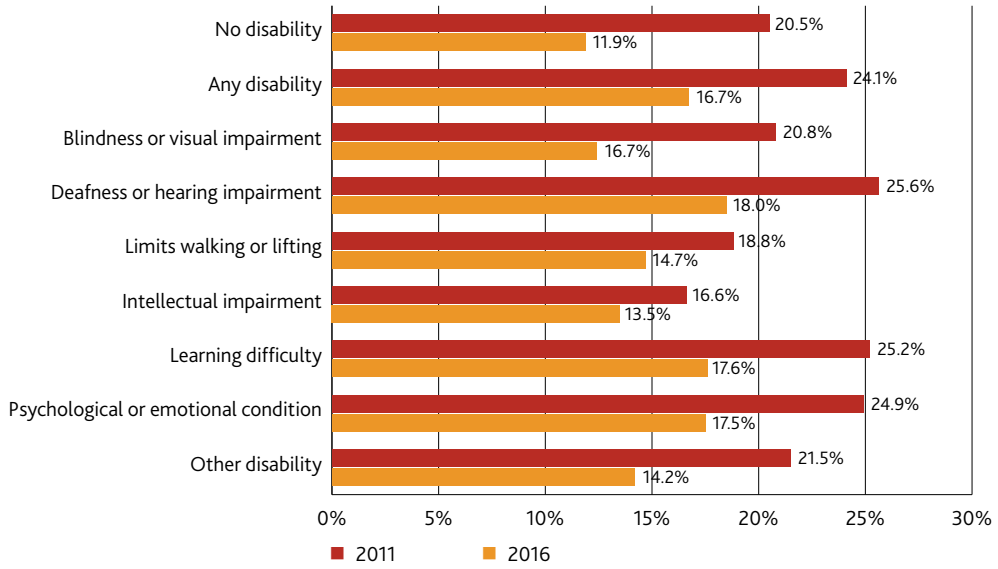
Figure 3.3 Third level achievement by disability type among those aged 20-24 in 2011 and 2016



Data sources: Census 2011 and 2016.

Young adults with a disability were almost half as likely to be employed (24.9 per cent in 2011 and 28.3 per cent in 2016) as their peers without a disability (40.2 per cent in 2011 and 45.8 per cent in 2016). This is consistent with trends in the general working age population (CSO, 2021). In 2011, young adults who reported a difficulty with physical activities (14.7 per cent), an intellectual disability (14.5 per cent) or a psychological impairment (16.9 per cent) were least likely to be working. By 2016 a higher fraction of young adults (with and without a disability) were in employment. As in 2011, in 2016 young adults with a physical impairment (14.0 per cent) and young people with an intellectual disability (15.8 per cent) had the lowest rates of employment. Over the same period gaps in unemployment levels become more prominent between young adults with a disability (24.1 per cent in 2011 and 16.7 per cent in 2016) and those without (20.5 per cent in 2011 and 11.9 per cent in 2016). After the Great Recession, unemployment rates were particularly high across the population in 2011. By 2016, the unemployment rate fell across all groups (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4 Unemployment status by disability type among those aged 20-24 in 2011 and 2016



Data sources: Census 2011 and 2016.

Similarly, young adults with a disability were less likely to report being a student (30.8 per cent in 2011 and 36.5 per cent in 2016) than their peers (36 per cent in 2011 and 39.8 per cent in 2016). Consistent with the rise in third level attainment, a larger share of young adults reported being a student in 2016 than in 2011. Young adults who reported a difficulty with physical activities were least likely to report being a student (19.6 per cent in 2011 and 23.6 per cent in 2016).

The largest gaps between young adults with a disability and their peers without were noted in relation to how many of them were pursuing alternative activities (such as looking after home/family, retired or unable to work – NEET). In 2016, 18.5 per cent of young adults with a disability and 2.6 per cent of young adults without had a status other than being employed, unemployed or a student. In 2016, those with a physical impairment (47.6 per cent) or intellectual disability (40.1 per cent) were most likely to report having an alternative status.

Census data cannot be used to track individuals by the characteristics of their school or to look at the pathways they pursue. They can be used to identify trends at the population level and changes between cohorts. The analysis above has shown that educational attainment among disabled adults has risen but that gaps persist, particularly by disability type. Young adults who reported a difficulty with physical activities or an intellectual disability were particularly likely to have poorer educational and labour market outcomes.

3.3 Primary and Post-Primary Online Databases

The Primary Online Database (POD) and the Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD) serve as central repositories tracking individual students through their educational journey. The former includes personal information (gender and date of birth) and enrolment information (enrolment source and leaving destination) on students in primary schools and those following primary and second-level programmes in special schools. For those in special classes, data are included on class type and integration into mainstream classes during part of the school day[32].

P-POD includes interconnected datasets on learners, subjects and schools at post-primary level[33]. In addition to personal information, P-POD captures indicators for various support services, such as Traveller support and medical card eligibility. School information includes indicators for fee-charging schools, DEIS schools and those in Gaeltacht areas, along with classifications based on ethos and gender mix. Both POD and P-POD record the number of students enrolled in mainstream classes (excluding special classes) receiving additional supports, including literacy/numeracy, EAL and special needs assistant (SNA) supports, as well as additional teaching support due to a SEN[34]. For schools with special classes, information on the type and size of the special class is also collected.

The total number of NCSE-supported special schools rose from 114 in 2018 to 116 in 2022, while enrolment increased from 7,722 in 2018 to 8,424 in 2022. Additionally, the number of students in special classes within mainstream primary schools surged from 6,229 in 2018 to 10,123 in 2022[35].

During the 2020/2021 academic year, most special school students pursued the Junior Cycle (JC) (525 students) or Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) (435 students), while programmes at NFQ levels 1, 2, or 3 (equivalent levels) accounted for 120 students. Smaller numbers were taking SC programmes, including the Leaving Certificate (LC) (57 students), the LCA (59 students), and other programmes at NFQ level 4 or above (34 students) (Department of Education, 2022, personal communication)[36].

32 Department of Education (nd). Primary Online Database (POD) – Information for Schools. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/3119d-pod-database/

33 Department of Education (nd). Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD). https://www.gov.ie/en/service/43ddb5-post-primary-online-database-p-pod/

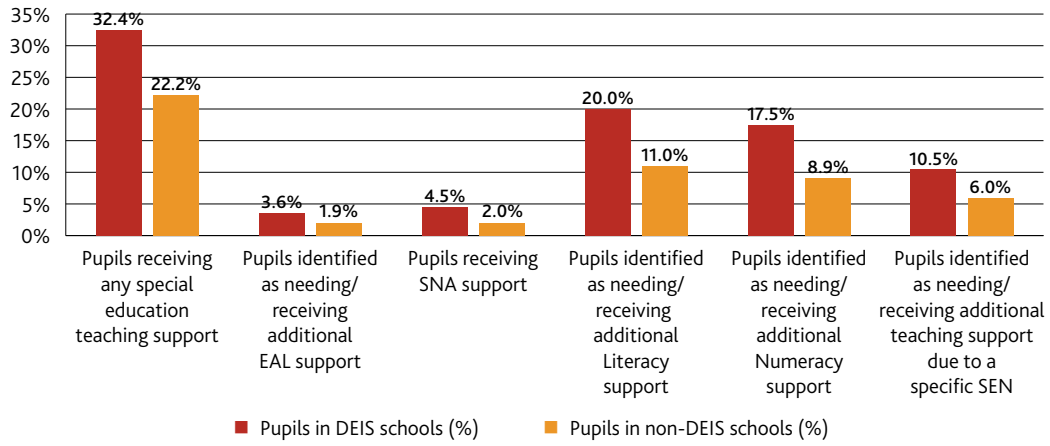
34 Additional teaching support is provided for students with significant communication difficulties, delayed cognitive development or adaptive functioning or significant emotional and behavioural difficulties.

35 Department of Education. (2024b). Education Indicators for Ireland. https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289901/66bf9068-8a83-4bf8-86d4-d3aba60ef7d1.pdf#page=null

36 Percentages are not provided as students can concurrently follow subjects from different programmes, making the categories non-mutually exclusive.

Post-primary students in special classes almost doubled during 2018-22, increasing from 2,136 in 2018 to 4,028 in 2022[37]. The largest area of support is in literacy or numeracy followed by additional teaching support, with higher levels among DEIS schools. While 20 per cent of DEIS school students had literacy support, this was the case for 11 per cent of non-DEIS students (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5 Percentage of pupils identified as needing/receiving special education support at post-primary level in 2020/2021



Data sources: Post-Primary Online Database (P-POD), personal communication.

Although POD and P-POD provide rich datasets for resource planning and allocation, they do not include the nature, intensity and duration of any additional supports or teaching provided at individual schools. Nor is it possible to disaggregate the dataset by SEN or disability type as there is no marker for students with special educational needs and disability. Another potential inadequacy of this data source is its reliance on accurate reporting by school principals. Yet little is known of how principals interpret the questions on SEN and how they count and report the numbers receiving additional supports for their additional needs (McCoy et al., 2016b), especially when a formal diagnosis is no longer required to assess a student's special educational needs.

3.4 State Examinations Commission: Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations

The scheme of Reasonable Accommodations at the Certificate Examinations (RACE) facilitates access to the Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations by candidates who would have difficulty in accessing the examination or communicating what they know to an examiner because of a physical, visual, hearing and/or learning difficulty. The scheme's focus is on removing barriers to access, while retaining the examinations' capacity to assess the same underlying skills and competencies as are assessed for all other candidates and to apply the same standards of achievement. RACE provides accommodations for candidates with a variety of complex special educational needs including learning difficulties as well as permanent or temporary physical,

37 Department of Education. (2024b). Education Indicators for Ireland. https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/289901/66bf9068-8a83-4bf8-86d4-d3aba60ef7d1.pdf#page=null

visual, hearing, medical, sensory, emotional, behavioural or other conditions (SEC, 2021). It was reformed in 2017 to give candidates greater certainty about the supports they can expect; and to provide greater access to the scheme by those with a learning difficulty. (SEC, 2021). Moving towards a needs-based approach, eligibility is assessed based on level of need without a requirement for a diagnosis of a specific condition (SEC, 2021). Applications for the 2022 RACE scheme were made on one of four grounds: learning , hearing, visual and physical difficulty (the latter includes medical, sensory, mental health and behavioural difficulties).

In 2020, 23,095 reasonable accommodations were granted to examination candidates requiring 6,973 new special examination centres. Table 3.1 below illustrates a small increase in reasonable accommodations provisions in recent years (SEC, 2021, communication; SEC, 2020). Table 3.2 shows many accommodations for LCA candidates relate to component/subject exemptions, accounting for 63 per cent of those awarded to LCA candidates. In contrast, 46 per cent of accommodations awarded to LC candidates relate to a spelling/grammar waiver, 32 per cent had reading assistance and 14 per cent used a word processor for their examinations. Overall, there was an increasing percentage of LCA candidates from 2016 to 2021, from 4.7 to 5.2 per cent.

Table 3.1 Reasonable accommodation statistics 2016-2020

Type of Accommodation	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Tape Recorder	249	305	453	432	442
Reading Assistance	6,431	6,816	7,274	7,289	7,093
Scribe	2,310	2,033	1,940	1,707	1,120
Word Processor	1,530	1,808	2,095	2,521	2,827
Visually Modified	155	194	191	202	210
Component/Subject/Exemption	2,292	2,244	2,354	2,353	2,462
Spelling/Grammar/Waiver	7,242	7,370	7,955	8,537	8,941
Total Accommodations	20,209	20,770	22,262	23,041	23,095
Special Centres	10,685	10,100	9,330	8,936	6,973
Candidates	16,764	17,661	18,642	19,795	18,577

Source: SEC, 2021, personal communication.

Table 3.2 Reasonable accommodation statistics 2016-2020, by Leaving Certificate programme

Type of Accommodation	2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
	LC	LCA	LC	LCA	LC	LCA	LC	LCA	LC	LCA	LC	LCA
Type of Recorder	64	17	92	37	116	44	132	62	130	64	N/A	N/A
Reading Assistance	2,122	522	2,715	951	2,811	1,004	2,716	940	2,595	943	N/A	N/A
Scribe	780	189	780	253	712	301	622	272	428	219	N/A	N/A
Word Processor	733	66	823	76	943	105	1,034	131	1,164	166	N/A	N/A
Visually Modified	59	11	71	20	83	14	85	16	84	15	N/A	N/A
Component/ Subject/ Exemption	20	2,030	24	2,205	15	2,305	22	2,292	23	2,366	N/A	N/A
Spelling/ Grammar/ Waiver	2,752	N/A	3,775	N/A	3,896	N/A	3,944	N/A	3,797	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total Accommodations	6,530	2,835	8,280	3,542	8,576	3,773	8,555	3,713	8,221	3,773	N/A	N/A
Total Candidates	55,708	2,758	55,770	2,773	5,4440	2,709	56,071	2,716	57,668	2,855	57,952	3,173
% of LCA Candidates		4.72%		4.74%		4.74%		4.62%		4.72%		5.19%

Source: SEC, 2021, personal communication

3.5 Growing Up in Ireland

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), Ireland's longitudinal study of children, has to date collected panel data over time from two cohorts. The '98 cohort, of relevance to this report, collected data at nine, 13, 17 and 20 years from over 6,000 respondents and their families. Such nationally representative information offers unique insights into the educational trajectories and outcomes of young adults, including those with disabilities and special educational needs (see Appendix Table 1.6). Earlier research has illustrated the experiences of, and challenges faced by, pupils with special educational needs in primary education (McCoy and Banks, 2012) and on transition to second level (McCoy et al., 2020; McCoy et al., 2016a). The numbers participating in all four waves of the study is 4,729, about 23 per cent of whom had been identified as having disability or additional needs at age nine (1,087 young adults)[38]. We focus on Wave 3 data which capture young people at the point of leaving school and hence give the best insights into post-school decision-making. The data reveal planned post second-level education and actual pathways for a small fraction of students with special educational needs who have left school by this wave (83 per cent were still in school). Pathways that can be observed include FET and HE.

38 The data were statistically adjusted to account for differential response or attrition at previous waves.

Here we look at plans, pathways and guidance processes among young people with and without additional needs. Where data allowed, further disaggregation was conducted by SEN type. Due to the small numbers involved, GUI is not best positioned to offer insights into the trajectories of those with special educational needs into less prevalent pathways, such as adult day services.

Previous studies used a comprehensive, triangulated definition of SEN (Cosgrove et al., 2014; McCoy et al., 2016a; 2016b), with that status at age nine derived from parents, teachers and the teacher-completed strengths and difficulties (SDQ) questionnaire (Table 3.3). This represents the most comprehensive measurement of SEN in the Irish context, capturing diverse needs and from multiple perspectives. This body of work has been widely cited to indicate that about one in every four students (in the mid-primary years) in Ireland has a special educational need. This prevalence rate largely aligns with cohort studies internationally, such as by Van der Veen et al. (2010) in the Netherlands (26 per cent) and Hills et al. (2010) in the UK (22 per cent), both based on evidence from multiple informants. Our study again employs this triangulated SEN definition (Table 3.3). As a limitation of the data collected as part of the child cohort, SEN complexity cannot be inferred.

Table 3.3 Construction of SEN measure using GUI (child cohort)

Disability Category at Age 9	Growing Up in Ireland Child Cohort
General Learning or Intellectual SEN	Identified by teachers as having a 'learning disability', excluding students identified by parents as having dyslexia or dyspraxia.
Specific Learning SEN	Identified by teachers as having a 'learning disability' and by parents as having dyslexia or dyspraxia, excluding participants included above.
Emotional SEN	Identified by either teachers or primary caregiver as having an 'emotional or behavioural problem' or students in the top 10% on teacher reported strengths and difficulties questionnaire. Excludes students included above.
Physical SEN	Identified by teachers as having a 'physical disability or visual or hearing impairment' or 'speech impairment' or identified by primary caregivers as having a speech impairment. Excludes students included above.
Other SEN	Identified by primary caregiver as having 'other' difficulty or disorder and not included in one of the previous types of SEN.

Gaps between students with special education needs and their peers can be noted in the number of students still in school at age 17, early school leaving and post-school planned pathways (Carroll et al., 2022a). They were slightly less likely to be in school at age 17 (79 per cent) than their peers without SEN (85 per cent). While by age 17 about 3 per cent of young adults were early school leavers, those with additional needs were twice as likely to become so (5 per cent) than their peers (2 per cent). Among respondents still in school, students with special educational needs were less likely to plan to attend higher education (66 per cent) than those without (84 per cent) and more likely to plan to attend FET (15 per cent) than students without SEN (8 per cent). Among SEN groups, young adults with a specific learning disability (73 per cent) or a physical disability (73 per cent) were most likely to plan for HE and those with a general or intellectual need least likely (54 per cent).

3.6 Higher Education

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) collects and compiles disability data through the Equal Access Survey (EAS) and Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD). These data do not allow for tracking of students before or after their course and insights into their choice processes. Additional data on participation rates and experiences of students engaged with higher education support services are collected by AHEAD. The EAS and FSD have important distinctions. While the EAS is confined to new entrants to higher education, the FSD includes students across years in HE and FET settings. The EAS is an annual voluntary survey of first year full- and part-time undergraduate new entrants to HEA-funded colleges[39], with information gathered on disability, ethnicity (including membership of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities) and lone parenthood status. The EAS allows data disaggregation by the following disability types, broadly aligned with the Census question on disability: (1) blindness, deafness, severe vision or hearing impairment; (2) physical condition; (3) specific learning difficulty; (4) psychological/emotional condition; (5) other, including chronic illness. The FSD provides funding to HE institutions to enable service and support for students with disabilities from PLC to doctoral level. Data collected as part of the FSD include a different disability categorisation than the EAS – Table 3.4 shows the disability types and supports provided by FSD.

Table 3.4 FSD disability categories and supports

Disability Categories in FSD	Supports Provided by FSD
Autistic spectrum disorder	Assistive technology equipment and software
Attention deficit disorder Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	Non-medical helpers (e.g. personal assistants, notetakers)
Blind/vision impaired	Academic/learning support
Deaf/hard of hearing	Deaf supports (sign language interpreters, speed text)
Developmental coordination disorder (e.g. dyspraxia/dysgraphia)	Transport support
Mental health condition (e.g. bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression, severe anxiety, severe phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder, severe eating disorders and psychosis)	
Neurological condition	
Significant ongoing illness	
Speech and language communication disorder	
Physical/mobility	
Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia or dyscalculia)	

Source: FSD, Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions 2023-24.
https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/06/UK-EEA-FSD-Guidelines_2023-24_Final.pdf

In 2019-20, FSD data show 12 per cent of new entrants to HE reported having a disability. In the same year, the EAS survey reported a disability rate of 16.6 per cent with 38 per cent indicating a need for support. The most common condition reported was a specific learning difficulty, representing 5.5 per

39 Details on Equal Access Survey: https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2020/08/Equal-Access-to-Higher-Education-for-all-1.pdf

cent of new entrants; this was followed by psychological or emotional conditions, accounting for 4.6 per cent. By 2023, the disability rate had risen to 17.8 per cent, with specific learning difficulties most prevalent: 37 per cent of cases, followed by psychological or emotional conditions at 31.2 per cent[40]. In 2012-18, there was a notable increase in students with certain types of disabilities who completed the EAS. The numbers with a physical or mobility difficulty rose from 390 to 733. Similarly, those who were deaf or had a hearing impairment rose from 210 in 2012 to 312 in 2018 (HEA, nd). The most recent EAS data in 2023 shows those with a physical condition are most disadvantaged, with 13.9 per cent from disadvantaged areas[41]. Just under 30 per cent of new entrants who stated having a disability entered HE through the DARE scheme in 2023.

Data collected as part of the FSD is used to estimate disability prevalence among HE students, limited to FSD-eligible students. In 2015, 7.8 per cent of new HE entrants had a disability rising to 10 per cent by 2018 and 12.3 per cent in 2019 (Department of Education, 2020). In 2017-18, 11,773 students were getting the FSD rising to 14,358 in 2019-20 (based on HEA-provided data).

AHEAD has been surveying students registered with disabilities[42] at higher education institutions since 1993. The survey's 2023-24 edition collected data on the following disability types: specific learning difficulty; mental health condition; significant ongoing illness; Asperger's/autism; DCD – dyspraxia; ADD/ADHD; neurological/speech and language; physical disability; blind/visually impaired; deaf/hard of hearing; other.

While specific estimates vary between the EAS, FSD and AHEAD, data collected by AHEAD in 2022-23 match EAS and FSD findings that show students with a specific learning difficulty (38.8 per cent) and mental health condition (21.7 per cent) remain the two most prevalent disability types at HE institutions in Ireland (AHEAD, 2024). Mental health difficulties rose notably from 14 per cent in 2017 to 22 per cent in 2022-23. Data over time reveal a continuous increase in both the percentage and the number of undergraduate and graduate students registered with Disability Support Services (DSS). The figure has risen from 0.7 per cent in 1993-94 (990 students) to 6.9 per cent in 2021-22 (18,097 students), and further increased to 7.4 per cent in 2022-23 (20,351 students) (AHEAD, 2023b, 2024). Meanwhile. the student-to-staff ratio in DSS has increased from 97:1 in 2012-13 to 139:1 in 2022-23. In 2022-23, there were 4,773 new registrations with DSS across all participating HE institutions, accounting for 23.5 per cent of all students registered with the service. However, around 11.8 per cent (2,406 students) registered with services were not eligible for FSD funding. In 2022-23, there was an 8.3 per cent increase in new undergraduate entrant[43] registered with disability supports across all participating institutions, rising to 7.8 per cent (4,773 out of 60,050) from the previous year's 7.2 per cent.

40 https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/student-disability-data-2023/

41 https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/students/widening-participation-for-equity-of-access/student-disability-data-2023/

42 AHEAD acknowledges that the term 'students with disabilities' specifically refers to students with disabilities registered with disability support/access services in higher education. Students with disabilities who have not disclosed this to their institution in any capacity or registered for support are not captured or represented in the AHEAD study.

43 According to AHEAD (2024), new entrants are defined as students entering HEA-funded institutions in the first year of an undergraduate course, as per the AHEAD survey distributed to responding HEIs. https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/AHEAD_Research_Report_23_digital_supplied.pdf

On the participation rate, the 2021-22 report (AHEAD, 2023b) identified an annual increase in under- and postgraduate students, a trend that continues in the 2022-23 data. Postgraduate participation remains persistently low, however, compared to undergraduate participation. In 2022-23, 18,447 undergraduates were registered with disability supports, representing 8.5 per cent of all undergraduates and 91 per cent of all students engaged with DSS. This is a 5 per cent increase in participation from the previous year. In contrast, only 3.2 per cent of all postgraduate students (1,904) were registered with disability supports, a 5 per cent rise from the previous year, representing 9 per cent of all students engaged with DSS. This persistent under-representation at postgraduate level can further hinder labour market participation for disabled graduates. In 2022-23, 1,500 mature students registered with disability supports, representing 7.4 per cent of all disabled students and 5.7 per cent of all mature students (N= 26,175).

Given the prevalence of intellectual disability among young adults in Ireland, a number of initiatives are in place to provide educational and employment opportunities particularly for those with an intellectual disability. In February 2024, the Minister for DFHERIS Simon Harris TD announced the introduction of higher education courses for students with intellectual disabilities across ten colleges in Ireland, alongside a €1.8 million fund for inclusion measures such as sensory maps for learners with autism and anti-racism initiatives (see details in Section 1.3).

3.7 Further Education and Training

The Programme and Learner Support System (PLSS) includes data on FET courses and learners, including information on disability status and type. In line with 2016 Census disability categories, respondents are asked: Do you have any of the following long-lasting conditions? (tick one or more) (1) Blindness or a serious vision impairment; (2) Deafness or a serious hearing impairment; (3) A difficulty with basic physical activities; (4) An intellectual disability; (5) A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating; (6) A psychological or emotional condition; (7) A difficulty with pain, breathing any other chronic illness/condition; (8) None (SOLAS, 2017). A total of 12,704 learners with at least one type of disability were enrolled in FET programmes in 2022, constituting 6.8 per cent of all learners, 63 per cent of whom were over 25. Enrolment was gendered with 57.8 per cent of disabled learners being female (SOLAS, 2023). This is in line with GUI study findings which note a higher percentage of girls planning to attend FET (Carroll et al., 2022a, 2022b). Most disabled learners (91.6 per cent) either partially or fully completed a course in 2022, with the certification rate increasing from 52.1 per cent in 2021 to 61.3 per cent in 2022.

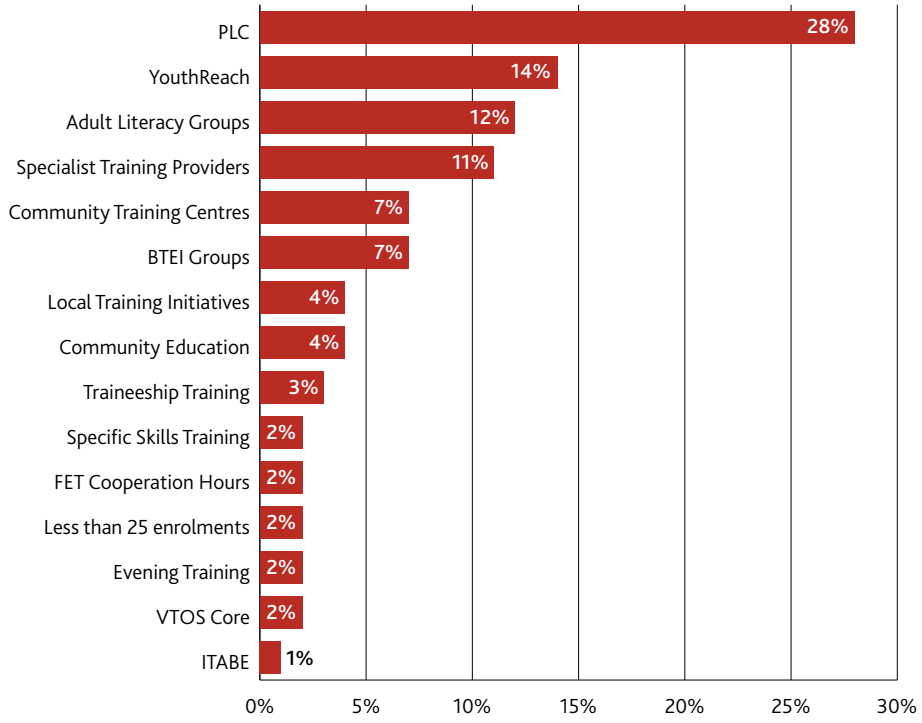
On respondents' principal economic status before enrolling in FET, most learners with a disability were either unemployed (31.1 per cent) or economically inactive (26.4 per cent)[44]. This aligns with Census results and shows this grouping less likely to be employed and more likely to be engaged in activities other than working and studying.

44 Data on prior principal economic status was not available for all respondents.

As our study centres on the post-school pathways of students transitioning from school, we further examined the under 25s using 2019 SOLAS data obtained through personal communication with SOLAS. In 2019, 4,452 learners under 25 reported a disability with over a third reporting a difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating (37 per cent), followed by learners with a psychological or emotional condition (20 per cent) or an intellectual disability (17 per cent)[45]. This is consistent with the findings from FSD, EAS and AHEAD data, with most HE students reporting a specific learning difficulty or mental health difficulty (see Section 3.6).

About 43 per cent of learners under 25 had up to lower secondary education on entry to the FET programme. Most learners with a disability were enrolled in a PLC or Youthreach course (28 per cent and 14 per cent) and were taking level 3, 4 or 5 courses (38 per cent, 25 per cent and 19 per cent) (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). Only 55 per cent of learners in this age cohort partially or fully completed their course in 2019, which is lower than the overall programme completion rate in 2019 (91.2 per cent). The certification rate was also relatively low for the under 25s (37 per cent vs 62.4 per cent for the full population). In terms of the principal economic status for learners with a disability under 25, despite the slightly higher proportion of learners under 25 studying or working as a trainee compared to the overall rate (31 per cent vs 14.7 per cent), most learners in this cohort were either economically inactive (28 per cent) or unemployed (28 per cent).

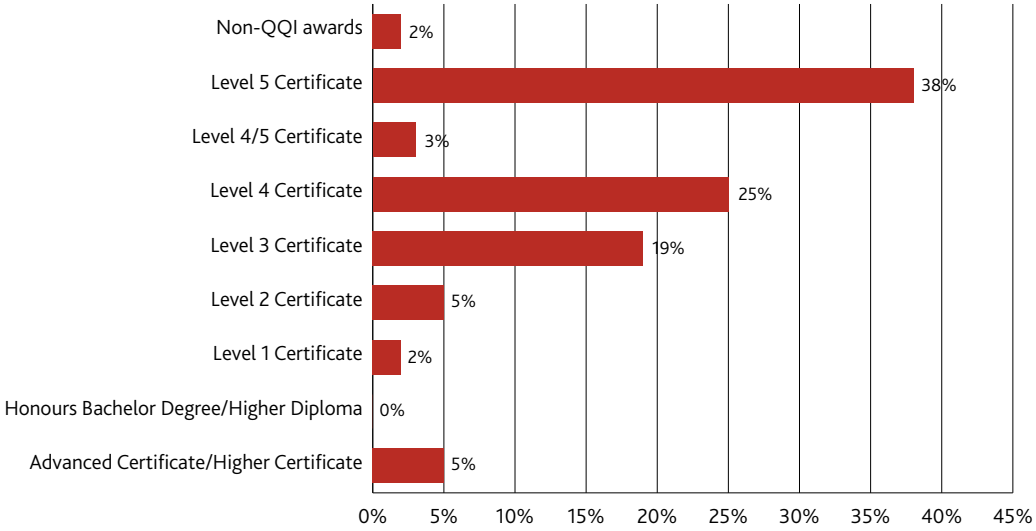
Figure 3.6 Learners with a disability under 25 years old by education programme 2019



Data source: SOLAS, 2022, personal communication.

45 Learners here are unique within each type of disability but not necessarily across disabilities.

Figure 3.7 Learners with a disability under 25 years old by course level 2019



Data source: SOLAS, 2022, personal communication.

3.8 National Ability Support Systems Database

The National Ability Support Systems Database (NASS), managed by the Health Research Board (HRB) on behalf of the Department of Health and the HSE, includes information on use of and need for disability-funded services as well as personal details (including sex, age and ethnicity), disability diagnosis, information on employment status and a standardised WHO measure, the WHODAS (WHO Disability Assessment Schedule) (HSE and HRB, 2019). The NASS is expected to improve the data landscape on Ireland's disability services (Mac Domhnaill et al., 2020). Two previous datasets, the National Intellectual Disability Database (NIDD) and the National Physical and Sensory Disability Database (NPSDD), have merged into NASS (Brick et al., 2020).

The NIDD was set up in 1995 to capture data on usage of and need for specialist disability services among people with intellectual disability. It collected data on current service provision (type and frequency of service as well as provider information) and future service requirements. Personal details included date of birth, gender and area of residence as well as level of intellectual disability (recorded as 'mild', 'moderate', 'severe', 'profound' or 'not verified'). Administrative details about the service provider and HSE area responsible for returning data were also collected. Service providers, HSE personnel and school principals completing a form for each individual enrolled with them delivered this information.

In 2017, the final year of data input to the NIDD, 27,894 individuals were registered, including 3,271 aged 15-19 and 6,477 aged 20-34 (HRB, 2017a, p2). Within the 15-19 category, 1,396 were registered as mild, 1,293 as moderate, 346 as severe and 59 as profound, with 177 not verified. In 2017, among those aged 18 or over, 1,279 people with mild intellectual disabilities were in residential settings and 4,917 in day settings, while 6,122 with moderate, severe or profound intellectual disabilities were in residential settings and 6,579 were in day settings (HRB, 2017a, p. 16).

Among those aged 18 or over, the most common principal day service was Activation Centres (8,242), followed by sheltered work centres (2,250), multidisciplinary support services (1,625) and rehabilitative training (1,406) (HRB, 2017a, p.18), all four accounted for 71 per cent of over 18s. In total, 283 over 18s were recorded as being in vocational training, with 84 in third-level education and 264 in 'open employment'.

In 2002, the NPSDD, administered by the HSE, started collecting data on usage of and need for specialist disability services among people with physical and sensory disabilities. It collected data on service use and future service needs as well as technical aids and appliances, challenges and barriers, a measure of participation restriction and functional impairment information based on the World Health Organisation Disability Assessment Schedule II (WHODAS II). Personal details included date of birth, gender, location, primary carer information and accommodation details.

In 2017, the last year for which data were collected, 20,676 individuals were registered, only 9,956 of whom had been registered or reviewed in the period 2013-17 (older records are excluded from analysis in the 2017 report, see HRB, 2017b). In total 879 were aged 18-24, with 413 recorded as being in the 'nervous systems' primary diagnostic categorisation, 94 in 'ear complaints', 84 in 'communication', 70 in 'musculoskeletal system', 59 in 'eye complaints' and 57 in 'respiratory system' (HRB, 2017b, p10). Of the 776 individuals aged 18-24 with a primary carer listed, mother/father was listed as the carer in 97 per cent of cases (HRB, 2017b, p14).

The NASS data record the following disability types, for primary or secondary disabilities:

- intellectual
- autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- deaf blind – dual sensory
- developmental delay (under ten years only)
- hearing loss and/or deafness; neurological
- physical; specific learning disorder (other than intellectual)
- speech and/or language
- visual; mental health
- not verified.

Additional information is collected on the degree of an intellectual disability as well as information on any record of diagnosis (HRB, nd).

In 2023, **31,698 adults** aged 18 and over were registered on NASS, 54 per cent of whom were male. Among those aged 18-34, the proportion of males was higher (63 per cent males vs 37 per cent females).[46] There was a 10 per cent increase in the number of adults reviewed on NASS in 2023 compared to 2022 (31,698 in 2023 and 28,859 in 2022). The primary disability types reported in 2023 were: intellectual disability (60 per cent) neurological disability (17 per cent) and autism (7 per cent). Additionally, half of adults (51 per cent) with a primary disability had another recorded. The most common additional types were physical disability (16 per cent), speech and language disability (10 per cent) and autism (6 per cent) (Casey et al., 2024).

In terms of employment status, the percentage of those aged 18 or over unable to work due to disability decreased from 34 per cent in 2022 to 28 per cent in 2023. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate remained relatively stable, with 10 per cent in 2022 and 9 per cent in 2023. However, a notable trend emerged: the percentage of adults aged over 18 in paid employment increased significantly from 5.3 per cent in 2019 to 11 per cent in 2023. Similarly, the proportion of those aged 18 engaged in training or day programmes rose from 21.4 per cent in 2019 to 41 per cent in 2023.

In 2022, among the population of NASS registered users for whom ethnic/cultural background information was available, 95 per cent were Irish, consistent with findings from the Census. Ethnic/cultural background information was not available in the 2023 NASS research bulletin (Casey et al., 2023).

Casey et al. (2021) report on data for 2020, noting progress in relation to coverage, and that NASS has expanded to include people with a primary disability of autism. In 2023, a total of 19,453 adults (61 per cent) accessed either a day programme (17,752) or rehabilitative training (1,917). Furthermore, 7,799 adults accessed residential services, with most having some form of intellectual disability (7,045 adults). An additional 5,534 adults received assisted living services. Regarding support services, over half (53 per cent) received at least one service from either a multidisciplinary team or a specialised disability service in 2023. Specifically, 10,000 adults with an intellectual disability received one or more support services. The most accessed services included social work (4,097), nursing (3,804) and speech and language therapy (3,584).

The 2023 NASS data also highlighted new services required for 2023-28, as identified by service providers. A total of 3,110 adults required support services, with physiotherapy (683), occupational therapy (625) and speech and language therapy (567) being the most cited. Additionally, 1,932 adults were identified as needing residential services while 624 required assisted living services.

46 This is calculated from the total number of males and females aged 18-34 (6,761 males and 4,104 females), and the total number of males and females registered on NASS (17,170 males and 14,528 females), in 2023 NASS Research Bulletin: https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2._Plugin_related_files/Publications/2024_Publications/NASS_2024/NASS_2023_bulletin.pdf

3.9 Educational Longitudinal Database

The Educational Longitudinal Dataset (ELD) is a CSO statistical framework produced by matching existing datasets on learners (including data provided by the State Examinations Commission [SEC], HEA, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, and SOLAS) with datasets on their outcomes in subsequent years (e.g. data from the Revenue Commissioners, benefits data from the DSP) (CSO, nd)[47]. The ELD, part of the National Data Infrastructure (NDI) and a pathfinder projects activity, has been used to prepare the 2010-14 and 2010-16 Higher Education Outcomes reports (CSO, 2018). In the future, it may be linked to the POD and P-POD and allow tracking of post-school outcomes for special school students and those from special classes and in mainstream classes. At the time of publication, the Research Microdata Files of the ELD are not available to researchers. The first report in this pathfinder programme (2021) focused on the cohort who sat their LC (or equivalent) in 2016 (CSO, 2021). The education chapter looks at the pathways taken by young people with a disability. SEC data are used for LC students, while further and higher education data are derived from the HEA, SOLAS and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). In 2016, 57,290 people sat the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied, with 4,760 candidates recorded with a disability. Eleven per cent of them sat the LCA, with this proportion ranging from 25 per cent among those with an intellectual disability to 6 per cent of those with an 'other' disability including chronic illness. In comparison, just 4 per cent of with no disability sat the LCA (Table 3.5).

Table 3.5 Leaving Certificate programme taken in 2016 by census disability status, CSO Frontier Series Output (2021)

Type of Disability	LCA %	LC %
All candidates	4.8	95.2
No disabilities	4.3	95.7
All disabilities	10.5	89.5
Blindness or serious vision impairment	13.0	87.0
Deafness or serious hearing impairment	16.7	83.3
A condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities	16.4	83.6
An intellectual disability	25.0	75.0
Difficulty in learning, remembering or concentrating	15.3	84.7
Psychological or emotional condition	9.8	90.2
Other disability, including chronic illness	5.9	94.1
Difficulty dressing, bathing or getting around inside the home	20.5	79.5
Difficulty working at a job, business or attending school or college	12.5	87.5
Difficulty going outside the home alone to shop or visit a doctor's surgery	26.6	73.4
Difficulty participating in other activities, for example leisure or using transport	15.1	84.9

Data source: CSO, Income, Employment and Welfare Analysis of People with a Disability 2019 (2021). Derived from Table 3.1: Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Exam Candidates, 2016.

47 https://www.cso.ie/en/methods/education/educationallongitudinaldatabase/educationallongitudinaldatabaseeld/#:~:text=The%20Educational%20Longitudinal%20Database%20(ELD,learner%20outcomes%20over%20many%20years

Almost 38 per cent of those with a disability did not sit Irish in the LC exam, compared to 12.5 per cent of those without. Seventeen per cent of those with a disability sat higher-level maths compared to 28 per cent without (CSO, 2021, Table 3.2). For those who took Irish, 20 per cent of those with a disability sat higher level compared to 38 per cent of those not indicating a disability on Census 2016.

In line with earlier research (McCoy et al., 2014a), those sitting the LCA programme were more likely to progress to FET than higher education. Patterns varied somewhat by disability status and among examinees three-quarters with a disability progressed to FET, compared to 63 per cent of those without (CSO, 2021, Table 3.3). Just over four in ten of all new HE entrants received either a fee or a maintenance grant or both, compared to five in ten of entrants with a disability. Those who are blind or have a severe visual impairment had the highest proportion getting a fee and maintenance grant at 55 per cent, while the lowest was 35 per cent for those with a difficulty learning, remembering or concentrating (CSO, 2021, Table 3.4). Students with a disability were less likely to enrol on an undergraduate honours degree (78 per cent) compared to those without (84 per cent), but more likely to enrol on level 6 or 7 programmes (22 per cent for students with a disability compared to 15 per cent of those without) (CSO, 2021, Table 3.6).

For the FET sector, almost 26 per cent of all SOLAS students with a disability studied generic programmes and qualifications (including basic programmes and qualifications, literacy and numeracy, and personal skills and development), based on the ISCED classification. This was the most prevalent course category among those with an intellectual disability, accounting for 44 per cent of students. Table 3.6 displays the breakdown of SOLAS programme participants by disability status and generic versus specialised programme participation (including Business, Administration and Law; Health and Welfare; Services; Education; and Arts and Humanities).

Table 3.6 SOLAS programme type by census disability status, CSO Frontier Series Output (2021)

Type of Disability	Generic Programme per cent	Specialised Programme %
All SOLAS enrolled	48.0	52.0
All disabilities	25.9	74.1
Blindness or serious vision impairment	22.4	77.6
Deafness or serious hearing impairment	23.5	76.5
A condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities	28.0	72.0
An intellectual disability	44.0	56.0
Difficulty in learning, remembering or concentrating	32.7	67.3
Psychological or emotional condition	27.2	72.8
Other disability, including chronic illness	21.4	78.6
Difficulty dressing, bathing or getting around inside the home	34.4	65.6
Difficulty working at a job, business or attending school or college	31.3	68.7
Difficulty going outside the home alone to shop or visit a doctor's surgery	39.3	60.7
Difficulty participating in other activities, for example leisure or using transport	31.8	68.2

Data source: CSO, Income, Employment and Welfare Analysis of People with a Disability 2019 (2021). Derived from Table 3.9 SOLAS students enrolled in 2019 by ISCED Course Categories and Disability Type.

3.10 Summary

The increasing availability of administrative data brings a step-change in social research, providing new and potentially valuable prospects of examining trends across a range of policy areas.

Our review has highlighted the potential for greater usage of existing administrative and survey data in the Irish context, particularly in understanding the school and post-school experiences of young people with special educational needs. This has been identified as a challenge across many countries. As Brussino (2020) noted, despite considerable progress in implementing policy approaches aimed at promoting the well-being of students with additional needs within and outside the classroom, countries still often lack robust monitoring and evaluation systems of SEN policies and statistics on these students/young people. He suggests that countries should put greater effort into developing and implementing robust SEN policy monitoring and evaluation. This should include efforts to improve national and international statistics on students in need of support and empirical evidence on the intersectionality of SEN with other dimensions of diversity in education (p.63-64).

Our analysis of Irish data has underlined wide variation in how SEN and disability are currently defined and categorised across key data sources in Ireland, often reflecting variation in the purposes the data serve. As shown in Table A1.1 (see appendix), different data sources use different categorisations to identify people with disabilities. While the identification of those with blindness or vision impairment is possible across most data sources, the categorisation of learning disabilities or mental health difficulties is more variable. Within data sources, definitions change over time. All of this makes comparisons between them difficult. While this may also explain why SEN and disability estimates vary between data sources, using different disaggregation criteria may be another reason for the different estimates. Our review suggests that it may be possible to create greater harmonisation by focusing on a few main SEN/disability types. This could include sensory, physical, learning, intellectual and mental health disabilities. This approach brings its own issues, however. In particular, variation within each category is significant, in the type of impairment involved, in the kind of support needed and the complexity of need. There are also questions of categorisation for conditions like autism which do not fit entirely into any of the above categories and may manifest differently in different young people or co-occur with other impairments or disabilities.

Overall, this review shows that the opportunity to track students from special schools into postsecondary pathways is limited based on the data currently collected across existing (administrative) datasets (see Appendix Table 1.2). Similarly, the potential to identify students with special educational needs from second-level schools is also limited currently. The integration of multiple data sources, for example as part of the Educational Longitudinal Database, offers a potential way to track individuals over time and across outcomes, particularly once key indicators are collected from primary and second-level schools.

The analysis suggests disabled young people are on the whole pursuing different post-school pathways than their non-disabled peers, though with significant variation by type of impairment and at the individual level. These young people are over-represented in FET and under-represented in HE, while many are engaging with services specifically for disabled people as recorded in the NASS. As well as these pathways, however, the data sources above suggest a significant proportion of disabled young people are NEET and are thus not on any particular pathway. The tracking of individuals across administrative datasets will be crucial in better understanding risk factors common among these young people to better target policy to prevent them from falling through the cracks.

The analysis has also highlighted wide diversity across key education data sources in how disability is defined and categorised. In drawing on Census data on self-reported disabilities, across seven main types, recent CSO Pathfinder analysis (CSO, 2021) provides one avenue to explore levels of progression to key education settings, including HE and FET. This approach could be further expanded by developing POD and P-POD systems to include individual indicators relating to receipt of additional supports and placement in special classes. This could potentially allow a mapping of the post-school educational and labour market trajectories of young adults getting different types of supports and in different school and class settings and would provide valuable insights for policy.

The next chapters present the extensive mixed methods longitudinal study of young adults with special educational needs across school and post-school education and training settings. As well as surveys of young adults, qualitative interviews with those taking different pathways and key stakeholders were conducted. The evidence provides rich insights into the plans, decision-making, school and post-school experiences of those with varying types and complexity of need. The research engages in depth with students on pathways that have not received sufficient focus so far. The use of a mixed methods approach and a range of secondary data sources allows us to engage with both the wider picture of post-school transitions for young adults with disabilities and the nuance of individual pathways.

CHAPTER 4

Reflections on School and Preparedness for Leaving School

4.1 Introduction

Employing quantitative and qualitative evidence, here we examine students' reflections on their school experiences and preparedness for leaving across diverse settings, including mainstream/special schools and various post-school situations. We begin with results from the initial wave of the School Leavers' Survey in mainstream schools as well as in-depth individual interviews with young adults. We then explore findings from the case study research in special schools, the longitudinal research with special school leavers and from the PLC learners' survey that includes those who report with and without a special educational need or disability.

The School Leavers' Survey began in May-June 2022 when sixth-year students identified by the SEN coordinator or school leader as receiving additional help or having a SEN (using a broad definition that includes learning, physical, emotional or other SEN) were invited to participate. The first three waves of Cohort '98 data from the GUI study were used to benchmark our school leaver sample to the national population. Detailed survey and qualitative measures examine school experiences, supports received and post-school planning and transition, from the perspectives of students, their parents and teachers. These data informed development of semi-structured interview schedules and completion of 20 in-depth interviews with students across diverse school contexts and post-school pathways (including higher education, FET, gap year, direct entry to the labour market and NEET status).

Case study research in eight special schools explore student reflections on preparations for leaving and their school experiences. These schools serve a diversity of SEN and disabilities (including physical, intellectual and sensory) along with a diversity of geographic locations and catchment areas across the state.

4.2 Second-Level School Experiences

4.2.1 Programme Provision in Mainstream Schools

Senior Cycle Experiences

The Transition Year (TY) programme is a valuable bridge between Junior and Senior Cycles with opportunities for personal development, diverse learning experiences and exposure to potential career paths. Over seven in ten availed of it, somewhat lower in DEIS schools, and two-thirds found it helpful. Mainstream students and those attending post-school settings (e.g. in PLC and NLN settings), reflected on their final-year programme. The vast majority in mainstream schools and those enrolled in PLC courses, took the LC with smaller numbers taking the LCA. Those on NLN programmes were much more likely to take the latter followed by the Junior Certificate and 'other' programmes.

Given the PLC Survey's scale, we are able to investigate the uptake of final-year programmes and find strong associations between programme choice and individual and family characteristics. A higher proportion of girls and those with no experience of economic difficulties took the LC. Those reporting multiple conditions were considerably less likely to take the LC. Conversely, greater numbers of boys (22.5 per cent vs 14.6 per cent of girls), those with economic difficulties and those with multiple conditions took the LCA programme.

PLC students were asked to reflect on their final-year programme experiences. Concerns were expressed about the emphasis on exams and the pressures created. Most (strongly) agreed there was too much to remember (86 per cent) or too much writing involved (71 per cent), and the exam schedule was too demanding (64 per cent). Only a third (strongly) agreed their grades reflected their ability (33 per cent). Pressure to perform better was acknowledged by nearly eight in ten students, mainly from themselves (70 per cent) and teachers (58 per cent) and less so from their parents (33 per cent) (Figure 4.1).

It is concerning that close to three in ten PLC students regretted their final-year choice (27.7 per cent). In particular, girls and those with less positive school engagement were more likely to express regret. Reasons typically centred around excessive workload, dominance of rote learning and stress in exam preparation.

> *It is unrealistic for people to remember so much information for a set of exams. It is unfair to put so much pressure on young people to do well in a few exams that for the most part determine what they are going to do in life (PLC Students' Survey).*

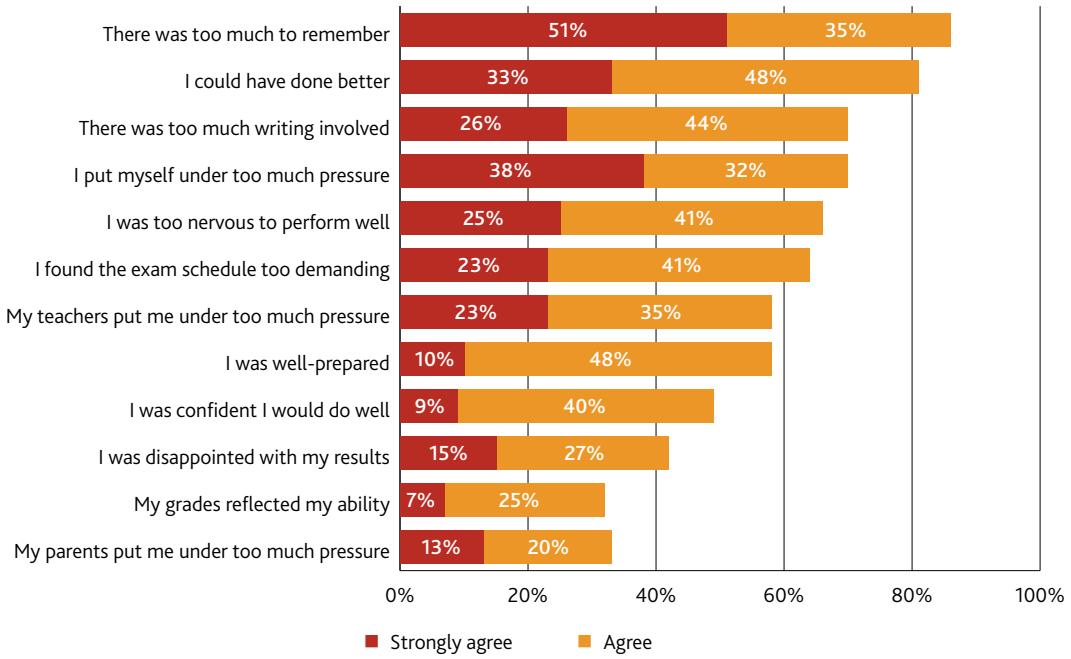
> *I think the LC is quite outdated. There aren't any real modern skills being taught... too much pressure on students to perform extremely well in the exams however, they do not prepare students for life after school (PLC Students' Survey).*

Taking the LC and going on to higher education, at least up to recently, is still perceived as a default option for most students, while FET is seen as second-best (McCoy et al., 2019).

> *…The expectation of having to go to college or university after the LC is huge, often other alternatives are considered 'worst case scenario' and pushed to the back; I only heard of a PLC at the end of 6th year, but as a plan B option (PLC Students' Survey).*

Students increasingly valued practical skills developed by programmes such as the LCA and apprenticeships especially after experiencing PLC programmes. They felt the traditional LC 'wasn't for me', '[LC] was too old-fashioned'. Some felt '…I could have possibly succeeded better in LCA' and 'I would have preferred to get an apprenticeship rather than a Bachelor's degree'.

Figure 4.1 PLC students' final-year programme experiences at school, in %



Data source: PLC Students' Survey. N=742

When PLC students reflected on how they were prepared for the future, sizeable differences were found. Students not reporting a SEN were much more likely to feel prepared (65.4 per cent vs 52.5 per cent). Students with degree educated parents and those not experiencing economic difficulties were more likely to feel prepared. Differences between students according to school engagement were also notable, with much more positive responses found among those who liked school, had better relationships with their teachers and those encouraged by teachers to continue their education, compared with their peers. Similar trends were observed in student reflections on their confidence in doing well, with notably more positive responses found among those who did not report a SEN, experienced no economic difficulties and those with more positive school engagement.

Clear gaps in gender and SEN emerged when it came to internalised pressure. Girls were much more likely to feel they were too nervous to perform well (68.8 per cent vs 58.2 per cent boys), and that they put themselves under too much pressure (74.9 per cent vs 56.8 per cent boys). Similarly, students reporting a special educational need, especially those with multiple conditions were much more likely to feel they were too nervous to perform well or put themselves under too much pressure (74.6 per cent those with multiple conditions vs 65.8 per cent those with a single condition vs 58.3 per cent of those with no condition felt they were too nervous to perform well). A sizeable proportion reporting multiple conditions indicated their parents (40 per cent) and teachers (67 per cent) put them under too much pressure.

4.2.2 Programme Provision in Special Schools

Given the distinct profile of special school students, particularly in the complexity and diversity of their needs, course and programme provision in the case study here is captured using a qualitative approach with school leaders and teachers. Interviewees were asked about the main curricular provision for their school leavers. Curricular and programme provision varied within and across schools, with many reporting a 'mixed profile of need in their school' and tailoring provision accordingly. Taking a few sample case studies illustrates this diversity. In one school there was a strong focus on JC curricular provision:

> *Students are presenting with more complex needs so more often than not they will do the Junior Cycle programme at level 1, 2 or 3. We have the rare student that is able to manage Leaving Cert and we had one student who took [two subjects] in the Leaving Cert last year (Principal).*

The interviews revealed a diversity of views on the adequacy and effectiveness of provision. Overall, reflections on the relatively new level 1 and 2 JC programmes were very positive and school personnel welcomed their introduction:

> *...All the work that was being done over the years, all the differentiation, all the supported work to enable students to achieve some elements of the programmes that were on offer were now acknowledged. It is about breaking down the learning targets into attainable units … you are suddenly giving our students an acknowledgement and a certification for what they can do … I think it's wonderful (Principal).*

One school was preparing to introduce levels 1 and 2, with teachers completing professional development programmes with the then Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST). While some provided the JC level 3 programme, they raised concerns over the move to common levels:

> *...Most of our kids would have managed … foundation maths and now it is a common paper … The common paper does not work. You can't have them all set at the one level … there should have been a different level in terms of papers given (Principal).*

One school runs the JCSP although predominantly for students at an earlier stage, with positive feedback reported again: 'I think the JCSP programme is very good at the earlier age of developing those independence and social skills' (Principal).

The LCA programme was offered in several special schools, while others felt that either they were not in a position to do so or their students would be unable to engage given its nature. One school recently introduced the LCA programme, as it was felt the JC was not sufficiently meeting their students' needs:

> *We feel JC level 3 is not offering enough, it's not giving our students enough for when they leave school … when we researched the LCA, because it's continuous assessment, you get 90 per cent credits for attendance and the programmes we have picked are tailored to suit the students ... and plus when they are finished it opens up more opportunities (Principal).*

School leaders and teachers reflected very positively on the LCA programme where it was provided. The LCA 'is a fantastic preparation in terms of preparing students for leaving, that's really what it's about. Preparing them as in governmental, banking, getting their own place, brushing up their mathematics, their English, life skills, it's all in that programme' (Teacher). Especially noted were support provided by PDST, 'we would be lost without them', and that received from other special schools offering the LCA programme, and the particular adaptations and provisions introduced. There was a sense that more DE guidance would be beneficial: 'it would be great if someone could send us a package and say "these are your options" or "have you considered this"' (Teacher).

School leavers and their parents reflected positively: 'LCA is great, my daughter is doing LCA and she finds it amazing.' They highlighted a need for its wider availability in special schools and that it would have been a better fit for their child than the JC. But there were concerns about the organisation of work experience for LCA students and a fear that while local businesses will be supportive, they will not have the resources to offer additional supports. In addition, schools are not in a position to provide staff to support students on placement. SNAs had supported students on out-of-school activities in the past, but they felt these activities were not now covered by insurance. The potential to provide a full LCA programme while following the primary school day was also questioned. Two school leavers and their parents highlighted limitations in the subject range available to them in the LCA programme, noting the absence of home economics, Irish or modern foreign languages. Other school leaders felt many special schools were 'not fit for purpose' and for that reason offering the LCA would be challenging. Other schools expressed a difficulty in running several programmes in a single classroom and resource adequacy to support such tailored provision:

> *Our day is quite short, we can do it, but it's not your typical Leaving Cert day and that's just the nature of the special school. It's something that moving forward has to be considered … Can there be an allowance with the LCA for special schools? … timetabling and time is of the essence (Principal).*

This school was mindful of students for whom the LCA was unsuitable and they were in the process of identifying alternative programmes for those at this upper secondary stage:

> *What we present [in relation to LCA] is a universal design for learning, so it is accessible to all, we differentiate and we communicate with parents because some parents would be very exam oriented and others not so much … Going forward the co-ordinator has looked at another leavers' programme that might be an alternative to the LCA (Principal).*

A similar school provided the LCA for some students and an alternative Learning for Living programme it had devised. For most case study schools there was a strong focus on transition preparation that was additional to mainstream Junior and Senior Cycle curricular provision.

Another school was not in a position to offer the LCA due to a lack of specialist teachers. Concern was expressed about lack of provision for students at SC stage that would leave them with no qualification beyond the Junior Cert. In the past students in some schools had attended neighbouring schools to take a specific LC subject/activity but these activities had ceased as they had no available staff to accompany students on school visits.

In some schools parents too raised concern over the absence of a terminal exam and the lack of finality to their school experience:

> *I would have liked some finality (LCA exams) to finish with … If there was some practicals or some questions and answers or even an oral test, something that showcased skills but something that could kind of wrap up things, a finishing point, rather than a phasing out. So they could show their results (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

School leaders raised concern over the SC review and the need to greater emphasise the views and needs of special schools. Future directions should include more flexibility, moving from a three- to a two-year programme as many students take four years to complete JC, along with better follow-on provision, particularly for students taking levels 1 and 2.

4.3 School-Based Experiences

School experiences are fundamental to the post-school pathways students take, both in equipping them to progress onto it and in defining the options they can conceive of themselves following. The themes in this section focus on both aspects of school's role in preparing students for life beyond school. Their overall perceptions of school are explored to show how affective and cognitive engagement with it inform their preconceptions and conceptions of post-school pathways.

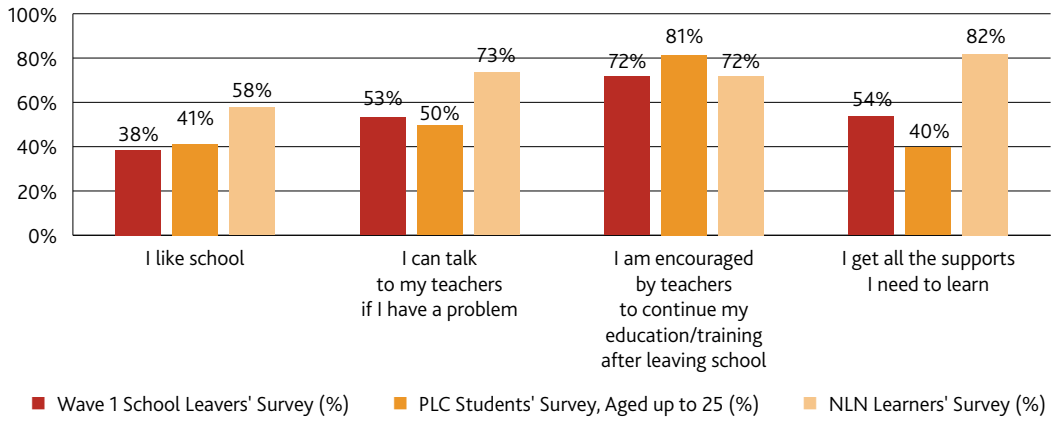
4.3.1 Student Perceptions of Mainstream Schools

Figure 4.2 shows responses to a series of questions on how students reflect on their school experiences in school and post-school settings. Specific questions may vary in different surveys with a different focus in each. Just under four in ten final year students in mainstream schools (strongly) agreed they liked school (38.4 per cent), most were positive about making friends and over half (strongly) agreed they could talk to teachers if they had a problem (53.2 per cent). Just over a third 'find it hard to understand their teacher'. Responses were similar among PLC students with about 41 per cent liking school and 50 per cent revealing their willingness to approach teachers for help. NLN students showed more positive responses with nearly six in ten liking school and over seven in ten being open to seeking help from their teachers.

The school leavers with special educational needs appeared somewhat more positive about supports and information available at school. For example, over half believed they could get all the supports they needed to learn, compared to 40 per cent among PLC students (SEN and non-SEN). Over eight in ten NLN learners (strongly) agreed they received all supports needed. The large differences in the perceived adequacy of school supports might be partly attributed to the visibility of their needs.

Over 70 per cent of final year mainstream and NLN students felt encouraged to pursue further education, with PLC students surpassing at 81 per cent. This is likely to reflect PLC students being surveyed after transitioning into further education. However, the evidence points to the importance of encouragement from teachers/school in shaping their decisions on post-school pathways.

Figure 4.2 Second-level experiences of students in mainstream schools, PLC colleges and NLN centres, % of students who (strongly) agreed



Data Source: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1, PLC Students' Survey, NLN Learners' Survey.

The school leavers' survey results indicate that school engagement levels in terms of liking school are more closely associated with socioeconomic background than individual characteristics such as gender or reported SEN status. A particular gap is evident between DEIS and non-DEIS schools with negative attitudes towards school reported by 69 per cent of those in DEIS and 56 per cent in non-DEIS schools in line with national samples in the GUI study (69 per cent of DEIS and 78 per cent of non-DEIS students reported liking school). Despite many survey respondents expressing a positive attitude towards school, nearly as many gave a 'neutral' response or said they did not like school. Interviews explored this in greater detail, though it should be noted that most interviewees said they had liked school. This could be because interviewees volunteered to participate, potentially creating a selection bias where those more positive about school were more likely to volunteer or it could be a result of the format, with interviewees more likely to give a positive answer when asked in person compared to an online survey.

The main things students interviewed reported liking about school were the social aspects, the feeling of belonging to a community and their enjoyment of specific subjects. Socially, they mentioned school's importance as a place to make and spend time with friends, friends who they were mostly still in touch with at the time of post-school interviews. The positive impact of school as a place where students were treated as respected and valued members of the community was evident in different ways across several interviews. For some it was bound up with supports available to them in school, particularly with how they were decided on. Genuine student involvement in the process made them feel much more part of the school community rather than a process they felt they had no part in. For others, the school's general atmosphere, promoted by staff and upheld by students was key with particular value placed on a 'good comfortable environment where you can be yourself' (School Leaver), 'whole-student supportive' schools (School Leaver) and 'student-led' schools (School Leaver).

Several reported liking the academic side of school with emphasis on their Senior Cycle years. The chance to focus on subjects of interest in greater detail, the practical components of favourite subjects and the chance to study subjects at a more challenging but rewarding level were all highlighted as positives. One student who completed the LCA said school became much more enjoyable when they started the LCA.

Interestingly, the main things they reported disliking about school were effectively mirror aspects of things other students liked. Several mentioned school's social challenges, issues with the school community and unhappiness with the academic side. Others linked their negative social experiences in school with their special educational needs, seeing themselves as excluded or othered by being labelled or receiving obvious supports such as an SNA. Issues with the school community were also linked with students' SEN in cases where they spoke of having no say in the supports they could access. Beyond this, several interviewees felt their school placed an excessive focus on academic results to the detriment of their overall development and, for some, their mental wellbeing. Some chafed against the lack of freedom in their day-to-day school lives, with survey responses looking forward to 'Not being controlled', 'Not getting in trouble for the stupidest things' and even 'Not asking to go to the toilet'.

Academically, some responses pointed to structural reasons for not enjoying school. Several preferred hands-on, practical learning to the book-based academic version school offered. One interviewee argued that a genuine vocational path similar to that available in Germany would give them and students like them a better chance of thriving at school. Even some students happy with the overall shape of the current SC were dissatisfied with the level of choice available, in particular for compulsory maths and Irish.

In terms of survey responses to whether students received sufficient supports to learn at school, significant differences were found by student gender, special class attendance, DEIS school attendance and parent educational level. Boys revealed a slightly more positive response than girls. Students attending a special class were more positive with about two-thirds (strongly) agreeing they got all the supports they needed to learn (64.9 per cent), compared to half of students in mainstream classes. While 46 per cent of DEIS students agreed they received adequate help at school, this compared to almost 60 per cent of non-DEIS students. Additionally, those with at least one degree-educated parent, an indicator of family resources, were more likely to agree they had received the supports needed to learn.

When PLC students reflected on their school experiences, students reporting a special educational need, those with non-degree educated parents, or from economically vulnerable families and those with less positive interactions with their teachers were less likely to report positive school engagement compared to their peers. Likewise, students reporting a SEN, especially those with multiple conditions, were less likely to report being encouraged to pursue post-school education or training and to feel adequately supported. Additionally, they were more likely to find the subjects available did not suit them.

4.3.2 Student Perception of Special Schools

Young adults that attended special school and their parents reflected positively on their time there and were happy with supports received, be that learning, social or transition support. They displayed strong connections with staff and were looking forward to touring the school to catch up. 'This school was great, they helped her a lot' (Parent and Special School Leaver), school 'was my favourite place', 'I loved school', were some sentiments expressed. One young man with an intellectual disability spoke excitedly about his enjoyment of school, and how much he missed the 'wonderful staff and students'. He talked about enjoying his classmates' birthdays and his birthday, 'they celebrated everything' (added his mother). 'There was great activities, [the school was] very very fitness orientated, they went on school tours, went on trips … you went on soccer tournaments … they did music, they did acting, they did plays … You couldn't praise the school enough' (Mother and Special School Leaver). 'I liked to learn everything' the young man said, enjoying the wide diversity of curricular and extra-curricular activities at this school.

Another spoke about the different subjects and activities he enjoyed at school. He liked the woodwork room best and enjoyed activities in the LCA programme, which he felt suited him. He made 'really good friends' during LCA, but he did not know where those friends were now he had left. There appeared to be a disconnect for some in being able to stay in contact with school friends, particularly where they progressed to different settings/localities. In reflecting on his teachers, he considered them to be 'great' and he 'got on well with them', as well as with his SNA. He participated in lots of sports, and particularly enjoyed playing soccer. He spoke about overcoming a fear of public speaking at school after his mother phoned his teacher who offered to support him. The teacher stood with the young adult to support him in speaking to his classmates and he proudly conveyed how he had countered his fear and 'did it', concluding that nothing phased him now, 'not anymore'.

School leavers in the longitudinal study reflected positively on academic and social aspects of their special school experiences:

> *I like school, just hanging out with my friends. I am doing exams this year and I am going to ace them. I am doing exams in English and woodwork. I like working with my hands. In English I am doing novels, plays and films … We do soccer, basketball, I like those, way better than class (Special School Leaver).*

A number of school leavers commented on the school bus and how they enjoyed that routine every day. One with an intellectual disability travelled with an escort. He spoke with joy about the social experience of being on the school bus and the friends he made, adult and student alike. Travelling on a school bus provided a sense of routine, consistency and social connection for the young adults, something they missed when they left school.

In general, school leavers and their parents reflected positively on their experiences in a special school setting and felt it was preferable to a mainstream one. For some, they had experienced both settings and the move to a special school was an important turning point in placing them in an environment where they felt included:

> *She had the most amazing experiences … great staff, great teachers, but not perfect. I am very glad she attended a special school … You are a real part of the community, you are not walking around with an adult SNA all day, not feeling part of anything (Parent of Special School Leaver in Day Services).*

> *From the minute he went in [to special school] he said 'I have friends now mommy'. And I said but the lads were so good to you in primary school and he said 'they were good to me but they weren't my friends', he knows the difference. It was the best decision we ever made to send him there (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

A number of school leavers reflected on the positive peer relations in the special school and the importance of a sense of belonging:

> *The reason why I came to this school was I was bullied (in last school) and they don't bully you here and you make friends. The school supports you. I do feel I belong and they include you in stuff and if you need help, they give it to you (Special School Leaver).*

One school leaver currently attending a day service felt they would have done better in a mainstream school, particularly around curricular provision and potential for certification:

> *I would have preferred to have been supported in a mainstream school … I would have loved to do my Junior Cert, but I couldn't do that in the special school … I would have loved to do work experience too, but the special schools don't have work experience. I think a lot of people with disabilities like me don't even have a Junior Cert … I think the government need to do a lot more for people with disabilities. Keep them in mainstream schools ... I was let down (School Leaver in Day Services).*

A number of interviewees, school leavers and parents, alluded to a culture of care rather than challenge in their experience in special schools, an issue they felt needed greater attention:

> *In the end I think they just fobbed my son off … Like his Junior Cert a few months ago, he wanted to do the English, but his school took him out during the English exam because they said just to let him do the woodwork. But [name] felt that he could have done it, and he was annoyed that they took him out. He wasn't challenged. If you don't push him then he gives up (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

4.4 Transition Preparation in Mainstream Schools

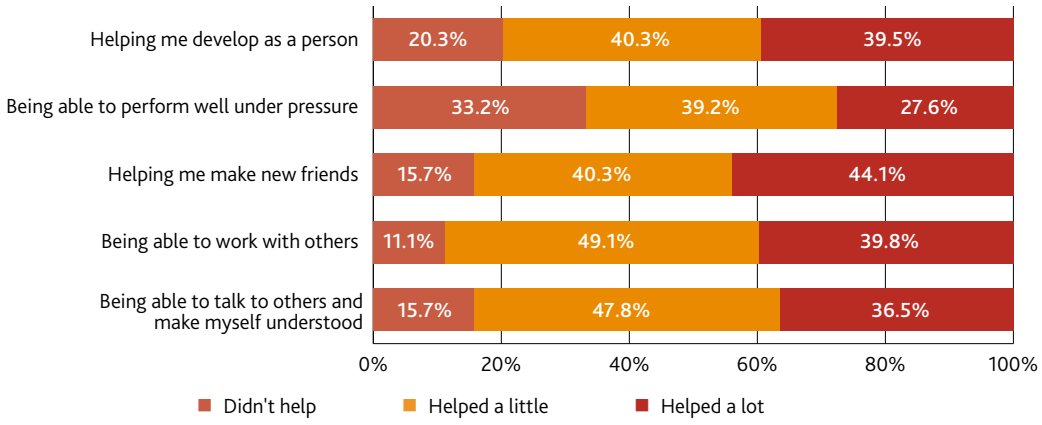
In interviews with school leavers, most were generally happy with the skills and capabilities learned in school and felt they transferred well to their new setting. Several pointed to specific skills they would have liked to learn, covering academic skills like referencing and broader life skills like budgeting and time management. Where interviewees were very unhappy with the preparation school gave them, it was always linked to issues with having their SEN recognised and accessing suitable supports, an issue highlighted in other studies (e.g. Inclusion Ireland's 2022 Study). One interviewee, who 'would give their education a three out of ten' (Student) had no formal assessment of their 'invisible conditions' until sixth year and thus was unable to access supports until it was too late.

Social, self-advocacy and self-determination skills are all crucial in preparing students with special educational needs for their post-school life (Dakwat, 2023; Ye and McCoy, 2024). Therefore, our broader School Leavers' Survey delves deeper by assessing the impact of school experience on perceived personal, practical and self-determination skills development.

Personal Skills Development

Consistent with the GUI study findings, most school leavers with special educational needs were positive about their school experiences helping them develop interpersonal skills (see Figure 4.3). Eighty to 90 per cent reported school experiences had helped them 'being able to work with others', 'being able to talk to others and make myself understood', 'making new friends' and 'helping me develop as a person'. Two-thirds felt their school helped them perform well under pressure.

Figure 4.3 Students' skills development, personal skills



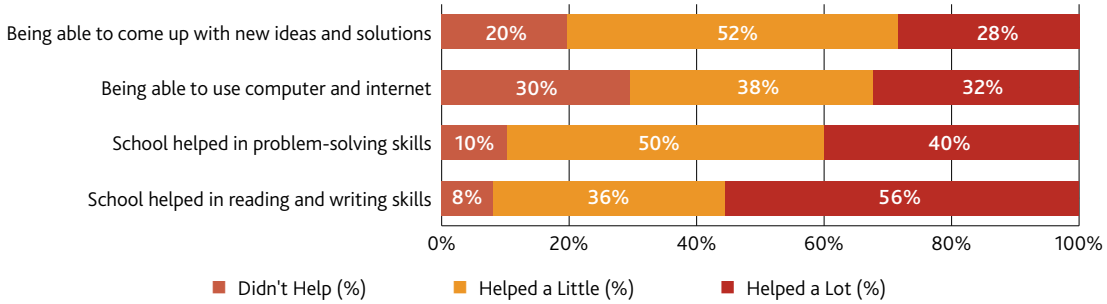
Data source: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1.

Differences emerged in student reflections on their communication skills, with poorer thoughts among those receiving additional supports, along with some differences by socioeconomic background (students in DEIS schools and whose parents had lower levels of education were less likely to find school helpful here). There were some gender differences in how students assessed their ability to perform well under pressure (boys being more positive) and those from more highly educated families were more likely to report their school helped them develop into a well-balanced person.

Practical Skill Development

Most school leavers with special educational needs were positive about their academic skills development, with nearly nine in ten finding their schools helpful in developing 'reading and writing skills' and 'problem-solving skills', and eight in ten finding their schools helpful in 'coming up with new ideas and solutions'. In contrast to other skill domains, students were slightly less satisfied with their digital skills development at school, with only about seven in ten feeling their school helped with their computer and internet skills (Figure 4.4). Those receiving supports were more positive about school support in this regard.

Figure 4.4 Students' skills development, practical skills



Data source: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1.

Self-Determination Skill Development

Overall, student responses to self-determination skills development were less positive compared to responses to the previous two questions. Notably, almost one-third felt their school 'did not help' foster an interest in learning. Under two-thirds felt their school helped increase their self-confidence, decide what to do after leaving school or provided knowledge about the field in which they wanted to study/work. Notably, concerns arose around preparing them for independent living, with over six in ten feeling their school experiences 'did not help' (Figure 4.5b). These patterns remained consistent across individual characteristics and socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting a gap in school supports and a curriculum which prioritises academic skills over crucial life skills, such as independent living. This is in line with GUI data (Figure 4.5a) indicating student dissatisfaction with school in preparing them for adult life, independent living, career decisions and field-specific knowledge. Compared to GUI data, students in our survey were even less positive about self-determination skills developed at school, with a notably higher proportion indicating their school 'did not help them' with this.

Figure 4.5a Students' self-determination skills development, GUI

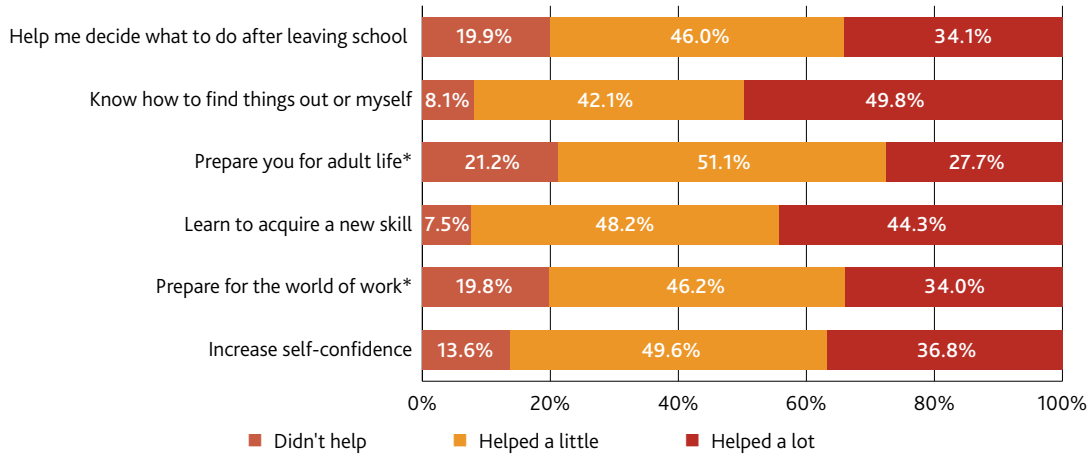
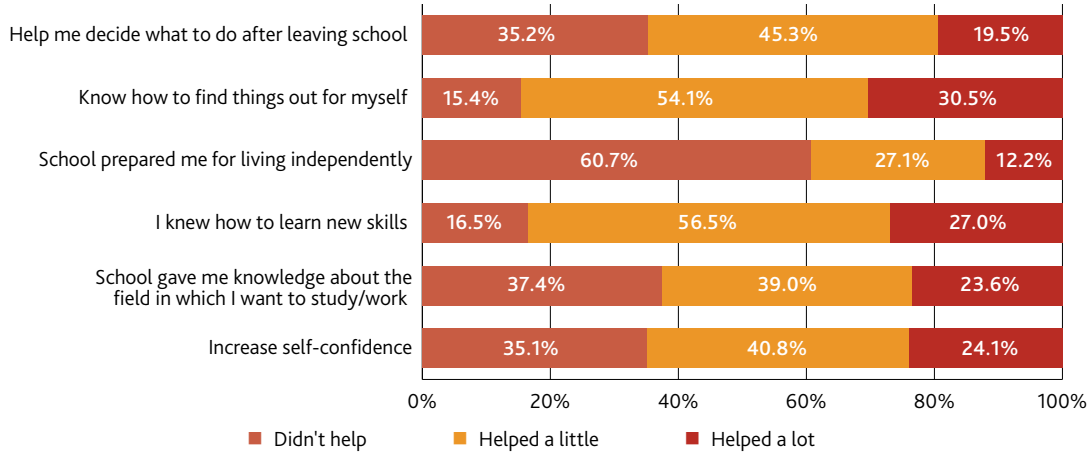


Figure 4.5b Students' self-determination skills development, School Leavers Survey



Source: School Leavers' Survey and GUI, Child Cohort, waves 1, 2 and 3 (9, 13 and 17-18 years).

Note: The measures with '' refers to the slightly different wording of two measures included in the School Leaver's Survey and GUI study. In our survey, we asked students whether they felt 'school gave me knowledge about the field in which I want to study or work', and the measure included in the GUI study is whether students felt their school 'prepares (me) for the world of work'. Additionally, the School Leaver's Survey asked students whether 'school prepared me for living independently', while the measure included in the GUI study is whether school 'prepares you for adult life'.*

The survey data show gender differences in self-confidence development with boys showing more positive responses. Boys were more positive about their school helping them make post-school decisions and learning new skills. They were more positive about school providing knowledge about the field of study or work. Less positive responses were found among students receiving additional supports. On preparation for the world of work, more positive responses are found for students with special educational needs (and DEIS school attendees) in GUI, perhaps reflecting the needs of participating students or the timing of the data collection.

4.5 Transition Preparation in Special Schools

Timing of Leaving for Students in Special Schools

Transition preparation in special schools was captured through interviews with young adults (some with their parents) and school personnel, including principals and teachers. Before delving into their reflections on transition preparation, we first look at lead-in to leaving. The students had experienced varied school placements. Some enrolled in their special school from the start of, or early in, primary education. Others (roughly half) transferred to special schools after attending a mainstream primary school. The timing of leaving for many varied across the school settings, with most exiting as they turned 18. Those who stayed an additional year generally did so to finish a curricular programme, usually JC but in a few cases, a subset of LC subjects or the LCA programme. In terms of readiness to leave school, some interviewees reflected on rigidity within the system and lack of flexibility where a young person was considered not ready to leave. One principal reflected:

> *If they are not ready, it's tough, as far as the NCSE is concerned, they just say 'No no, the cutoff is 18 and that's it' … if a child is having a very difficult time trying to accept the fact that they are leaving, there is no consideration, there is no flexibility (Principal).*

In other settings, however, school leaders felt they were usually successful when applying for an enrolment extension for a student, once they met the requirements:

> *If they have done one year of a two-year programme or two years of a three-year programme, they qualify for the extra year. And in fairness to the Department, if you have the grounds for them to apply, they will be granted the extra year… It has to be QQI level 3 or the Junior Cycle (Principal).*

Across all special school settings, personnel spoke of the importance of supporting development of a diversity of skills (academic, social, communication, independence and so on) ahead of leaving school. Medical difficulties for some, and long periods of school absence as a consequence, affected the amount of work that could be done and progress across each of these domains. Many studies have observed an enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic such as Carroll et al., 2024 on secondary school students in Ireland and Morgül et al., 2022 on UK primary school students. Our study also finds a clear impact of COVID-19 for school leavers. As one teacher noted: 'The pandemic hurt us as well, any of the training like the bus training, couldn't happen.' Additional difficulties and disconnects arose around COVID-19, leading to less informed decision-making among young adults and their parents:

> *I would have liked my students to go [to adult services setting] one day a week … but COVID was the reason why they couldn't go, every time there was a shortage of staff [in day services setting]. So there was a complete disconnect (Teacher).*

Each school offered some form of transition programme, working with students in the weeks and months before leaving. A teacher with designated responsibility often oversaw the transition programmes and the goals were usually twofold: to promote independence and life skills as much as possible and to support the decision-making process. The latter is typically framed in a collaborative way, both with parents and the HSE. Individual schools often developed transition programmes that were tailored to meet their students' (changing) needs. The School Leavers Programme in one school included the Gaisce project, practical skills like learning how to cook, understanding road signs, bus timetables, and activities like horse-riding, swimming, as well as life skill maths and life skill English.

Many schools had a strong focus on raising awareness of the opportunities and programmes available, alongside the changing supports that will be available on leaving school. Transition preparation often included a growing focus on community engagement, visiting local services like coffee shops, managing money and interacting with different services and staff. One school used to engage with a coffee shop run by the Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA)[48], and students brought money and were assigned tasks as part of the outing to the coffee shop. Work experience was a central feature of transition preparation in several schools. In one the principal noted the school organised work placements 'where students might safely engage in a work task. It might be in the local café and they might be clearing the tables, one fellow did that. Another guy was big into cooking, he wanted to be a chef so the kitchen allowed him work there' (Principal).

The school leavers' programme in another school similarly focused on work placement and preparation:

> *It did give the students independence to go out and see a workplace themselves, be accountable for their day. We had set up mock interviews where a student would have wrote a letter, attend for interview … keep the record of it, dress and present for it and come back and … tell us how their interview went and then start their work experience (Teacher).*

Several schools identified barriers, however, to organising and supporting work experience and placements for their students, particularly in more recent years. Some noted that while small businesses were often willing to explore offering work placements to young adults, securing relevant insurance was a significant barrier.

Across all schools, there was a focus on engaging with parents and taking a collaborative approach to transition preparation. Supporting parents and raising awareness of opportunities and services was identified as an important goal, although not all schools were satisfied that enough efforts were placed on supporting parents in the post-school transition process more broadly (returned to later). Many schools ran information evenings for parents, inviting a range of service providers to give a presentation to (and meet) often several cohorts of parents and students, providing valuable insights on the range of programmes (post-school education, training and adult day services) available in their locality. Several schools would have liked to plan more events to support parents and their school leavers to support greater awareness of the types of programmes and services available. School personnel in a number of settings reflected on the widespread focus on students progressing to higher education, and to a lesser extent PLC programmes, and the prominent

48 The Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) runs charity shops that provide local communities with new and lightly worn items at affordable prices. The income from these shops directly funds essential services for people with physical disabilities.

place of open days for these school leavers. They questioned the absence of similar open days for students progressing to non-mainstream education and training settings. Most special schools, however, organised some form of visiting programme, allowing the young adults to visit different service providers in the company of a school staff member. In many cases these visits lasted a few days and up to a week, providing a good opportunity 'to assess again the interests, the likes and so on'. Greater parental involvement was identified as something that would be beneficial.

> *The anxiety lessened the more often they went up [to the adult service], the more comfortable they became. You could even see it in their presentation. So that worked really well … It might help to lessen the anxiety if parents could visit too (Teacher).*

There was a view that parents should be part of the sampling and visiting settings, both to support their awareness and to allow them to support the decision-making process of their young adult.

> *I would like the parents to also be there on some of the sampling days … I would like if some of the profiling was done with myself, the parent, the young person and a staff member from the new facility together, because we are trying to hold a holistic approach but yet and all it is fragmented … if the young person had the vision in their mind, that image, that everybody was together in one room, there might be more of a safety net, the anxieties might be lowered (Teacher).*

Interviews with school leavers and their parents further highlighted a need for greater involvement of parents to ensure a full picture is gathered and an optimal placement follows:

> *The officer said you have to have high expectations but I said you have to be realistic. I just felt as a parent that we weren't informed very much of the services that could be provided … We met the profiling officer from the HSE … they are asking questions of Kevin like 'do you go into town?' and he said 'yeah, yeah'. But I had to intervene and say but his sisters or cousin goes with him. He can make decisions but he needs adult support and people that know him to help him (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Service providers arranged to visit school settings, engaging with teachers and students 'for planning and particularly to identify the special interests the student has, the type of routine they are used to so that they can replicate that initially to settle them into the setting and that has worked pretty well' (Principal). However, in other schools there was a perception that schools are doing a lot of work in preparing the young adults for leaving, but there is very little work happening at the other end (service providers) to give an insight into their service or prepare for their arrival.

Overall, there were concerns about the decision-making process being too rushed and the process ultimately orientated towards what is available rather than finding a suitable setting:

> *I think it's a little bit rushed, because there is no talk up to Christmas time and then its bang, bang, bang … I would have loved someone to sit me down and say this is what this service does and this is what this service does (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *There is definitely pressure on parents to pick a place where they have space rather than pick a place that is right for the child. Parents have that massive fear that they are not going to get a place (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

In a number of schools, the transition was supported through the completion of a project with the school leaver or 'transitioning books', which involved looking at their time at the school, using photographic documentation of their time at the school and moving it on to where they are going after school. For autistic students, these visual representations were seen as very important. Other schools prepared transition passports for the leavers. Many prepared a leaver's report that goes to the centre when the young person is leaving (June) – these reports included 'everything from their toileting, their feeding, what level they are functioning at, their likes/dislikes, their communication/how they communicate, what happens if they have a meltdown.' (Teacher). However, schools reflected on the absence of a standard or template transition programme for special schools, leaving them needing to develop their own without any overall guidance.

Young Adults' and Parents' Reflection on Preparation for Leaving School

Overall, parents were highly positive about the school building independence and preparing their young adult for leaving school and young adults too were typically very happy with their school experiences and preparation for leaving.

> *He had an amazing teacher last year and she was brilliant at working on [name]'s strengths and building on everything up. His independence was a big thing, trying to get him to be more independent, but he is capable ... and they worked on him leaving this cosy little environment (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *She came on in leaps and bounds here, she loved it [since she joined the school at the age of 8] … if she could have got another year she would have stayed here [in special school] (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Some parents reflected on the development of social skills as they progressed through school: 'He is ridiculously social, he loves socialising, he loves doing jobs, up and down the corridor asking everybody for jobs. So socially the school brought him on amazingly.'

> *I think she was very well prepared. Overall, I think it was a very happy experience … She would have been at the top skillset there, whereas if she had gone to mainstream secondary school she would have been at the bottom … It nurtured and reinforced a lot of the groundwork that had been done by her primary school and myself (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

While some young adults and their parents were reluctant to leave the security and familiarity of their school setting, teachers and school leaders worked hard to reassure and smooth the transition process.

> *She got very worried about leaving school – change doesn't sit well, she is a creature of habit … But as the year progressed it did seem to get better, it became more of a form of acceptance for her, but it did take her a long time to come to that point (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

The school leavers themselves often came to the realisation that they were ready to leave school and embark on the next stages of their lives, after much support from their school and parents:

> *I am at the stage where I am ready to leave. I want to work on my independence. And then if I work on that I will decide what I want to do. I am applying for day services, like [name of service] – I went with that one (Special School Leaver).*

For others the transition was more difficult and in some cases this reflected more complex needs and hence a more complex transition process. Many parents spoke of the 'battle', particularly the efforts required to ensure all the necessary supports were in place for their young adult:

> *It is very difficult for them, because they are not only transitioning from school to adult services, they are also transitioning from a paediatric hospital ... so there is a combination of a lot of things going on for them … She found it very difficult … Everything seems to be a battle, it wears you down, nothing is made easy for you ... down to equipment, down to school, therapy session … everything is a battle (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

The summer holidays were a focus for some parents, being unable to access summer programmes, traditionally known as July Provision, being a particular challenge:

> *We weren't able to access July Provision or anything, because we were told he doesn't fit the criteria, which he is. He has a learning disability as well [as a physical disability], which is mild, but we could have done with July Provision … We got it over COVID [when the rules changed], that was our first time, which was brilliant, but we could have done with that the whole way up (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

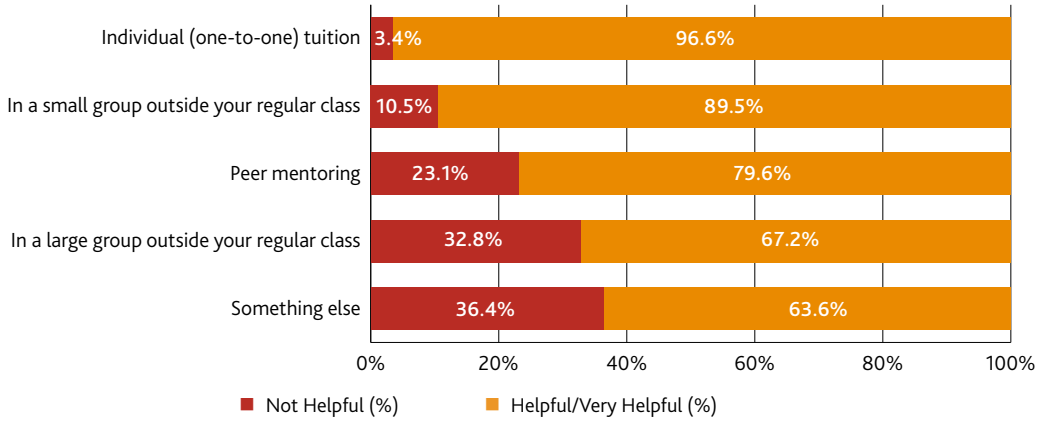
As noted earlier, a number of parents would have liked more contact with the adult services before the decision was made and the young adult started: 'In hindsight, I would have liked more visits, I only got to see it for the first time about three weeks before he started. So I was probably more anxious than [name of son] was.' This gave little opportunity for the staff to get to know the young adults 'so when he rocked up day one, they couldn't understand him, But they are figuring it out, he is great at communicating, through Lámh[49], his board, his computer' (Parent of Special School Leaver). 'A more structured settling in period' would have been preferred, a sentiment echoed by several parents. Some felt school personnel should have played a more central role in the transition preparation. School leavers and their parents were much more likely to reflect positively on preparedness where both parents and the young adults were familiar and informed about the chosen pathway, where everyone 'decided together'.

49 Lámh is a manual sign system used by children and adults with intellectual disability and communication needs in Ireland. More details can be found at: https://www.lamh.org/

4.6 School-Based Supports in Mainstream Schools

The nature and quality of career guidance depends on a range of factors including a school's type and social mix, the student's gender, nature of their disability and the array of tools and approaches available to career guidance professionals (NDA, 2023c). With this in mind, we now examine the supports students were accessing at school, with a focus on what they and their parents perceived as 'good support'. While 43 per cent reported receiving extra subject support, this was substantially lower at DEIS schools (one-third vs 53 per cent non-DEIS), suggesting resource constraints at DEIS schools. Over nine in ten students found individual tuition and small-group subject support outside their regular class helpful. Peer mentoring was positively received by over three-quarters of students. However, only two-thirds found support in large groups outside their regular class helpful (Figure 4.6), indicating the importance of tailored and individualised supports. This echoes NDA's 2023 policy advice paper which stresses the importance of providing a mentoring programme, and an individually focused, person-centred approach to support learners with disabilities to achieve their full potential (NDA, 2023b).

Figure 4.6 Extra subject supports at school



Data source: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1.

In addition to extra subject supports, both mainstream school students and those in PLC courses were surveyed about supports related to their SEN at school, with exam accommodations and learning supports being two widely utilised SEN supports. In line with Chapter 3, the most commonly sought exam accommodations were a spelling/grammar waiver (36.1 per cent), followed by 'other' accommodations (21 per cent), and reading assistance (16.6 per cent).

When asked how helpful the supports were, responses were generally positive, with over 90 per cent finding assistive technology and SNA supports as (very) helpful and over 80 per cent finding learning support and their guidance counsellor (very) helpful. However, students were less positive about psychological supports, with slightly over half rating them helpful. The evidence suggests some unmet need (38 per cent report needing extra help), which is somewhat higher among girls (47 per cent) than boys (32 per cent). For those who received no additional supports at school, three in ten stated that it was because 'they did not know what these supports were', followed by 'their family did not want to get such supports' (23 per cent), or they were not able to access the supports (22 per cent). One in ten indicated the supports were unavailable at their school.

Our qualitative analysis reveals broad satisfaction with supports received in school, though as noted earlier there may be an element of selection bias at play in who volunteers to be interviewed. There were also some students who received no extra support and were happy with that. Bearing that in mind, we will begin by looking at responses to a survey question where students who indicated they would like to access extra supports (roughly 38 per cent of respondents) were asked which supports they would like to access. This will be complemented by material from interviews with students and parents that outline what makes for 'good support' to paint an overall picture of where students and their family see existing supports as working well and where they see a need for improvement. Table 4.1 below shows the extra supports students called for, organised into Academic Supports, Non-Academic Supports, Specific Accommodations and Personal Aspects of Support.

Table 4.1 Extra supports students called for

Theme						
Academic	Learning support	One-to-one support	Resource hours	Small group instruction	Extra classes	Specific subject support
Non-Academic	Mental health support	Organisation support	Social support	Motivation	Study assistance	Therapy
Accommodations	Assistive Technology	RACE	Safe room	Irish exemption	SNA	
Personal	Encouragement	Recognition of Needs	Regular Check-ins/ Communication	Denied Asked for Help	Respect/ Dignity	

Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey.

Most of the codes are self-explanatory and ask for access to supports or accommodations that should already be available in school or the community, or for greater access to supports already being accessed. The breadth and volume of calls for more supports show there is unaddressed need among survey respondents across many types of support and accommodation. The final row allows us to explore this need further, capturing codes that focus more on a respondent's needs as a person and on the impact of inadequate or poor support on them.

As touched on in section 4.3 above, students who felt they were not being listened to about their support needs or entitlements perceived this as affecting their wider school lives. The impact on their personal lives was made particularly clear in one response, asking for 'Help with notes from the teachers so I wasn't constantly playing catch-up and made feel stupid'. Some students felt it was not so much support as something akin to universal design they needed, for example the call for 'classwork [to be] explained in different ways as people DO NOT learn in the same ways and that NEEDS to be accommodated for each and every student.' For others, the need to constantly fight for supports was clearly taking a toll: 'I wasn't able to get supports I needed. I felt discriminated against due to this as students who had the same diagnoses as me got supports I needed. I had to fight for supports which I wanted for months, meanwhile other students were allowed to easily choose what they wanted.'

The interviews further develop these ideas of what made for good support. Interviewees reported a wide range of special educational needs and disabilities, from autism to dyslexia to physical impairments to acute and chronic illnesses which affected their learning. They required an equally wide range of supports and accommodations. As noted in many studies, it is crucial to include students' own voices in supporting their SEN (Bohan, 2023). Building on the survey responses above, parents and students alike praised support which was proactive in meeting student needs rather than waiting for issues to arise to react, student-centred rather than prescriptive and tailored to students' specific needs. The positive impact of good support could be life changing: one parent who had very positive experiences of school support stated: 'I don't think [my child] would have gotten through school without that support' (Parent of School Leaver).

'Bad support', on the other hand, was reliant on formal diagnosis (that in some cases was not available or very late in coming), which emphasised or even created difference from peers rather than fostering inclusion or which could not be accessed without 'a fight'. One interviewee reflecting on their school experiences felt they could have benefited from further support, but that they 'would have had to kick up a fuss' to get it (School Leaver). The same student felt that they were strongly affected by 'Leaving Cert pressure' and were somewhat alienated from the school by the end of their time there. Overall, the qualitative material suggests that those who do not wish to 'fight' or do not have the resources to sustain and win such a fight are losing out under the current methods of allocating support.

As for the challenges schools face in supporting students with special educational needs, especially those with complex needs in special schools, a prominent challenge is the adequacy of specialised supports at school. A common sentiment related to frustration with the (consistency of) specialised supports available as a young adult progressed through school, a situation exacerbated in the context of COVID-19. This related to OT, speech and language therapy, psychological supports and so on.

> *The supports were non-existent. We were lucky that we were comfortable enough financially and we would have over the years paid … OT, speech and language. Non-existent, it really was, it's a joke really (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *We believe that OT was a major fallback that he lost out on. The reason we know is that we brought another child with dyslexia to an OT and we knew by talking to her that there were certain things we saw in [name of son] which if we had of had a proper OT intervention could have dealt with that particular thing. We were disappointed in that area, we didn't get what we should have got, that would have benefited him hugely (Parent of Day Services Participant).*

> *The health system is desperate for people with special needs, absolutely desperate. Even to get some occupational therapy, speech and language, psychology, it's terrible. Paid private to get son assessed as non-verbal, other than that I'd probably still be waiting (Parent of School Leaver, NEET).*

School leavers also highlighted shortcoming in the supports they received at school, particularly in terms of learning supports and socio-emotional skills development:

> *I wasn't given many supports. The only support was on the dyslexia side rather than the ASD side … there is a sensory room in the school that was available to me, but there are teachers who see it as me skipping class [so I didn't avail of that]. I didn't get any help for depression until after I left school (School Leaver, NEET).*

She wasn't getting the types of support she needed [at school] … She didn't get support in terms of how she could deal with things, how to handle things when things got a bit much … She was never really treated as a child that had special needs. (Parent of School Leaver, NEET)

4.7 Summary

Drawing on evidence across quantitative and qualitative sources, this chapter tells a story of Senior Cycle programme experiences, school engagement, perceptions of teaching and learning, transition preparation and supports received at school for students with special educational needs. Concerns for mainstream school leavers often related to broader concerns around teaching and learning approaches, rote learning and pressure from the high-stakes exam. The special schools research highlights a high level of responsiveness of schools in terms of the nature of curriculum provided – with a tailored approach evident in all schools – which included JC levels 1, 2 and 3 programmes, LCA and a range of transition support programmes. School leaders raised challenges in running multiple programmes, often within one classroom, concerns around the adequacy of resources to support such tailored provision and challenges completing programmes while following the primary school day.

The survey results in mainstream schools show a high level of positive engagement with school and positive reflections on school experiences, often underpinned by positive interactions with teachers and peers and encouragement to continue in education. Interviews with mainstream students highlighted their enjoyment of the social side of school and a feeling of being a valued and respected member of the school community. Access to effective supports was key with individualised and responsive supports valued. There was evidence of resource constraints in DEIS schools, particularly in extra subject support provision. In special schools, positive school experiences were particularly evident among the young adults who displayed strong connections with staff. While reluctance to leave the security and familiarity of their school setting was noted, teachers and school leaders worked hard to reassure and smooth the transition process.

In terms of transition preparation, mainstream students are positive about their school helping them develop interpersonal and a range of practical skills (literacy, problem-solving, ICT and the ability to come up with new ideas and solutions) but were much less positive about their self-determination skills and independence skills development, notably less positive than the full population included in the GUI study. In special schools, each one offered a form of transition programme, working with students in the weeks and months before leaving, with the aim of promoting independence and life skills and supporting the decision-making process. The latter is typically framed in a collaborative way, both with parents and the HSE, but some parents did seek a greater role.

Not every student could access the supports needed for reasons including poor awareness or knowledge of what was available and limited availability of required supports, with 38 per cent of students in mainstream schools indicating unmet need. Overall, students with special educational needs, especially those reporting multiple conditions, were less likely to report being encouraged to pursue education or training and to feel adequately supported. Finally, parents were particularly vocal about the inadequacy of specialised supports like OT, speech and language therapy and psychological supports, particularly for young adults attending special school settings, a situation exacerbated during the pandemic.

CHAPTER 5

Post-School Planning and Decision-Making

5.1 Introduction

Deciding what path to take after school is a complex process. Non-academic factors like family background, financial situation, openness to new experiences and peer choices all play a role alongside academic or vocational factors that shape the pathways young people want to pursue and those they will have the opportunity to take up. Here we examine post-school planning and decision-making for young adults with special educational needs. We begin by analysing their post-school plans and the higher education schemes they applied for. Then, we aim to unravel the decision-making process by investigating the information sources used and their perceived helpfulness, scrutinising the considerations guiding student choices and evaluating the impact of parent, teacher and the student's own expectations.

In addition to quantitative analysis based on student surveys, we incorporate qualitative evidence from interviews and parental perspectives to explore the role of school supports in their school lives with an eye to how these set them up for their futures. We outline the different forms and levels of engagement with school-based guidance to show that different students want very different things. Additionally, we look into family influences on their post-school plans. Beyond school and family supports, this chapter underscores the role of HSE support as a crucial facilitator in post-school decision-making, particularly for those with more complex needs.

5.2 Post-School Plans

5.2.1 Post-School Plans

Before tapping into how students decided on their post-school pathways, we discuss what their plans are using the Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey. In total, 339 final-year students with special educational needs in mainstream schools revealed their post-school plans. Most planned to continue their education (82 per cent), while others aimed to secure a job (12 per cent). Compared to the broader population included in the GUI study, the proportion planning to pursue education programmes is slightly lower (82.3 per cent in Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey vs 92.3 per cent in the GUI study for those aged 17-18). This aligns with findings from Carroll et al. (2022b), indicating that those with disabilities are more likely to progress to FET and less likely to attend level 8 degrees in universities. Additionally, a few students opted to travel, take time out, attend specialist services, do something else or indicated 'don't know'.

Students were asked to report on how difficult it was to decide their post-school plans, with around six in ten finding it difficult. The figure was lower compared to the broader population included in the GUI study, where nearly nine in ten aged 17-18 felt so regardless of their SEN status or gender. Regarding reasons, most students stated it was because they were interested in more than one option (40 per cent), followed by not knowing what they would like to do

(31 per cent) and not knowing what they would be able to get (22 per cent). Overall, evidence suggests a need for more information to help students, particularly with special educational needs, form a clearer idea of what they want to do in the future.

5.2.2 CAO, DARE, HEAR Programme Application

Given the high proportion of those aiming for higher education, students were asked which programme they applied for. Out of 353 responses, 77 per cent indicated they had applied to the Central Applications Office (CAO) system, 36 per cent to the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and 29 per cent to the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR). CAO application patterns were structured by family background, gender and complexity of need. For example, 83.7 per cent of girls compared to 72.7 per cent of boys applied to the CAO. Meanwhile, those in mainstream classes were more likely to apply to the CAO system compared with those in a special class (80.6 per cent vs 70 per cent). While the pattern is broadly similar across DEIS and non-DEIS schools, differences emerged based on family background – CAO application rates range from 83 per cent of students with a degree-educated parent to 72 per cent of those whose parents have lower education levels.

Family background plays a role in DARE application rates too, with students from more highly educated families more likely to apply (44 per cent with at least one degree-educated parent vs 32 per cent with lower education). Additionally, a significantly higher percentage from non-DEIS schools made a DARE application (57 per cent of non-DEIS vs 13 per cent of DEIS students). The gap in school social mix is concerning as students from families with limited resources traditionally rely more on school supports than their family to access educational and employment opportunities. Yet they may be doubly disadvantaged at school without appropriate support. No significant differences were found in HEAR application rates by key student characteristics (such as gender or special class attendance) other than socio-economic status, which is expected given the nature of the HEAR programme.

5.3 Post-School Planning

This section examines how students decide on their post-school pathways, including the information sources used and key factors considered, from the survey and interviews with them and their parents.

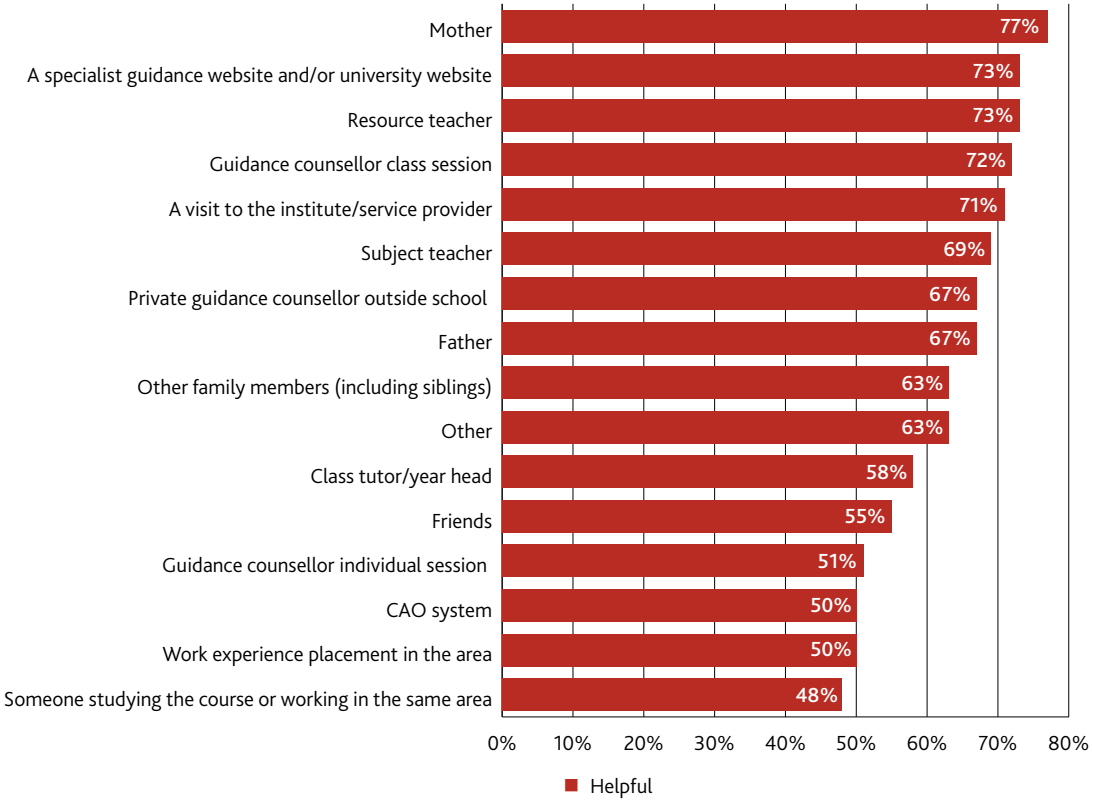
5.3.1 Information Sources Used by Students

Information Sources Used by Students at Mainstream School

Figure 5.1 illustrates the information sources school leavers used for post-school pathways and the perceived helpfulness of each. The most cited sources were their mothers and guidance counsellors (including class and individual sessions). Other prominent information sources included friends, fathers, other family members (including siblings) and subject teachers, or individuals studying the same course or working in the same area, all of which received over 200 responses. Private guidance counsellors accessed outside school were the least popular, with only 67 using this source. There are no notable differences in information sources across DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Students identified their mother as the most helpful information source, followed by 'a specialist guidance website and/or university website', 'resource teacher', 'guidance counsellor class session' and 'a visit to institute/service provider'. Across each source, over 70 per cent of students found the information helpful. Moreover, over 60 per cent expressed satisfaction with the information from their subject teacher (69 per cent), a private guidance counsellor outside school (67 per cent), father (67 per cent), other family members including siblings (63 per cent), or 'other' (63 per cent). Interestingly, despite 'someone studying the course or working in the same area' being one of the most popular information sources, less than half found it helpful. Students appeared less satisfied with information from a work experience placement in the area, the CAO system or individual guidance counsellor sessions, with close to half finding them unhelpful.

Figure 5.1 Percentage viewing different information sources as helpful in making post-school decisions



Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey.

Overall, students included in the School Leavers' Survey were less positive compared with the nationally representative population in the GUI study, with a much higher proportion in our sample finding these information sources 'not helpful'. In both studies, information from mothers is the most important source helping them to decide their post-school plans. In addition, the GUI study finds most students felt family-based supports were important when making their post-school plans, with the vast majority finding information from their father (93 per cent) and other family members including siblings (90 per cent) '(very) important'. Survey students seemed to rely more on school-based supports, with a larger proportion finding the information from their career guidance classes and their subject teacher as 'helpful' (72 per cent and 69 per cent, respectively). A discussion on the guidance students received in the GUI study is presented in Chapter 4.

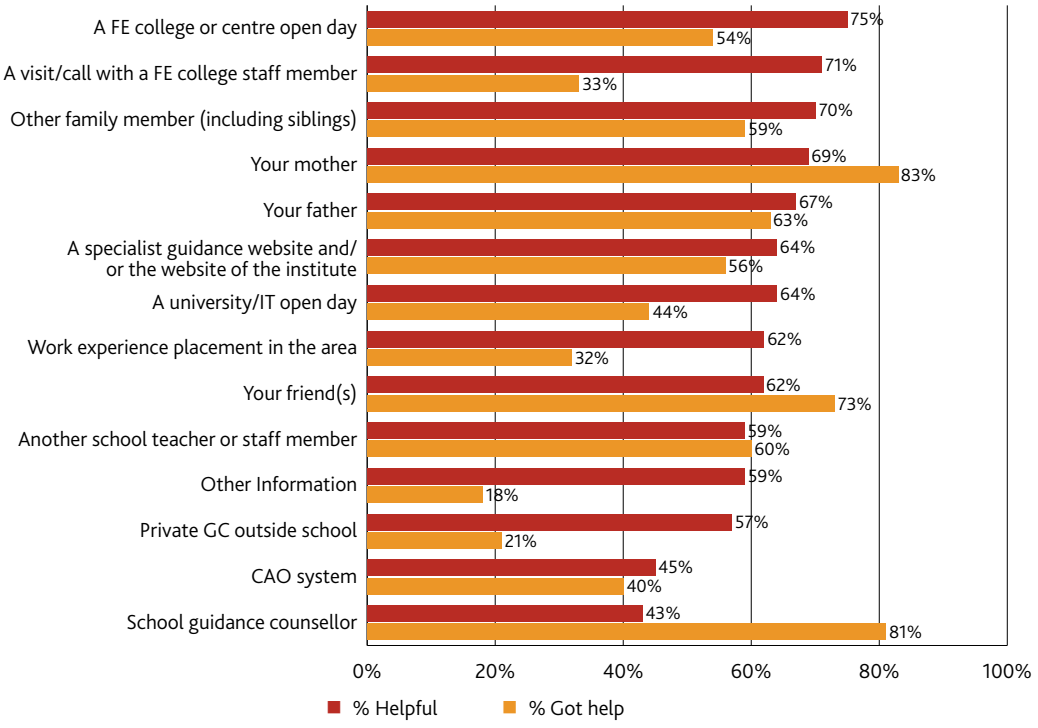
Information Sources Used by PLC Students

PLC students were asked to reflect on the information sources they used when making post-school decisions and the perceived helpfulness of each (Figure 5.2). Again, they predominantly relied on information from their family, particularly their mothers (83 per cent), and their school, including guidance counsellors (81 per cent) or other school staff (60 per cent). They relied less on information from universities or FE colleges, such as open days (44 per cent) or communication with staff from post-school settings (33 per cent).

Despite being less frequently used, students indicated that the most useful information came from universities or colleges, such as open days or a call with university or training centre staff, with more than 70 per cent finding these sources helpful. This was followed by information from their family and specialist guidance websites or those of a university or college. Information from school guidance counsellors was least likely to be perceived as helpful (43 per cent). The gap between the most-cited information sources and the most helpful is concerning. It suggests students may not have access to relevant material for their post-school decisions or may not be aware of it.

Those with more positive school engagement were slightly more likely to consult school personnel when deciding their post-school pathways. Those from more highly educated families were more likely to rely on them for help. For instance, 94 per cent with at least one degree educated parent compared to 84 per cent with non-university educated parents consulted their family for advice on post-school planning.

Figure 5.2 Information sources used by PLC students when making their post-school decisions

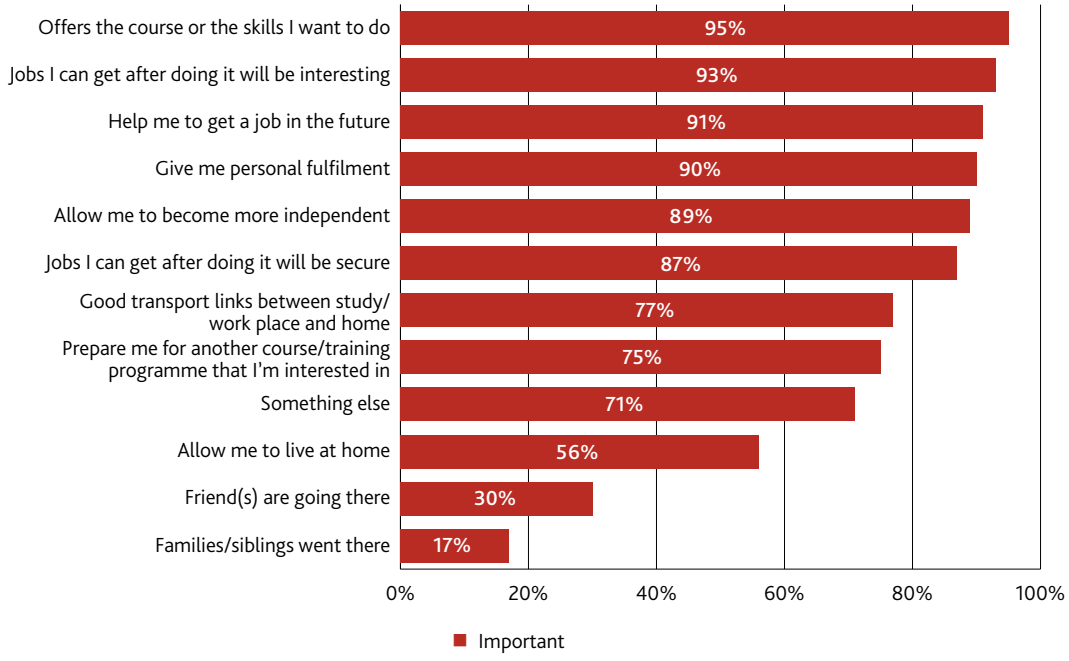


Data source: PLC Students' Survey.

5.3.2 Factors Affecting Post-School Decisions

Students in mainstream schools were asked to identify the most important factors influencing their post-school decisions. Intrinsic motivations played a significant role, with close to 90 per cent considering the following factors important: 'It offers the course or skills I want to pursue', 'the jobs available post-course would be interesting', and 'it would provide personal fulfilment'. Instrumental reasons also held weight, with the vast majority focusing on whether the post-school setting would help them secure a future job (91 per cent), become more independent (89 per cent) or improve job security (87 per cent) (Figure 5.3). Factors less likely to feature included whether family members or siblings attended the institution (17 per cent found it important) or whether friends attended (30 per cent). These findings align with results from the GUI study, with most students in both studies indicating the importance of the institution offering the desired subject/course. Students in both valued good transport links between the work/study place and their home, with over seven in ten considering this factor important. Finally, students in our survey were more likely to consider options allowing them to live at home as 'important' (47 per cent in the GUI vs 56 per cent in the Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey), suggesting greater dependence on support from their families due to their SEN.

Figure 5.3 Factors students found important in making their post-school decisions



Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey.

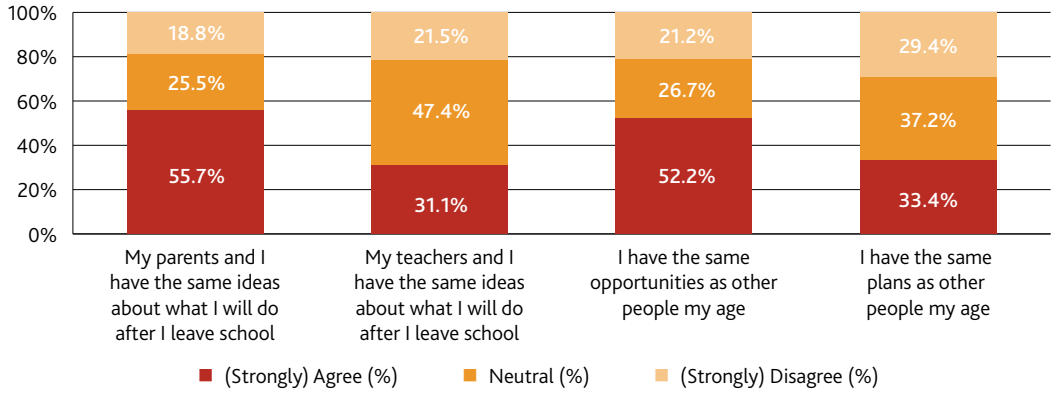
5.3.3 Perspectives on Future Opportunities

Expectations, especially those of parents, teachers and young people themselves, have been found to be important in shaping post-school trajectories (McCoy et al. 2016a; Martinez et al., 2012). We included four questions to explore how students perceived opportunities open to them. In terms of parental expectations, while half agreed they and their parents held consistent expectations of their post-school plans, a fifth (strongly) disagreed with this statement. Boys seemed to be more positive than girls, with nearly six in ten agreeing that they held consistent expectations with their parents compared with half of girls. In contrast, only a third of students felt they held consistent expectations as their teachers, with most either neutral (47 per cent) or disagreeing (21.5 per cent). This expectation gap might indicate a lack of teacher awareness of options for students with special educational needs, particularly considering their diverse needs profile. It could also reflect teachers holding higher expectations than a student. Given the importance of expectations for later achievement and outcomes (Engels et al., 2021; Rubie-Davies, 2006), these findings warrant attention. Positive teacher expectations are also linked with students being more likely to approach them with a problem.

When it comes to young people's expectations relative to their peers, half (strongly) agreed they had the same opportunities and about a third (strongly) agreed they had the same plans. This may indicate that those with special educational needs felt constrained in the choices made. Such constraints vary by complexity of need. Those with multiple conditions were less likely to convey a positive view compared to those who reported a single condition (44 per cent of students with multiple conditions vs 58 per cent with one condition). School experiences also mattered, the more positive being associated with consistent opportunities and plans compared to peers. Further, students who found their school helpful in developing their skills (personal, practical and self-determination skills) were more likely to report having the same opportunities and plans as their peers.

There is some evidence of social structuring, with a higher proportion of DEIS students disagreeing that teachers encouraged them to continue their education (33 per cent vs 25 per cent). Students with at least one degree educated parent were more likely to report being encouraged to discuss their future plans (74 per cent vs 64 per cent). It appears parental involvement, alongside school supports, is important in young people's future planning, which is in line with recent research (Carroll et al., 2022b).

Figure 5.4 Perceived expectations of parents, teachers and young person themselves



Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey.

5.3.4 Guidance Provision Expected

School-Based Guidance

Our qualitative evidence further explores the supports students want from school in guidance and advice for post-school planning. We start with a table (Table 5.1) showing their responses to a question on extra guidance they would have liked to receive in school. There were only 57 responses to this open question in the School Leavers' Survey. In interviews students were far less vocal about their preferred additional guidance supports than about additional supports in other aspects of their school lives. Partly this reflects general satisfaction with the guidance they did receive or a feeling that it was not particularly relevant to them.

Table 5.1 School-based guidance students would have liked to get at school

Theme						
Specific Actions	Provide more information	Career discussion	Open day	General	Work experience	Career advice
	Mentoring	One-to -one	Subject specific advice			
Focus	Apprenticeships	Non-HE advice	Options outside ireland			
Awareness of Schemes and Supports	Disability specific	Scheme support				
Wider Support/ Advice	Better parental support	Encouragement	Self-directed Research	Went elsewhere	Transition	Long term

Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, open-ended responses.

Most of the codes in Table 5.1 are self-explanatory and many feature supports or experiences that students should already be receiving. One recurring call for a support not currently widespread was for mentoring by someone already in their course or career of interest. Of course, getting such an insight would require coordinating non-school personnel and in other ways asking a huge amount of schools in terms of logistics and organisation. But, as we shall see in the next section, where students cannot access such a support through school they often turn to their family and friends, exploiting their social capital to find people to talk to. It is not hard to see how unequal social capital leads to socioeconomically differentiated pseudo-mentorship opportunities, and how inequality is thus reproduced by absence of public provision.

A cornerstone of Ireland's efforts to tackle such inequality in recent decades has been to expand access to higher education. Suggestions of an over-emphasis on HE pathways have prompted an attempt to recognise the value of non-HE pathways and to increase them through further- into higher education through a more integrated tertiary system. Qualitative data in this study present a nuanced insight into both sides of this issue. The lack of information in some schools on apprenticeships or other non-HE options was raised as an issue in survey and interviews, with

students feeling they were being funnelled into higher education. On the other hand, one DEIS school interviewee felt there was too much focus on PLCs and apprenticeships and not enough information on HE – which was where they wanted to go. Previous research has shown the impact of this school context effect in the Irish education system (McCoy et al., 2014). Generally though, students felt they got good information on all options available to them. Acting on it was sometimes the issue: one student wavering between an apprenticeship and HE said 'the guidance counsellor gave me options but didn't push me one way or the other'. They chose the HE course and now regretted it, attributing the decision to a mix of family pressure and 'inflated grades getting me in the door' (School Leaver).

The interviews especially show differing levels of engagement with school guidance. Some barely wanted or needed input from school at all. One interviewee now studying in a university outside Ireland did all the legwork themselves in finding the best one for their chosen course and completing the application process. They only needed the school to send on transcripts to the university. They were happy with this state of affairs, seeing it as entirely their decision and their responsibility (School Leaver). Another said they had decided on a course in one university after talking to their guidance teacher, but then filled out the CAO 'change of mind' after their LC exams and chose a different course and university where they thought the points would be lower. While they described this as an 'impulse decision', they were generally happy with their course choice so far (School Leaver).

For those with no idea what to do, guidance was not very useful as the counsellors had nothing to work with. One such interviewee was taking a gap year and felt they needed time to think through their plans themselves rather than in school where they felt under pressure to decide (Student). Most interviewees, however, had at least some idea of what they would like to do after school and found school guidance helpful in planning for it. Many knew what they wanted and how to get there but welcomed support with specific dates and steps in the process, especially with RACE and DARE applications. Others knew the general area they wanted to go into and appreciated support in turning this into a specific pathway.

Two interviewees offered compelling vignettes of two different types of effective guidance schools can offer. One was doing fewer than six LC subjects, but hoping to do a PLC. Their teacher 'rang around' PLC colleges offering the course the student wanted until they found one that would accept them, something the student 'just wouldn't have been able to do' themselves (School Leaver). Finding ways around barriers to entry into such courses is not something many students will need, but where it is it can be the difference between going into a course or not. A different but no less important support guidance counsellors can provide is giving students the space to work out what they want themselves. One was unsure about following their passion and doing a creative arts course, with no straightforward route into gainful employment thereafter. After conversations with the guidance counsellor, they ultimately decided to take the risk. The supportive, reflective space offered was more important for the student than any specific guidance given.

These findings highlight the challenges in the breadth and depth of supports schools provide and the variation needed across individual students. As with the good supports discussed in section 4.6, we can identify some key aspects of effective guidance as seen by students and their parents. As well as requiring an encyclopaedic knowledge of available options and alternative routes into them, effective support is personalised, student-led and supportive rather than prescriptive. It encourages students to decide for themselves what they want to do with their lives while helping them along the way.

Family Influence

In addition to school guidance, the qualitative evidence explores the impact of family supports, specifically the direct impact of parental support or pressure and the indirect impact of socioeconomic background on students' horizon of possibility. Generally, they spoke of their families, particularly their parents, being supportive in a general sense of their plans and ambitions. In two cases, the interviewee chose the exact same career path as one parent and explicitly mentioned taking inspiration or guidance from that parent's experience. In some cases where the young interviewee was not sure what they wanted to do, rather than follow their parents' career paths directly, they followed in their general footsteps. Specifically, children of parents with a degree defaulted to higher education while children of those without, defaulted to FET, an apprenticeship or direct entry into the labour market. While we cannot extrapolate the impact of this on socioeconomic inequality at societal level, its impact on production and reproduction of inequalities at individual level is clear.

The data offer two contradictory case studies. One (university educated) parent spoke explicitly about pushing their child to go to a university, highlighting the necessity of a degree for success in the labour market. Their child said they had had no idea what to do and had picked their (university) course without much confidence in it but were enjoying it so far. The other case was a young person trying to decide between an apprenticeship and a HE course in a similar area, eventually opting for the latter. They now thought the course was 'not what I should have done' and were unsure as to whether they would continue after completing first year. They felt their parents (university educated) had 'pushed' university on them despite it not being suited to their strengths and interests or to their long-term career plans.

Deciding what path to take after school is complex with non-academic factors like family background, financial situation and peer choices playing a role alongside academic or vocational factors which determine the pathways students are interested in pursuing and will be able to enter. These personal factors during transition are more nebulous than LC points or PLC entrance requirements, but can be equally important. While influencing these factors is beyond a school's role, taking a holistic view of their students' decision-making and being equipped to support them in balancing all the factors involved is not. Finally, with all the support and guidance in the world, young people will still make decisions that do not turn out as they expected or are not what they wanted. Schools cannot magic away this worry. But they can prepare students for such setbacks by giving them the awareness that things do not always work out, but there are always other options and ensuring they have the capacity to go looking for these themselves. While only one interviewee was experiencing regret over their choice, several others were not on their first-choice pathway but had recalibrated their plans accordingly, an issue we return to in the next chapter.

5.4 HSE Profiling

In addition to school and family supports, those from the HSE are key in guiding special school students' post-school decision-making, especially for those with more complex needs. HSE profiling experiences were explored in interviews with school personnel and with students and parents from special schools.

5.4.1 School Personnel Reflections on Profiling Process

Special school staff interviewed reflected on the HSE's role, specifically its profiling exercise with school leavers, usually scheduled in October or November of their final year. Its main purpose is to assess the student's level of support requirement, but 'more often than not they err on the side of caution, particularly in relation to care needs, their personal care but also their behavioural care needs' (Principal). In most cases, the HSE disability manager/placement officer (terminology varied so we use the term placement officer for consistency) visited the school, arranging to meet personnel, parents and the student 'where they wish to attend and are able to do so'. 'They go through the whole profile, the learning capabilities, mainly around their life skills, they need to know if they can socialise properly and interact. Do we need to put in extra staff? Are there safety concerns?' (Transition Teacher).

Principals reflected on the importance of a thorough and accurate assessment in recording each school leaver's support needs to ensure an appropriate placement and supports:

> *He [placement officer] will always say think of it on your child's worst day for the funding … and that's why I sit in as well because I know parents don't want to see their children in the worst light possible (Principal).*

One principal noted that they advised parents to portray all of the needs of their child during the profiling meeting, 'not how great they are, think of the worst scenario, think of the days when they are really bad and they are really high needs … give them the good, the bad and the ugly so that everybody is prepared' (Principal). While another noted 'I would be saying to them "no, definitely say it like it is" … Sometimes you do have to gently guide them [parents] to somewhere else [a different post-school setting]' (Principal).

While the school often facilitates the meeting between the HSE and parents/young person, school personnel repeatedly highlighted they were not directly involved in profiling and were very much separated from the deliberations and decisions made: 'They would be careful about separating our role and the HSE's role' (Principal). In most schools, the principal and/or a teacher (often the teacher with a transition role) attended one or more meetings with the placement officer and their role typically ceased at that point. Hence school leaders felt they were not centrally involved in the full profiling process, and particularly the subsequent placement recommendations and this had implications for their opportunity to support parents and young people through the full process.

Overall, the process was seen as 'holistic' and 'inclusive of everyone's views' (Teacher). However, the extent to which the young adult was part of the decision-making process varied widely, often reflecting the young adult's level of need. 'Some students are not able to make that choice, but others are and do … Some might see something they like and appeals to them, but it might not be the best service to support their needs' (Principal). A few interviewees suggested the process could be more rigorous in terms of expertise and that the profiling should be undertaken by 'a multidisciplinary team, not just a half hour conversation, the process is very superficial' commented one teacher. Some school personnel would like to see greater transparency in the placement process, with the provision of a step-by-step guide for all parties at the outset:

> *Nobody knows how the process works … I don't think anyone is making an informed enough decision to be honest … there is no formal process … I can tell them what I know but all I know is my own experiences based on the last two years … but there is no actual set out steps … School and I [as a parent] would say adult services are all confused, and no one knows their role (Teacher).*

The absence of clear guidelines means some parents are more informed than others, inequalities that are perpetuated by the absence of formal career guidance provision for special schools:

> *Some parents are more informed if they start the process earlier … they look to the school for guidance, but we know career guidance doesn't exist … and without that we don't know what we are doing and … parents are looking to us to make the decisions but we don't know and they [parents] are not empowered (Teacher).*

The level of assessed need determines the funding that will go with the young person to adult services. The placement officer then recommends certain services that 'would suit that [young person]', then 'channelling the student towards the services that would best meet their needs' (Principal). While the process served to remind parents of their child's level of need 'it highlights how dependent they are or how restricted they are in terms of their ability to do things without support' (Principal).

In general, reflections on the process were positive and school personnel and parents alike felt the service was valuable and served an important purpose. It was seen to play an important role for parents often anxious in the pre-transition period and fearful of the change that leaving school will bring. However, there was a recognition of resource constraints impacting on the pathways suggested and supported, and 'often the young person will not get the number of hours [in the post-school setting] that the parent was hoping they would get' (Transition Teacher).

School personnel would like to see greater longer-term follow-up with the school, beyond the initial 'profiling' meeting(s):

> *I would like if there was more of a transition back … if there was more feedback back to the school … I would like to be able to meet with the [adult services] staff who work with that young person to see how they are getting on now (September) and maybe meet again after Halloween. Because some behaviours are not apparent in the first weeks when the children are processing what is going on. And if we could meet again in six to eight weeks' time and I could say well that's typical of their behaviour during the first term in school … There is nothing to tie the two systems together (Teacher).*

Some also sought a more collaborative profiling and transition process where the school would provide an education report, echoing the findings from Inclusion Ireland's study (2022) which stresses the need for more joined up activities working with schools and other services.

> *So everyone would know what level they are educationally and a little bit about how they present in school … And then if the disability teams could be advocates for them, if they could give a picture of the child in terms of occupational therapy, speech and language, psychology, social work and then pass that information on to the service they are going to, it would probably be a smoother transition (Principal).*

> *The profiling doesn't come back to us as a school, we don't know, we are not formally told … We don't even have a copy of the questionnaire they use (Principal).*

They would like the collaboration to continue throughout the process, right to the point of the young adult enrolling in adult services/programmes and for a more seamless process for school leavers and their parents:

> *There still isn't the partnership between schools and the HSE when it comes to the transfer [of students], they are running parallel. They go off and do their profiling and they link with the service providers as to where they go … Each year the profiling has improved a little bit more but at the end of the day I would still have a question over the purpose of the profiling because ultimately I have the profiling which assesses the level of the child, but a lot of the time the parents are still waiting in May or June to find out what course their child will be on or what support has gone with that child (Principal).*

Some school personnel felt profiling was often last minute with placements being confirmed very late in the day (often close to the September starting time) creating stress for school leavers and their parents: 'Everything is a rush, it's just not okay and it makes moving on so much harder' (Teacher).

School personnel reflected on profiling outcomes and the perceived appropriateness of recommended placements. In some cases, there was a sense that budgetary considerations played too great a role in placement outcomes, meaning that young adults were not always progressing to the most appropriate setting in their locality:

> *The placement officers 'try to steer them [parents] in a certain direction … some parents don't like that setting and I say 'if you prefer [name of setting] then fight for it' … but it doesn't seem that they [placement officers] welcome that approach, because obviously they are under pressure, they know there is only so many places available and so many centres (Principal).*

> *All these settings reps sit around the table and look at the profiles of our students and … well [hypothetical name] will cost me 90 thousand but I won't take [hypothetical name] because he'll cost me 120 thousand, even though it might be the best setting … It comes down to finances … Looking at our fabulous students and knowing that they may not be getting the service that's the best placement for them (Principal).*

Overall, there was a recognition that the goal was to find the most appropriate placement from what is available and within the resources available, which may fall short of the best placement to meet the needs and interests of that young adult:

> *The goal is to find the service that most suits their [the young adult's] need, but it may not fully suit their need (Principal).*

The HSE profiling has been in operation since 2015, with school personnel commenting that the process has steadily improved since it was introduced, but room for further improvements was identified around placement timeliness and the extent of ongoing collaboration with key stakeholders (particularly school personnel and parents/young adults):

> *Every year the profiling has slightly improved … when it happened first I think it [the profiling] was in January or February, then it was pushed back to December, then November and now it's October … There is a gap between when the profiling happens, feeding back to the service providers and the children then being offered places (Principal).*

One school noted a change in the process for 2022, where the HSE was looking for an up-to-date diagnostic assessment for their school leavers, providing just two weeks' notice to parents. As this was not normal practice, parents were not expecting it and many students had not been assessed for five to six years. On querying this with the disability officer, the principal was told it was not mandatory at present but would be required before the placement began (mid-September). The principal wrote to the parents and explained this, but they were highly stressed by the experience.

A number expressed a hope for further improvements with New Directions[50], but with concern that geographic accessibility might mean a price in terms of programme diversity and consequently placement suitability. While people would attend a hub in their locality:

> *Each hub may not be providing the full range of options … they might not have a programme that suits your needs, so not every hub can offer every programme … so which is the greater, catering for your needs or catering for the geographical location … if you are not happy where you are going, are you going to continue? It does lead to dropout (Principal).*

5.4.2 Young Adults' and Parents' Reflections on Profiling Process

Parents and young adults were generally positive in reflecting on their experiences of profiling and found the process thorough and responsive to their requests and preferences. A number felt they 'got all the information' they needed from the range of stakeholders involved and welcomed the opportunity to express their views and expectations. These positive experiences reflected the multiple supports received from the HSE and from school personnel, which created a successful and 'seamless' transition experience for many:

> *I did find that process quite good because I was listened to, this is what I said I wanted and it's what we got. He got his extra year [at school], he got his transition programme … They talked about all his needs, they went through everything … It is a really good fit (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

50 New Directions: Report of the National Working Group for the Review of HSE Funded Adult Day Services, Dublin: HSE. Health Service Executive (HSE) (2012). https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/new%20directions%20report.pdf

We worked with the school and the HSE and we decided on this [adult services] place … That was very positive, there was a lovely open three-way communication between the school, [name of HSE placement officer] and the training centre, which I found very helpful … So it was a seamless transition' (Parent of Special School Leaver).

The profiling exercise was recognised as central to this transition process and was key to identifying what programmes and services would best meet the young adult's needs and preferences:

The HSE staff would use a profiling tool to assess the needs and establish the level of care the child would need. Through profiling, I was able to explore what our options were in the area we lived (e.g. Enable Ireland, Rehab Care, Sunbeam services) … The HSE officer brought us through the process over seven months in total, from the first contact with the guidance officer (Parent of Special School Leaver).

Some felt their positive experiences stemmed from the type of disability their child had and their prior engagement with disability services, but not all young adults would necessarily have either access to transition supports or appropriate post-school placements which would meet their needs:

My daughter's diagnosis fell into [multidisciplinary team's] services. The team did work with the school to support the transition … But that didn't happen [for everyone] … Having the right diagnosis in [the] right [geographic] area means that we have relatively good services provided to us (Parent of Special School Leaver).

However, a small number of young adults and parents were less satisfied with the profiling exercise and process. Some parents felt relevant and important information was not conveyed to the post-school setting, an issue also highlighted in a study among Progressing Disability Service (PDS) recipients (Inclusion Ireland, 2022). Others suggested that greater access to and visits with the post-school setting would have greatly improved the transition for all concerned:

She was brought over [to day services] but not enough … there was not enough visits done to make her feel more comfortable, there should have been more … I just don't get the purpose of the [profiling] interview … they knew she needed medication, they knew she needed a nurse, they knew what she needed set up [but that wasn't conveyed to the service provider] (Parent of Special School Leaver).

A number of parents experienced difficulty in completing the relevant application forms to secure day service/programme places for their child and would have liked greater support in this part of the transition. In one case, the parent had not sent the required medical report with the application form resulting in her daughter not being offered a place with implications for her educational and social progress:

She [daughter] wanted to go into the NLN, they sent me out the forms, but I didn't get the medical report. It has been an absolute nightmare [she has not got a place in NLN as a result]. It is not good for her because she is regressing a bit (Parent of Special School Leaver).

In addition to the HSE profiling service and the multidisciplinary team, one parent mentioned the newly established CDNTs and shared their positive experiences in working with this team (see section 1.3 for more details). A transition support team contacted the parent in March-April of the school leaving year, and at that stage the team comprised a behavioural support therapist, a speech and language therapist and an occupational therapist, providing important linkages during the transition:

> *They explained that it was a very new service that they would be only able to get involved in around that period of transition that would be a couple of months before and up to four months after the young person's transition to day services. They linked in with the current multidisciplinary team from my daughter's service provider, and the day service centre where she is now. They are crossing over the time span to make sure that nothing is dropped within that period of time … It was very useful because it focuses on the transition (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

5.5 Summary

In line with the national GUI sample, most students in our study planned to either continue their education or work. However, more than half found it difficult to decide what to do. When making their post-school decisions, students were motivated more by intrinsic factors reflecting the skills or job they would find interesting or fulfilling. There was social structuring in CAO applications, but also in those for DARE. While the latter scheme is designed to target students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, those from non-DEIS schools and from more highly educated backgrounds were more likely to apply, raising an important policy issue.

While teachers encouraged most students to continue their education or training, only a third believed they had the same plans as their peers. Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction with school-based guidance, but also huge diversity in terms of what respondents wanted from guidance. The data suggest the importance of personalised supports which give young people as much or as little guidance as they need. They would also like mentoring from someone already in their chosen field/course. The qualitative data collected in this study also examine how family support, particularly the direct influence of parental assistance and the indirect influence of socioeconomic background, shape the possibilities and opportunities perceived by students.

Overall, young adults attending special schools and their parents reflected positively on their decision-making and felt the HSE profiling was thorough and broadly responsive to their requests and preferences. There is a recognition that the goal is to find the most appropriate placement from what is available and within the resources available, which may fall short of securing the best placement that aligns with the needs and interests of the young adult. School personnel sought a more collaborative profiling and transition process that would extend to their enrolment in adult services/programmes, to create a more seamless transition experience.

CHAPTER 6

Experiences of Post-School Pathways

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines student experiences within a wide array of post-school pathways. Starting with those from mainstream schools, we examine where they went after leaving school and their experiences in different settings. Our discussion then extends to students from special schools, examining their pathways. We conclude by considering transition preparation in post-school settings and support and guidance provision within and beyond those settings, casting a comprehensive view on the multifaceted landscape of student journeys beyond the school environment.

6.2 Reflections of Mainstream School Leavers on Post-School Plans

Most students leaving mainstream schools planned to continue their education, including 62 per cent planning to progress to higher education and 29 per cent to FET. The remainder wanted either to get a job, travel or take time out or were undecided. Over 90 per cent achieved their goals, with fewer progressing to HE (56 per cent) and larger numbers in FET (35 per cent). Young people reflected positively on their choices, with over nine in ten indicating a desire to continue on the same pathway. Their reasons included enjoying the programme, the course aligning with their original post-school plans and personal interests, opportunities for exploration, improved job prospects and learning practical skills.

Interviewees in HE reported enjoying their courses and wider student life, though some reported finding the work challenging or the timetable and courseload hectic. Enjoyment of the subjects they were studying was widespread and appeared to drive the positive academic engagement they reported. Subject specific teaching and learning methods like labs, coding work and discussion-based tutorials were particularly enjoyed. While some found the social aspects of college initially daunting, overall they appreciated the college atmosphere. Some were already receiving support from disability support services in their institution while others felt they did not currently need it but knew where to go if they did.

Students in apprenticeships reported positive experiences, valuing the work's practical nature and the supportive atmosphere within their settings. Although the apprenticeship setting had no formal mechanisms for supporting students with disabilities in place, they found they could access any supports or accommodations they needed by discussing it with staff and were generally happy with the situation.

One interviewee was completing a gap year, travelling and working in an entry-level, part-time position in the field they hoped to enter after completing a FET or HE course. While they expressed positivity about their work and personal reflections, they also highlighted the challenge of making new friends after their school peers had moved on. Another interviewee had entered

the labour market after completing a brief course in an area of interest. They could work only part-time due to a chronic condition but were generally positive about their work and wider life. An exception was the young person unsure about continuing their course beyond the current academic year and another who was NEET. They were trying to access an apprenticeship or failing that re-enter the labour market having been employed full time and laid off in the three months between leaving school and taking part in the interview. They were hoping they would find an apprenticeship or employment soon as they were struggling to fill their days without work and coming under financial strain. Further exploration of the NEET group will be presented in section 6.4.1 using case study research.

NLN learners were asked about their plans when leaving school. Most planned to pursue an NLN course (56 per cent), with a small number aiming for FET or HE courses (10 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively), with more girls planning to progress to the NLN. Entering the workforce, attending specialist services or taking time off were noted by fewer young people and around 10 per cent had no clear plan at that time. Reasons for attending NLN courses were primarily intrinsic, including learning new skills, preparing them for future education and work, fostering confidence and independence, and making friends. Some reported that NLN courses allowed them additional time to adapt to life at a later stage and provided them with more options. These sentiments were echoed in interviews with students from the School Leavers' Survey, where one highlighted the NLN's positive aspects, particularly in job preparation and developing social and workplace skills. A small number of NLN learners mentioned that their decision was influenced by family or school suggestions.

6.3 Post-School Experiences in FET Settings

This section explores students' post-school experiences including programme choice, challenges faced, plans for the future and overall experiences within their setting.

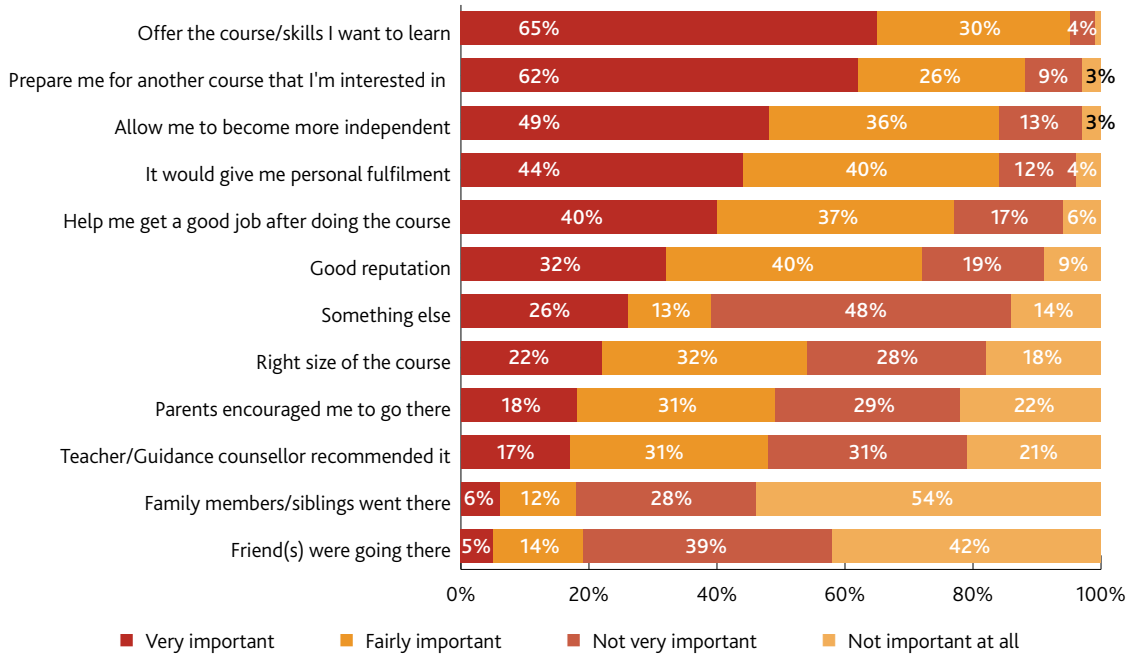
6.3.1 Post-School Programme Choice

Most of the school leaver cohort were pursuing a bachelor's degree (NFQ level 8) (56 per cent), followed by NFQ levels 5 or 6 courses (35 per cent). A small number were taking an ordinary degree (NFQ level 7) and a few were on NLN programmes. Most were enrolled full-time (95 per cent) with the remainder either studying part-time or with other arrangements.

NLN students attended programmes specifically designed for them, with Access being the most popular. Others included Advance, Employability Skills, Option, Skills 4 Life, Sports and Recreation, Transition, and Voyages. Most were satisfied with their course (over 90 per cent) and this stemmed from making new friends, being in a friendly environment, having supportive and approachable centre staff, appropriate course difficulty level and content, a good mix of classroom teaching and practical work experiences and learning new skills, especially those relevant for future work and education. Concerns were raised, however, about not having enough opportunity to engage with peers due to age gaps, finding the course 'boring' and just following what they were told to do.

PLC students were predominantly enrolled on level 5 (81 per cent) and level 6 (12 per cent) programmes, with the main subject areas 'other' (44 per cent), community and health services (11 per cent), art (10 per cent), business studies (8 per cent), nursing studies (8 per cent) and information technology (7 per cent). In their choices, students were motivated by programme content and quality. The course offering desired subjects/skills (95 per cent), preparing them for another course (88 per cent), enhancing independence (85 per cent), personal fulfilment (84 per cent) and facilitating job opportunities (77 per cent) all featured prominently (Figure 6.1). This is echoed by open-ended survey responses where students stressed the importance of high-quality teaching, relevant course content (e.g., 'a great course combining practical and theory'), 'enjoyable' and 'interesting' learning experiences, a supportive learning environment and the current programme equipping them with relevant skills and knowledge aligned with their career or education interests. Just under half considered advice from teachers or guidance counsellors as 'very' or 'fairly' important, suggesting many students are not relying on school personnel in making post-school decisions, potentially reflecting time constraints at school or insufficient guidance supports/personnel.

Figure 6.1 Factors influencing post-school programme/course choice



Data Source: PLC Students' Survey.

Most PLC students were positive about their PLC programme choice, with nearly nine in ten indicating they would 'probably' or 'definitely' take the same programme again. Students reporting additional needs (13 per cent with SEN and 5 per cent without) and those who struggled academically (13 per cent who found their programme difficult and 5 per cent who did not) were more likely to report they regretted their programme choice.

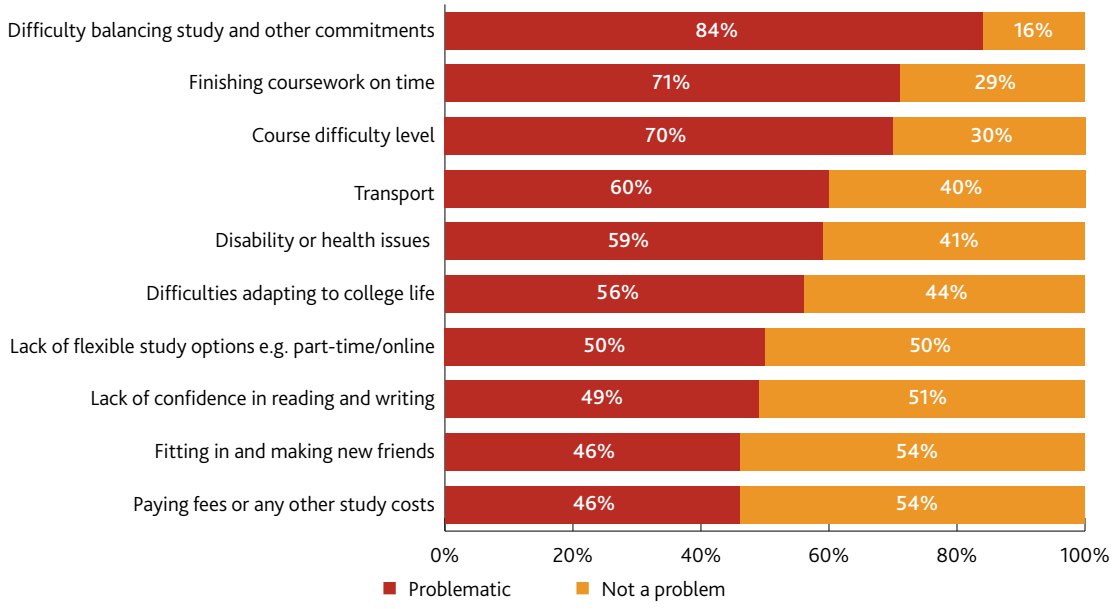
Reasons for this include the programme's unsuitability in content and difficulty level. While some found it 'too intense' or 'stressful,' others deemed it 'not challenging enough. Others identified criticisms around programme content, lack of preparation for work and teaching approaches.

6.3.2 Course Experiences

In terms of the difficulties PLC students encountered in their first year, most found it challenging to balance study and other commitments (84 per cent), with this more prevalent where they were unclear about course expectations. They also found it challenging to finish coursework on time (71 per cent) as well as adapt to the programme's difficulty level (70 per cent). More than half revealed concerns over transport, disability or health issues, as well as difficulties adapting to college life. Notably, close to half struggled with paying fees or other study costs (46 per cent). Similar responses were recorded among respondents in the School Leavers' Survey, where a high proportion struggled to balance study and other commitments. They found it difficult to finish coursework on time, faced challenges in adapting to college life and making new friends, and also experienced financial difficulties.

For PLC students, notable gaps were observed in SEN status and PLC programme experiences. Students with special educational needs, particularly those with multiple conditions, were more likely to find course difficulty levels a problem compared to their peers (80 per cent of those with multiple conditions vs 66 per cent with a single condition vs 60 per cent without SEN). In addition to academic challenges, this group faced social difficulties and a higher proportion, especially those with more complex needs, found it challenging to fit in and make new friends (52 per cent with multiple conditions vs 34 per cent without SEN). Gender and socioeconomic background played a role, with boys and those experiencing economic difficulties finding it difficult to fit in compared to their peers (51 per cent boys vs 43 per cent girls, and 51 per cent with economic difficulty vs 38 per cent without). Students with special educational needs were more likely to struggle with public transport to attend their course (64 per cent with SEN vs 49 per cent without). Those with such needs were more likely to find inflexible study options problematic, with 56 per cent with SEN and 39 per cent without considering this an issue. The results highlight the importance of accessible public transport and flexible study options, such as online courses, to accommodate students' increasingly diverse needs.

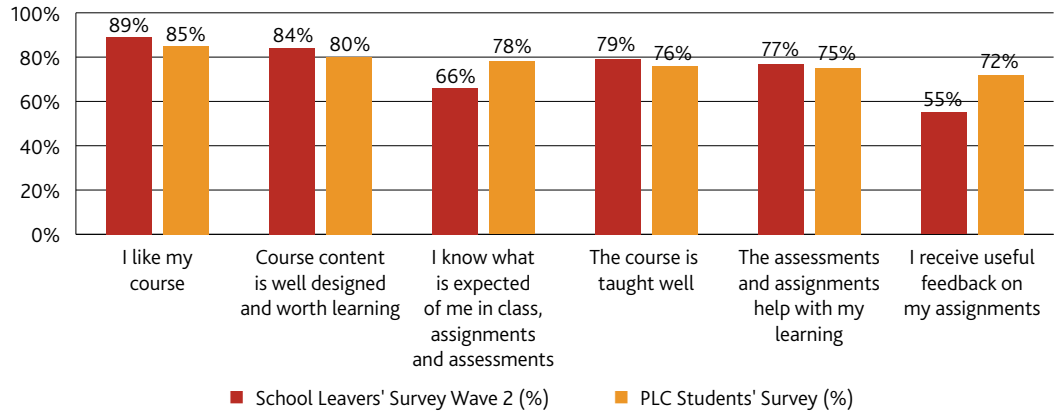
Figure 6.2 Difficulties in taking PLC courses (All Students)



Data source: PLC Students' Survey.

When asked to reflect on their course experiences, most were positive, with 89 per cent of students from the Wave 2 School Leavers' Survey and 85 per cent of PLC students liking their course (Figure 6.3). Satisfaction with course content, teaching quality and assignments was high. PLC students were more aware of class and assignment expectations and more positive about receiving useful feedback on their assignments compared to students across a range of settings in the School Leavers' Survey. For PLC students, more positive responses were reported by girls, those from more highly educated families and among students without SEN (81 per cent of those with multiple conditions compared to 86 per cent of those with a single condition and 93 per cent of those without SEN reporting liking their course). Students with special educational needs faced challenges in understanding what was expected of them, while 71 per cent of those with multiple conditions were clear about this as was the case for 87 per cent of those without SEN.

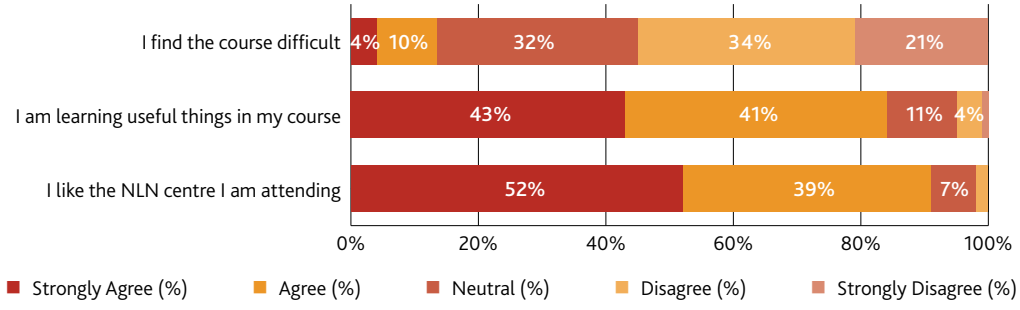
Figure 6.3 Comparison of post-school course experiences with students in PLC colleges and other post-school settings



Data source: School Leavers' Survey Wave 2, PLC Students' Survey.

Although students attending NLN courses were asked slightly different questions about their experiences in their centres, positive responses were evident regardless of individual characteristics or family background. Over nine in ten indicated they liked their current centre and 83 per cent felt they were learning useful things in their programme. Just 14 per cent found their course difficult.

Figure 6.4 NLN learners' experiences with NLN programme



Data Source: NLN Learners' Survey.

The school leavers' cohort was also asked to reflect on difficulty level and motivation levels in their post-school course. More than half agreed the course met their expectations, 59 per cent felt motivated in their studies, while 45 per cent reported being able to organise their time well on their course.

Most students, specifically 77 per cent of PLC students and 96 per cent of those in the School Leavers' Survey, reported they expected to finish their programme[51]. Reasons for non-completion among PLC students included mental stress, challenges in balancing study with other commitments like caring and work responsibilities, financial constraints and dissatisfaction with teaching quality or programme suitability. Consistent with earlier findings, differences in completion plans are closely related to SEN status and family background. The proportion of students with special educational needs who have considered dropping out is over twice that of those without SEN (28 per cent with vs 11 per cent without SEN). Additionally, students from less advantaged families (where parents did not attend university and those who experienced economic difficulties) were also more likely to consider dropping out. Course experiences played an important role in understanding these completion plans – those dissatisfied with course content, teaching, assignments and feedback received were significantly more likely to consider leaving.

6.4 Main Post-School Pathways Taken by Special School Students

The young adults leaving special school settings varied widely in their post-school pathways, but most transitioned to a range of adult services and vocational programmes, rather than mainstream education settings such as higher education or PLC programmes. The schools had a clear focus on ensuring all leavers would have a placement, with repeated mentions of the importance of progression: 'The worst thing would be if somebody didn't have a service' (Teacher). School personnel noted that for young adults and parents, the move to an adult service was often seen as more reassuring, particularly where the service was near the special school and/or home. Overall, school personnel noted an increase in the range of opportunities available over time and a perception that 'there has been an expansion in the range of services, particularly for ASD, so there is choice there for the parents now' (Principal). However, some school personnel, parents and young adults themselves would have liked more choice in placements, settings and services available for school leavers, particularly for those not progressing to mainstream education programmes. There was evidence of regional and geographic variation in programme and service type available, and variation in programme availability to meet different types of needs, interests and aspirations.

To preserve the anonymity of schools (and their location), young adults and parents, the following provides a broad overview of the initial post-school pathways of those leaving the eight schools in 2022. A small minority progressed to ETB courses and FET programmes in specialised areas of vocational training. About a quarter progressed to NLN programmes where participants 'need to be learning independent – have to be able to clock in in the mornings, get there themselves etc.' (Principal). In many cases, participants in the LCA progressed to NLN or mainstream FET

51 Students in PLC colleges and those tracked from the School Leavers' Survey were asked slightly different questions. PLC students were asked 'Have you considered leaving the course?' with a binary response Yes or No. Students from the School Leavers' Survey were asked 'How likely do you think it is that you will complete the course?', with a seven-category response ranging from Definitely, Very Likely, Likely, Unlikely, Very Unlikely, to Definitely Will Not.

programmes like PLCs. Overall, a further quarter progressed to a wide diversity of adult day services. These included transition, rehabilitative and a range of other (sometimes community developed) programmes. Rehabilitative training programmes are designed to equip participants with the basic personal, social and work-related skills that will enable them to progress to greater levels of independence and integration in the community[52]. Many of these services offered QQI programmes with a strong emphasis on a diversity of independent living skills.

A small number of school leavers were not enrolled on any programme or employment at the time of the fieldwork (during September and early October 2022). They were either waiting for places on a day services programme or indicating there was no suitable programme or service available to meet their needs. In the study's second phase we explored the experiences of young adults in day services and those with NEET status to gain a greater understanding of the barriers they experience. This is discussed at the end of this section.

Across a number of areas, interviewees noted that school leavers were also accessing a diversity of services on an informal/drop-in basis. These were focused on providing guidance on potential pathways and developing key skills to allow them to access services, such as communication and practical skills like using public transport. Some also participated in the School Leavers' Ability Project, working with specialised staff before leaving school and into the post-school period. This project supported students in diverse ways, including developing a communication passport, identifying their needs and interests, guiding them in how to go about learning to drive, how to use public transport, how to set up a bank account, the disability allowance and what they are entitled to do/how many hours they can work. They discussed the range of options available, visiting their homes and continuing their work through the summer holidays, supporting their transition from school to placement, programme or place of employment. Interviewees reflected very positively on the role and impact of this programme and the support and guidance provided in ensuring a successful post-school transition was appreciated.

School personnel spoke of the important role played by training centres specifically designed to meet the school leaver needs, initially developed as part of a community-based initiative. In one case a training facility was set up to serve the area after the special school was established, oriented to support young adults with moderate learning disabilities. The centre was considered to have 'excellent, highly tailored facilities' which include a print shop, a garden and a local house bought to allow young people to practise their daily living skills with a second 'more work oriented' building. Participants move through the different centres, with placements typically running for four years at the end of which some are employed to work there. The centre is seen as 'the preferred place' for school leavers: they are 'all good placements and [they are] happy'. Insufficient capacity means not all applicants get a place, however.

52 https://rehab.ie/national-learning-network/info-and-support/rehabilitative-training-courses/

While some school personnel and parents spoke positively about the pathways available and transition success, at least during the initial weeks when the research was carried out others felt not all placements were ideal and funding was seen to affect the suitability of what was on offer: 'If there was more funding they could offer a better range of services' (Transition Teacher). In a number of areas, interviewees indicated that not all groups were equally catered for in terms of services currently available, highlighting a 'geographical lottery' (Teacher). School leaders and teachers reflected on the diversity of provision available and the extent to which suitable educational placements were available for all. In one area the principal indicated that students with higher and lower need levels were provided for, but the 'group in the middle' were not, with many of them moving to settings that did not meet their needs:

> *Some of our students stay at home [when they leave school]… could be about 10 per cent … The NLN are limited in the programmes they can offer … they need to have a better academic ability [for these programmes] … It is people in the middle of the road who are lost … there are a very limited amount of places that our students can go to (Principal).*

In another school students with severe/profound intellectual disabilities were seen to have fewer educational opportunities, opportunities which in this case depended on the county they lived in:

> *I would think that the pupils with a moderate learning disability are catered for, mild to moderate yes, but the children with severe to profound, I don't feel there is an awful lot out there for them. We cater for two counties and one county is catered for better than the other county, which is very hard for parents (Principal).*

In this school, young adults in the 'other' county had not the same educational opportunities when they left, with longer term implications for their development and fulfilment. They

> *… are going to day activation units, but they are not happy … because of the setting, it looks like a shed … the look of it puts people off and when you go into it, it's a big open space. It's just not very welcoming … And it is just care, there is no education (Principal).*

Finally, in another school, interviewees saw a particular gap in provision for students with behavioural difficulties. One teacher noted:

> *For the pupils that might have serious behavioural issues, what are the options for them? … There are a couple of pupils in my class that will be finishing up in a couple of years and the parents are starting to go 'what's going to happen?' … A lot of places won't want to take pupils with behavioural issues (Teacher).*

While provision was seen to be increasing in response to growing need, other principals noted a growing gap for students with autism as their numbers were increasing over time. In one case, the principal was aware of a new service being developed to meet their needs:

> *They are opening a centre for ASD, with more of a need for placement here given a changing profile of need in this school (Principal).*

School personnel noted a growing prevalence of students 'experiencing strong stress and anxiety and for them you would need an extra type of facility or service or have a better funded service that can meet their needs. They need their own quiet space' (Transition Teacher).

Alongside gaps in providers to meet different needs, others were seen in the types of interest areas addressed. One parent and young adult reflected on the absence of an arts-based programme in their area, noting the availability of this elsewhere:

> *He loves music. If we were living in [name of city] he would be in [programme], because he loves drama, he loves singing, he loves cinema, he loves all that type of stuff [but that type of programme is not available in his area] (Parent).*

School leaders and parents again noted changes underway under the New Directions policy[53] that aims to support school leavers to access supports and services in their local area – which is not always the area where their school is. The policy

> *… has had an impact on parents looking at where their child is going to attend after they leave here. With New Directions you are supposed to access a service nearer to your home, it is all about the school leaver becoming familiar with their own community … With New Directions the objective is for the student to access services in their own community (Principal).*

6.4.1 Extent to Which Plans are Realised (Leavers from Special Schools and Young People in NEET Group)

Drawing on longitudinal research with special schools leavers alongside interviews with young people in the NEET group and those attending day services, we examine young people's plans on leaving school and whether these are later realised. The ten school leavers from the special schools all displayed high levels of active choice in their planning and positivity about the choices available to them.

> *When I was going to see NLN, I found they didn't really do as much that was of interest to me. But when I came here, I found there was more stuff that I enjoyed … I did a sampling week in the day service. When I first done the sample week, I wished I could have started there and then, because I didn't want to wait then until September (Day Services Participant).*

Eight of those leaving planned to attend adult day services or rehabilitative training programmes and each had formed these plans following support from the HSE placement officer, school personnel and parents. Visits and sample weeks in the different centres formed an important part of decision-making even if these were somewhat affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

> *I'm hoping to get a letter from Rehab and I'm looking forward to that, my friends are there too, my friends from Special Olympics. I have been to visit, and I felt comfortable there and I feel excited about going there and about becoming more independent. I think it will be better than school (Special School Leaver).*

53 https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/disability/newdirections/new%20directions%20report.pdf

After school I'm going to college. I will be going to [name of day service]. We kind of went down there to visit … I definitely would like the place because, like, I'm going to [be] close to town … They kind of give you like, a choice of your own, like what kind of subjects or what kind of work experience you want to do (Special School Leaver).

He didn't want the NLN because it was a school setting and he didn't want to do a school setting again. Then we heard about [name of day service], and when he went down there for a week, for sampling, oh my god the difference in him, he was a lot more relaxed, it's for him (Parent of Special School Leaver).

There was an air of quiet excitement for many school leavers and their families, with clear plans and hopeful anticipation.

He can't wait to start in [day service]. Many of his friends will join him there. He will be there for three years (Parent of Special School Leaver).

I will go to [day service] and will start at 9 and finish at 3.30pm. I will have to take a public bus to get there, I haven't done that before so I will practise that in the summer (Special School Leaver).

She is excited about going on to college and a lot of her friends will be with her. Monday to Thursday 9.30 to 3.30 and half day Friday. She is looking forward to cooking, outings and online courses in different areas (Parent of Special School Leaver).

Follow-up interviews in winter 2023 revealed high levels of satisfaction from school leavers and their parents about placements secured and the realisation of plans even if the original ones were sometimes constrained by services/programmes available in their locality. The transitions could be described as largely successful, bringing relief and joy for students and their families. For some the success reflected a 'little bit of extra independence' and the diversity of experiences available:

She loves it, there is so much, she does her sports, her swimming, her cooking, bowling and she does her advocacy, her decision-making … It is the right setting for her needs, she needs that level of support … In a year or two she might move to the higher level and do more courses and work experience (Parent of Special School Leaver).

We were hoping to get into [name of day service] and that happened and is getting 15 hours a week and we are delighted with it. He goes in Monday, Wednesday and Friday. This smaller place now suits him (Parent of Special School Leaver).

They do lots of courses, they go into shops, they see where they might like to work … I am very happy with his progress, he is busy (Parent of Special School Leaver).

Many school leavers had friends accompanying them to the new setting, which made decision-making and transition much easier.

All of my friends are going to [service], nearly all my class, it is only five minutes away on the bus. I chatted with my teacher and my parents and came to the decision that this is the best option for me (Special School Leaver).

It seems to be suiting her … I think she has settled in well, mainly because two of her best friends went with her, the stability of having two buddies means a lot (Parent of Special School Leaver).

Young adults all appeared satisfied with their experiences in the new settings (across diverse pathways – adult services, training programmes). They were very much part of their pathway decision and many made that decision after a sampling period in the setting (ranging from a day to a week). They were proud of their role in the decision-making process and several were keen to convey that they had made the final decision. They conveyed a range of reasons for their choice from liking the setting when they visited, to liking the types of activities on offer: 'He didn't want to sit in a class all day, he wanted to do stuff' (Parent of School Leaver). The young people and their families repeatedly referred to placement suitability for their needs at this time and a stepping stone in a longer-term process of career and personal development.

> *I would be looking for a push towards more occupational stuff as she progresses through the programme. At the moment it is the right thing for her to do … more of a safety net at the moment … It is still at the minding end of things. Not quite college, not quite secondary school, but where she needs to be at the moment (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

In interview, the parent of the NLN learner reported a successful transition that was reflected in his happy demeanour since joining the programme:

> *He's very happy … to see him coming home every day, he's a lot happier in himself, and he's a lot more content … He does love the NLN, where he is now (Parent of NLN Learner).*

Overall, parents were generally positive about transition and satisfied with the placement's suitability:

> *She [daughter] is in the NLN in [name of area]. So far so good, she has settled in very well … she seems to be very comfortable there, she is full of chat about it … she wanted to go there, it's a good fit for her I think (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Some parents also expressed an appreciation that they were part of the process and their views were listened to in terms of programme design and supports provided:

> *It's so transparent, I went in there and they sat me down and asked me what would I like for [name]. I said I know what [name of daughter] would like for [name] and I know what I would like for [name]. We worked really well together, we put things in place, they listened to me as a parent and they listened to [name] and they were quite amazing (Parent of Day Services Participant).*

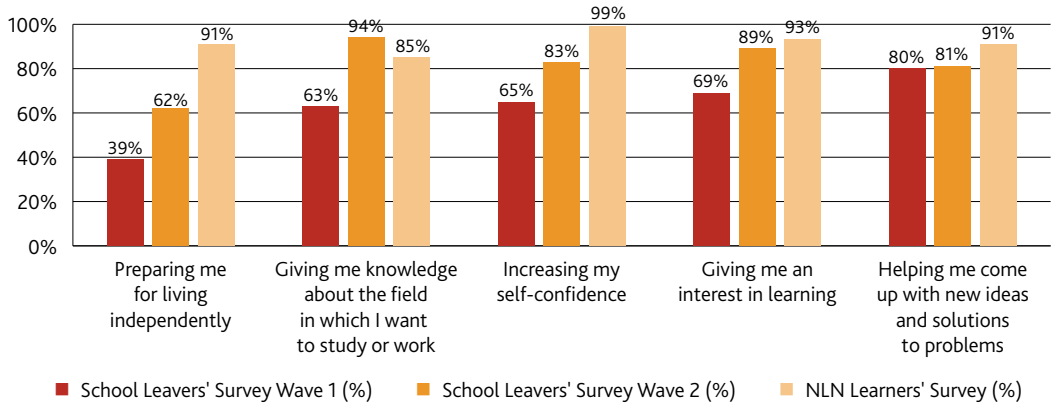
6.5 Skills Development at Post-School Settings

In this section, we explore students' skills development across a wide range of post-school settings. We begin by examining their reflections on their personal and interpersonal skills development in their current post-school setting.

6.5.1 Personal Development

Compared to school leavers in the Wave 1 survey, those in post-school settings expressed much greater positivity about their personal and interpersonal skills development, especially in providing relevant knowledge about their future field of work or study, fostering an interest in learning, and helping them generate new ideas and solutions to problems, with over 80 per cent finding their college or centre helpful (Figure 6.5 below). Notably, the proportion of students finding their current setting helpful in preparing them for living independently has risen from 39 per cent in the Wave 1 survey to 62 per cent in Wave 2 and 91 per cent among NLN learners. The latter were positive about their course increasing their confidence and especially in preparing them for living independently.

Figure 6.5 Perceived helpfulness of school/post-school course in developing personal and interpersonal skills



Data Source: NLN Learners' Survey, School Leavers' Survey Wave 1 and Wave 2.

Many young adults relished their greater independence and the opportunity to make decisions for themselves and learn new skills. This was notable among participants in adult day services and NLN programmes:

> *We do different classes as well, you sign up for classes you would like to do … There is one called personal effectiveness and there is another one, social and emotional [wellbeing]. You learn about wellbeing, communication, your own emotions, your listening skills, like learning to do more eye contact things like that (Day Services Participant).*

The focus on personal development was evident, with initial courses serving as a stepping stone for further education and career development:

> *It's a QQI level 3 [course daughter is doing], really it's for sussing out what her aptitudes are, what she likes, it's a personal development course so that she will know herself what she'd like to do (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

All appeared happy so far, enjoying the greater independence that comes with using public transport and some had already made new friends. On longer-term hopes, one young adult liked cooking so hoped to work in this area after the four-year programme.

One student with a moderate intellectual disability spoke about his experience in a day service: 'I am in the [name of centre]. I am there two weeks … We do theatre, arts, the gym, my legs are sore [laughs] ... we get to choose [what activities we do]'. The young man prepared and brought his lunch with him each day. He knew no one else when he started but had made friends already. He conveyed that he was very happy: 'I am perfectly fine.'

Another parent asked her daughter during interview if she would like to stay in adult services or go back to school:

> *She said she would definitely stay … they are a great bunch [in the day service], they really want her to settle in, they really want it to work for her … they do great things … they do a lot of good work (Parent and Special School Leaver)*

Another parent and young adult reflected on what they saw as a successful transition:

> *We are all happy … She is happy going, she is happy coming home, she has got her bit of independence, we are sending her on the bus … she has made lots of friends and getting through the work (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Overall, parents were generally satisfied with placement suitability and the learning and care they observed even at this early point in the course:

> *She needs to have a meaning behind and a purpose behind the things she does. So I didn't want her going into a service where you were filling in a day. I wanted a service where she would get a lot from it and develop and grow and eventually someday go into the workforce (Parent of Day Services Participant).*

> *They do everything – horse-riding, badminton, every sport, soccer, you name it. They also have a fantastic literacy scheme in place. And all the social things they do together … They have organised social events, bringing them to [city name] and that's what a 19-year-old wants. They don't want to be with mammy (Parent of Day Services Participant).*

School leavers and their parents repeatedly spoke with great excitement of the activities and programmes on offer along with opportunities for personal and social development:

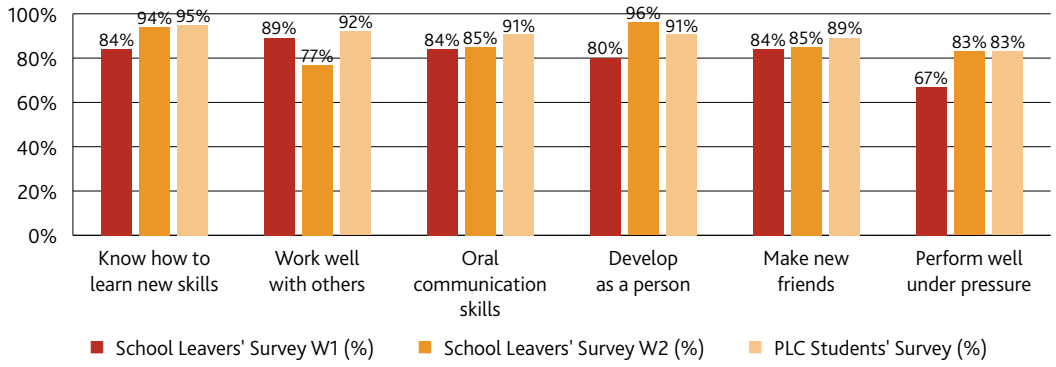
> *I go swimming, do social skills, gym, bowling … and I like [them]. I get a lift from my dad. My friends from school went all different places and they meet for dinner. I found the transition to day service OK. I am smiling when I go in each morning (Day Services Participant).*

A few parents and young adults raised some concerns, however, over the level of challenge and activities provided during the day and the extent of educational content within the programme:

> *At the moment [he is doing] very little … When he was here [at school], it was very motivated all day long … he knew what he was doing every day … he was working extremely hard … And now that we have gone here … it's a case of earphones, on a computer a lot and I'm not too happy with that … it still should be a college type situation, he still needs to learn reading, mathematics … he loves it [learning] (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Compared to mainstream school leavers, PLC students are generally more satisfied with their skills development (Figure 6.6), with the vast majority finding their PLC course helpful in acquiring skills, collaborating with others, developing as a person and making new friends. While 83 per cent of PLC students saw benefits in their ability to deal with pressure, this compared to 67 per cent of final-year second-level students. Students with special educational needs, however, were less positive. For instance, 44 per cent of them compared to 61 per cent without SEN found their PLC course 'helped a lot' with developing oral communication skills. While boys and girls held similar views on oral communication skills development, gender differences emerged in written skills development, managing pressure, learning new skills and personal development, with more positive responses from girls.

Figure 6.6 Perceived helpfulness of school and PLC course in developing general skills

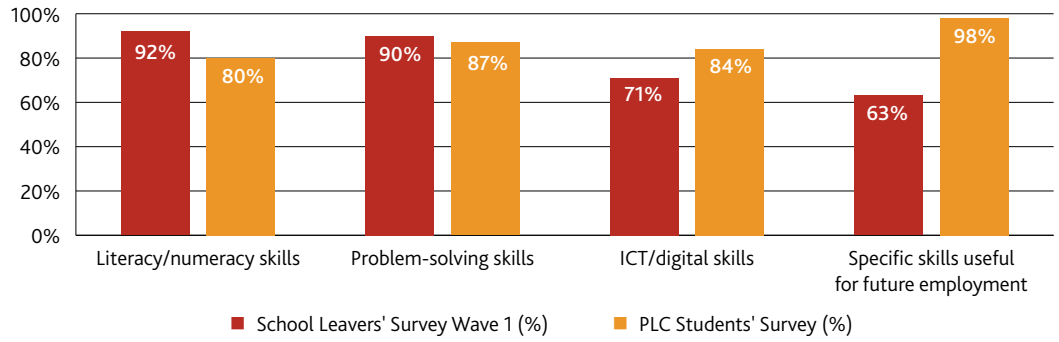


Data source: PLC Students' Survey, School Leavers' Survey Wave 1 and Wave 2.

6.5.2 Specific Skills

In terms of specific skills development, PLC students again reflected more positively than school leavers, particularly for skills useful for future employment or education and ICT/digital skills (Figure 6.7). Students indicating multiple SEN were much less likely to reflect positively, with 32 per cent indicating their PLC courses helped their literacy/numeracy skills 'a lot' compared to 46 per cent of students without SEN. Just 38 per cent with multiple SEN reported their PLC course 'helps a lot' with problem solving skills compared to 48 per cent of those without a SEN. The gap is wider for ICT skills: 46 per cent of students with multiple SEN indicated their course was benefiting their skills 'a lot' compared to 61 per cent of non-SEN students. Students with additional needs reported less positive PLC experiences in course content and adapting to college life, while girls were also more positive around developing skills for employment.

Figure 6.7 Specific skills development in PLC college, % of students finding it 'helps a lot' or 'helps a little'



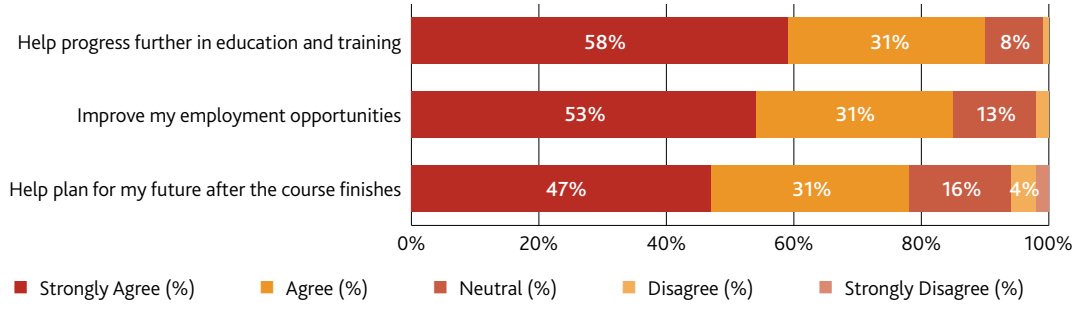
Data source: PLC Students' Survey, School Leavers' Survey Wave 1.

Note: In Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, the item 'specific skills useful for future employment' was included as 'School gave me knowledge about the field in which I want to study or work'.

In reflecting on preparation for the future, respondents were generally positive, particularly about their PLC helping their progression in education and employment (Figure 6.8). Patterns are broadly similar across students with and without special educational needs, although fewer with it indicated their PLC course supported them in planning for the future (76 per cent with SEN vs 84 per cent without).

The overall positive responses were echoed in interviews with students in the School Leavers' Survey. Interviewees attending PLCs were generally enjoying their course and student life, with several drawing very favourable comparisons between their PLC course and their experiences in school. In particular, the practical side of the courses was highlighted as enjoyable and as better suited to many than the type of teaching and learning in school. Several remarked on how the classroom atmosphere combined sociality and productivity in a way they deeply enjoyed. Some had work experience incorporated into the course and saw this as adding to its practical side.

Figure 6.8 Preparedness for the future among PLC participants



Data source: PLC Students' Survey.

6.6 Provision of Supports at Post-School Settings

6.6.1 Supports Provided at Post-School Settings

PLC students were surveyed about additional supports received (Table 6.1), with 45 per cent receiving extra support at their college. Among recipients in post-school settings, most found them helpful. Similar to mainstream students, key supports included career guidance, learning assistance and support from class tutors. For postsecondary students across a range of settings, consistent with their school SEN supports, academic supports (such as learning support for specific subjects and those from their class tutor) remained prominent in post-school settings. Assistance from the DSP or English Language Supports were less frequently cited among PLC and school leaver respondents. Exam or assignment accommodations were frequently noted among school leavers across a range of settings while PLC students noted financial supports, counselling or psychological support and disability support services. However, despite a significant proportion disclosing that they experienced emotional or mental conditions, only a small number received counselling or psychological supports at their setting. Interestingly, no NLN learners reported 'never' getting any supports. The numbers receiving each type of support cannot be shown due to data disclosure control.

Students were asked about the reasons for not receiving additional supports at their PLC setting. The most common was a reluctance to reveal their additional needs, with 33 per cent saying they preferred not to talk about them, 15 per cent concerned about being unfairly judged if they revealed them and 15 per cent not wanting their peers to find out those needs.

On their access to disability support services, most who used these services accessed them easily (77 per cent) while more than seven in ten wanted them, indicating unmet need reflecting either lack of awareness or availability of such supports.

Table 6.1 Additional Supports Used by PLC Students

	N of PLC Student Getting Support(s)
Career Guidance	107
Learning Supports	75
Class Tutor Support	69
Financial Support other than Student Ireland (SUSI) Grant	54
Counselling/Psychological Supports	47
Disability Support Service	26
Support from Department of Social Protection	12
English Language Supports	*
Childcare	*

Data Source: PLC Students' Survey.

Note: Students can choose more than one option if applicable. The number of mainstream school cohort receiving additional supports cannot be reported due to disclosure control.

NLN learners were also asked to rate the adequacy of support in their centres. All received supports with most feeling they 'usually' or 'always' received enough (89 per cent). Around 35 per cent indicated they would like more support, including learning support (for specific subjects and with their spelling and writing), job-relevant training or work experience, or more individualised supports such as 'someone to sit and do the work with [them]'.

6.6.2 Supports/Challenges in Supports For Special School Leavers

In our research with students, parents and personnel from special schools, three main challenges were identified relating to timing and intensity of placements, transport supports and continuity of supports between settings.

Timing and Intensity of Placement

The transition brings with it a host of new experiences for the young adults and their parents. While many successfully progress to education/training programmes or services others experience difficulties. For a few young adults this can create longer term challenges in their access to education, training and further services. The many changes experienced on leaving school can be unsettling for some young adults and while attending school provided

> *… a predictable routine, it's well-established, the students can manage, but then when they are taken out of this environment sometimes they can't cope … [for one student] the lack of structure and the unknowingness of what's ahead of him, he is finding that really difficult (Principal).*

There was widespread recognition that the supports would never be at the level received at school and while this was not seen as a criticism it was seen as the reality in moving from a school setting.

> *I don't think they [the young adults] will ever get the time, the predictability of a full week, the duration of the day, I don't think they will ever get that again (Principal).*

For some there was a delay in starting their new programme and one young adult was waiting at home for months. This arose for a range of reasons as one principal explained, with serious implications for the student, their progress, wellbeing and self-esteem:

> *It might be a problem with transport funding, it might be the service provider is recruiting and they don't have adequate staff … these young adults need some sense of predictability, they need that routine and to be sitting at home causes untold problems … It's like going back to COVID when they were at home, all the behavioural needs that were presenting then, with the elevated anxiety (Principal).*

This was observed by three other principals. One noted: 'It's coming into October and some of our students haven't started … its staffing [problems in the adult day service].' A second noted starting delays for several school leavers, while a third commented:

> *What we hear a lot is houses are full, they have to set up a new one, it could be November before they start … so there is always a huge delay (Principal).*

School personnel repeatedly highlighted challenges in staff turnover in the day services which, as well as affecting the readiness of service providers to enrol young adults as planned, impacted on the intensity of the service. One centre was offering a school leaver just two hours per day, five days a week, which proved untenable given a long commute time. Another was attending one hour a day with staffing and lack of engagement cited for this. Shorter days meant difficulties arranging transport:

> *We had another student while he is allocated 20 hours per week, he is actually only getting one hour a day … it is partly staffing, the other reason they [parents] were given was that the staff weren't sure what to do with him because he seems bored, and he asked to go home … and I was like you could actually distract and redirect him (Principal).*

> *I think the hours is the one that parents find the hardest, that and the transport … if both parents are working … it really heavily impacts when it comes to getting them to and from adult placement, particularly if they are only getting a couple of hours a day … so it could be that [hypothetical name] is not starting until 10 or 11 o'clock and has to be picked up at 2, 3 o'clock, so that's a huge difficulty (Principal).*

It is difficult to assess how many leavers moving to adult day services experienced disrupted or delayed transitions. Nearly all school leaders raised it as an issue and some suggested the difficulties were prevalent in their experience, meaning attendance patterns were often shorter than they would have been at school.

> *Recently they are not getting full weeks, they might get two days. Not many of them got full-time, since COVID ... they get a shared place [in day service] (Principal).*

Transport Supports

Transport issues were frequently highlighted by school personnel, parents and young adults and getting to and from the post-school settings was a 'huge issue': 'So if they have to get to a centre, [transport facilities are] going to be a huge factor and a lot of the time there isn't enough of a budget to put transport in place' (Transition Teacher). Some school leaders observed that the absence of transport (and support on transport) meant young adults did not transition to a post-school setting, while in others their choices were constrained:

> *Because of transport, the parents can be limited in choice … I know parents who may have liked [name of service], but there isn't one in their locality, so they have to go with [another service] … Because of transport they are limited in where they can choose (Principal).*

> *Most of our children are very rural, so transport is a massive problem … when they leave [school] … so that's going to be a massive barrier. And some would need support on the transport (Principal).*

With many adult services based in urban centres, there were widespread difficulties for young adults and their parents in accessing them on a daily basis. 'We still have students leaving and parents being told you may not get transport' (Principal). To reduce the budget allocated to transport, one principal noted that some centres had been looking at young adults sharing transport to ensure

they could attend. But this has a zero-sum effect, affecting the services then offered: '… to a certain extent this [funding for transport] is taking away from funding that should support the programme and it means that you will be reducing the number of hours that students get' (Principal). Being able to use public transport was key in accessing the most suitable settings for some.

In many cases these views contrasted with what were regarded as excellent transport supports while the young person was in school. Most of the special schools catered for a wide geographic area, including areas not currently served by public transport routes, so these services were essential for students.

> *You have a child who for 15 years has had transport, door-to-door service, and there has never been a question over how far away they live and suddenly they are being told there is no transport (Principal).*

Transport again featured as critical in interviews with parents and young adults. While some received no transport support once they left school, others secured it after many attempts: 'We are getting transport, but we were told "no" from the start, but we did get it. But we were only told during the summer … it was a waiting game' (Parent). Another parent spoke about the pressure a lack of transport funding meant for her and her daughter.

> *There is no possibility of her being able to go independently. She's a wheelchair user and she does require full care. She has moderate intellectual disabilities. We don't have other options other than I pay somebody myself, I bring her myself, or hopefully negotiate some bit of transport through her funding (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

The parents noted that transport funding was overseen by the HSE and many challenges reflected the lack of a joined-up approach between it and the DE.

> *There is no transport provided by the service and there is no public transport where we live so we are driving him in and out and that leads to him missing out some of his services because I work … The service is telling me the government will fund a bus but they won't fund the staff to staff it. The annoying thing is his school bus is still driving right by my door and there is loads of room on it. But I was told the services are the Department of Health and the school buses are Department of Education and they don't talk (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Continuity of Supports

Clear challenges reflected gaps between systems and over time, with disconnect between schools and post-school settings noted: 'There is nothing to tie the two systems [school and adult services] together' (Teacher). This was seen to have implications for young people's experience of transition and the adequacy of supports received particularly in adult services:

> *Most of them need a huge amount of support and then when the support stops, because I know the model in sheltered employment is the mentoring and phasing out the support, but there is none of that in adult services. The adult just attends and makes or breaks it … If it doesn't work out, that's it (Principal).*

This was apparent in specialised therapy supports with many parents, young adults and school personnel highlighting that key supports received while at school (including speech and language therapy, OT, psychological) were not continued on leaving school:

> *All of that is gone … the minute you hit 18, it's meant to be a miracle that everything is meant to be right, and to be honest it's when they are older you need more (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Parents highlighted difficulties and delays in accessing social protection payments and the ongoing pressures in advocating for their child with special needs and ensuring successful post-school transitions:

> *At the moment we are footing the bill for it [travel to day service] because she is not on any [disability] payment … it's taking six months nearly … they refused her on not having a bank account sent in and she had sent it in, so I had to write back to them … explain that it was sent in, so we are waiting on a deciding officer to give a decision on it (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *She [daughter] doesn't receive disability benefit, she was refused it. Unfortunately, I left it too late because my father had died … I appealed that and it wasn't accepted. I am in the process of resubmission … you have to be on-the-ball, you can't take your eye off it and you have to be your child's advocate (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Another detailed difficulty in securing a companion travel pass for her daughter when she turned 18 that was necessary given the nature of her needs:

> *I have a travel pass for her, that's fine but she needs somebody with her. They rejected her the first time … It's going to be the end of September before I hear [the result of the appeal]. If they don't give it to her they are going to pay for it (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Social and leisure opportunities dissipated after transition from school, with a lack of social opportunities and supports for adults with disabilities:

> *When they're children, there's literature coming in the door every day, camps, art classes. But once they hit adults, there's no literature coming in your door … they need more support as adults than as children … There's nothing coming through my door that offers support in that [social] area. Now is when they need social interaction. They're adults just sitting in houses (Parent of NLN Learner).*

School leaders suggested that each school leaver would benefit from a mentor or key worker assigned to support them in the longer-term to aid their transition into the post-school setting and beyond:

> *I would like to see a mentor assigned to work with the individual prior to them leaving here, organise the placement, support them in the placement, like a shadowing approach, to ensure they attend appointments (Principal).*

> *There should be more supports out there for these young people … even just a key worker who links in with them every so often, 'how are things going'. 'Right, it's coming up to the end of your years with the NLN, what would you like to do next?' (Principal).*

Such ongoing support could be instrumental in giving school leavers and parents much-needed reassurance and advice as they navigate the post-school world:

> *I don't think the supports are good enough when they leave school. You are the only person that has gotten in touch since he left school to see how he is getting on … They need a support network after they leave school, if they have any issues they need to deal with (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

In terms of persistence in the post-school setting, it was not possible to gather any evidence on whether this cohort of young adults planned to remain in their programme to completion. It appears programmes varied greatly in duration, typically ranging from two- to four-years, but in a few cases, it appeared some adult service placements were relatively permanent. The post-school placement 'can be forever or it can change, it depends on each individual … the majority that I know of have remained in their settings, I would say 90 per cent have remained where they are' (Principal). Given the school leavers had just begun their programmes, few had considered what they might do when they were over. Some parents felt they could progress to further education, perhaps a PLC programme. In one case a parent indicated that her son was hoping to progress to university. Principals noted that progression opportunities were greater for participants in NLN programmes, with past school leavers moving from NLN to tertiary education (including PLCs and Institutes of Technology). However, this principal felt progression opportunities were more limited for other programmes. There was also a worry about the longer-term futures for many school leavers:

> *There is a mother that had to fight for full-time hours in the [name of service], once her child is out of [name of service] I don't know how she is going to cope … there is nothing after adult services, what happens next … You age out, or the funding runs out … and there is always more people coming and coming (Teacher).*

6.7 Summary

Overall, many school leavers attending a diversity of pathways, including NLN programmes, reflected positively on their choices, emphasising personal enjoyment, high teaching quality and valuable learning opportunities. The cohort leaving special school settings varied in their pathways, although most transitioned to a range of adult services and vocational programmes. Across all schools there was a clear focus on ensuring that all school leavers would have a placement. Challenges were noted, however, including less-than-ideal placements, delayed or disrupted transitions, funding shortfalls, unequal service access, limited educational opportunities particularly for those with severe intellectual disabilities and with behaviour and communication needs.

On transition preparation, students expressed positivity about their programme developing their personal and interpersonal skills as well as developing specific skills (such as literacy/numeracy and problem solving). They were less positive about developing their independence skills. There was evidence that PLC students with additional needs and those who struggled academically were less positive about course content and being prepared for the future and consequently more likely to regret their pathways and consider dropping out. Our study finds evidence of a reluctance among some to share their SEN status in their post-school lives with implications for access to supports.

For special school leavers, positive experiences were more evident among those who participated in deciding on their pathway and many made the decision after a sampling period in the setting (ranging from a day to a week), indicating the importance of including young people's own voice in decision-making and giving them relevant and adequate information on their options.

On supports provided within and beyond post-school settings, there was evidence of limited access to emotional and mental health supports, despite a significant proportion reporting to be affected by emotional or mental conditions. The evidence shows that not all placements were seen as ideal, with different gaps identified in different regions/localities. School personnel repeatedly highlighted challenges in staff turnover in day services which affected the readiness of service providers to enrol young adults as planned and the intensity of the service provided. School personnel, parents and young adults frequently highlighted transport support issues and travelling to and from the post-school setting was seen as a significant challenge. These challenges have serious implications for young adults, their wellbeing, self-esteem and progress.

CHAPTER 7

Looking to the Future

7.1 Introduction

This chapter examines school leavers' outlook for the future including considering their plans when they finish their courses, perceived preparedness for life, excitement and worry about the future, and their general satisfaction with life. Comparing young adults with a range of support needs across different settings, including school and a diversity of post-school settings, we examine how expectations for the future are shaped and the opportunities they perceive open to them at various time points.

7.2 Plans after Post-School Settings

Most PLC students planned to continue their education, with the bulk aiming for higher education (61 per cent) or another FET course (7 per cent), while 15 per cent hope to secure employment and 10 per cent were unsure. Plans for HE were closely associated with family background, but less differentiated by gender or SEN status. Economic resources shape aspirations; students from more highly educated families are 10 percentage points more likely to aim for HE, while those not experiencing economic vulnerability are 17 percentage points more likely than their peers experiencing such difficulties. Students who did not find adapting to college life challenging were more likely to plan for HE as were those who felt prepared for life after their course; were clear about available choices and expectations; felt confident in their decision-making; and, believed they had the same opportunities as their peers.

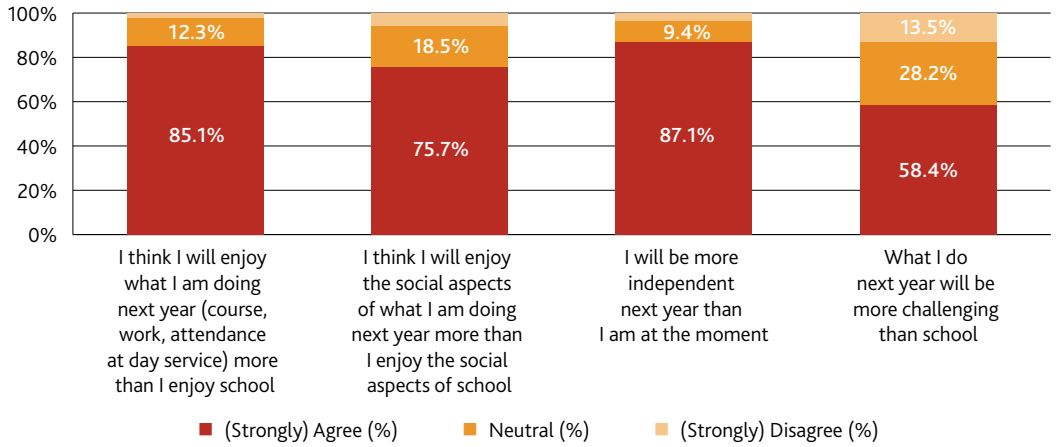
Among NLN learners, just under a third were aiming for additional education or training (another NLN course, FET or HE), just over a third planned to get a job while one in five had not yet decided what they might do. Such uncertainty was reflected among all leavers, with 58-63 per cent of school, PLC and NLN leavers finding it difficult to decide what to do next.

7.3 Preparedness and Future Expectation

7.3.1 Young Adults' Outlook for Future

Overall, as students prepared to leave school, they were broadly positive about the future, especially about becoming more independent (over 90 per cent) and the new experiences ahead. They expected their post-school pathways and social lives to be more enjoyable. However, nearly 60 per cent felt what they did next year would be more challenging (Figure 7.1).

Figure 7.1 Expectations for life after leaving school



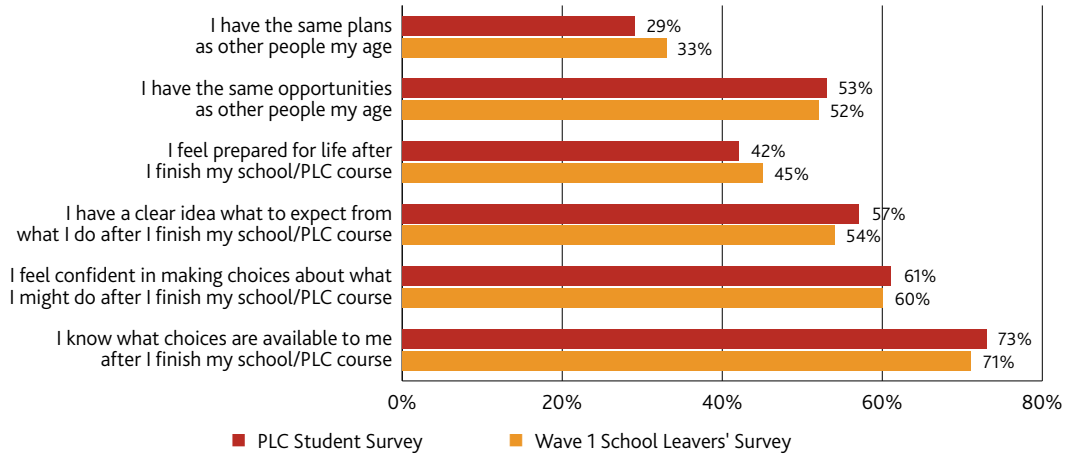
Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey.

Young adults varied in their levels of preparedness, with three-quarters of second level and PLC students agreeing that they knew the options available to them, and 60 per cent feeling confident in making decisions (Figure 7.2). Just half agreed they knew what to expect and less than half reported feeling prepared for life. Half felt they had the same opportunities as their peers, however, and as noted earlier, just a third felt they had the same plans as their peers, suggesting diverging post-school pathways.

SEN status, complexity of need and family background played a key role in shaping young people's expectations. PLC students with additional needs were less likely to feel confident in making decisions for themselves, in knowing what to expect after finishing their course and feeling prepared for life. Fewer such students, particularly those with multiple conditions, believed they had the same opportunities as their peers (43 per cent with multiple conditions vs 54 per cent with a single condition vs 62 per cent without SEN). Similarly, they and those from less advantaged family backgrounds were less likely to feel they had the same plans as their peers. Gender differences were also notable for school leavers (but not for PLC survey respondents) – with boys expressing greater confidence, awareness and preparedness for the future.

The results suggest that young people's expectations are socially structured and better supports are needed for those with complex needs and limited family resources. Numerous studies (e.g. Bandura et al., 2001), nationally and internationally, have shown young people's perceived self-efficacy and aspirations are central to their development and life course trajectories. It is, therefore, crucial to ensure that targeted interventions and support systems are available to ensure that students from all backgrounds and abilities have the same opportunities to develop and achieve to their full potential.

Figure 7.2 Students' perceived preparedness for the future, percentage of students (strongly) agree



Data sources: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1, PLC Students' Survey.

7.3.2 Outlook for the Future (Special School Students)

As part of the research with case study special schools and longitudinal research with school leavers and their parents, we explore parent expectations alongside the voices of young adults with complex needs on their future pathways. Many parents worried about their child's long-term future and whether supports would be available for its duration:

> *You worry about what's going to happen. You don't want them at home, and unfortunately some children are at home ... It's not fair on them, that's no life and we're not going to be around forever, they need to be set up … they need long-term support. That's always a worry (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

However, most focused on the short-term, their current programme or placement in further education and training seen as stepping stones:

> *Even when we were visiting Rehab, the person there could see that it wasn't the place right now, he wasn't ready for that. [Name of current centre] was the first step and then maybe three, four years down the road, that would be the place then. They are small steps but we will get them covered properly and I can see him going to Rehab in a few years (Parent of Day Services Participant).*

Adult services were often very focused on supporting decision-making and enabling young adults to progress through different learning and training opportunities suited to them:

> *The individual comes in and through that process of self-discovery and enablement, they make the choices ... This is to enable and to empower people, and to ensure that neither the provider or the family get to make the decisions … Our job is to work to articulate their choices and preferences and enable them to progress or understand the consequences of poor decisions (Day Services Manager).*

A number of day service managers highlighted the importance of progression and noted that provision had moved away from people being placed in a setting for many years, but these efforts require the support of employers and education providers working in partnership. Connecting with a range of governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was an important part of this.

> *When I started here, it was the old way of working like sheltered occupation. They came in at 18 and they didn't leave. Now that it is not sitting right with us. Especially when the young person has that drive and ambition themselves, we kind of foster that and encourage it, to make sure that they don't stay. …More work needs to be done with employers and education providers to allow that to happen (Day service facilitator).*

Young adults and their parents expressed cautious hope for their longer-term lives and their potential for fulfilling lives, but acknowledged challenges in finance, personal relationships and independent living:

> *It's scary to think about the future … If the next two years go well we can then plan the next two years … He sees a lot of familiar people here, so maybe that made this transition easy for him (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *First course is two years and we are hoping after that she will have enough life skills to get a job, eventually move into her own place … to try to live a normal life (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

A key goal for some parents was for their young adult to engage in a form of employment, which they saw as key to living a purposeful life:

> *He needs assistance with everything, he is non-verbal. I really hope that he'll find something that he can do, even if it's stacking shelves, that will give him a purpose. That's all I want, but then you are relying on businesses and the kindness of other businesses to take someone on board like [name] and accept the consequences that go with that … I'd love him to be able to have a wee job … so that he feels that he is involved in the community (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

> *I'd love her to have a little part-time job … realistically it's not going to be full-time because I don't think she would be able for it, stamina wise and concentration wise. But for her to have some of her own money and start to build her own little life … and her own social set. To have a life independent of her mam and dad (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

Parents are conscious of the need for an incremental approach towards greater independence – which has different meaning depending on the nature of need. One parent thought one or two hours' work might be a longer-term goal for her child, but this meant 'pushing the boundaries' in a gradual way to achieve it:

> *In five years' time … start exploring the idea of the world of work …[the] possibility there for [child's name] to do one or two hours, somewhere along the main street that is of interest to her and feasible, to give her a sense of working … Where she can feel that she's helping out and working … It's about pushing the boundary of what might be achievable for her (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

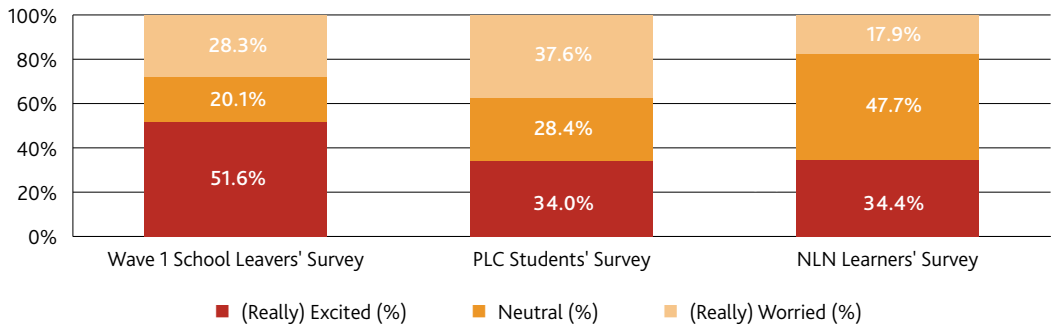
The three years are very general, she will need more specific training after that to be ready for meaningful work. It is still at the minding end of things. Not quite college, not quite secondary school, but where she needs to be at the moment (Parent of Special School Leaver).

7.4 Excitement and Worry for the Future

At the end of each survey, students across a range of school and post-school settings were invited to share the extent of their excitement or worries about their future. Figure 7.3 below shows that compared to students in their final year, those on PLC and NLN courses were less optimistic here. Only a third of PLC and NLN students, compared to half of final-year mainstream students, were excited about their lives after completing the current course. Notably, over a third of PLC students were (really) worried about their future. Similar patterns emerged among those tracked from the School Leavers' Survey, with around three in ten either being (really) worried or neutral about their future. Conversely, NLN students were more neutral (48 per cent) and less likely to be worried about their future (18 per cent).

Among PLC students, despite an equal proportion of girls and boys being excited about their future, girls were more likely to report feeling worried (41 per cent girls vs 28 per cent boys). In terms of SEN status, those with multiple conditions were particularly concerned about their future (44 per cent with multiple conditions vs 39 per cent with a single condition vs 27 per cent without SEN). Those with more positive PLC course experiences and who felt their skills were well-developed were more optimistic. For example, 59 per cent of those who did not find the PLC course was taught well, compared to 31 per cent of those who did, were worried. Furthermore, feelings were more positive among those aware of the available options, confident in making decisions for themselves, prepared for post-PLC life and who perceived themselves as having equal opportunities as their peers.

Figure 7.3 Excitement and worry scale



Data sources: School Leavers' Survey Wave 1, PLC Students' Survey and NLN Learners' Survey.

7.4.1 Excitement for the Future

Connecting the quantitative survey findings with qualitative insights, we consider student experiences and perceptions to provide a comprehensive understanding of their attitudes to and expectations of their future paths. Respondents in the Wave 1 Survey found much to be excited about, with 263 students entering an open text response to the question 'What are you most excited for after leaving school?'. Table 7.1 shows the codes applied across four key themes: Growing Up, Better than School, New Contexts and Social Life.

Table 7.1 Students' excitement for the future

Theme						
Growing Up	Independence/ Self-direction	Money	Moving away from home			
Better than School	Leaving school	Rest	Less intense			
Contexts	University	Apprenticeship	PLC	Work	Course/subject	Learning
Social Life	Friends	Fresh start	Hobbies			

Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, open-ended question.

As well as moving to a new setting, these young people were moving on to a new stage in their lives and the first theme reflected this. The responses coded under Independence capture the allure of having more control over their own lives, often defined against their perceived constraints in school: 'I'm looking forward to making my own schedule and wearing my own clothes, as well as having more independence and actually being treated like an adult.' For some, this independence was exemplified by the control they now had over what they were doing with their lives 'having time to dedicate to something I genuinely want to study.' Others eagerly anticipated a more vague but holistic sense of independence 'Being free to do what I want'. Central to control over one's life and the freedom to do what one wants, it is no surprise that earning and having their own money were frequently mentioned as something to be excited about. Many students were eager about moving away from home, a code that frequently appeared together with Independence.

Unsurprisingly, many looking forward favourably contrasted what they imagined lay ahead with where they were. The Better than School theme captured codes indicating students were excited specifically because certain things would be better than they were in school. Some responses coded under Leaving School suggested a real antipathy to school, with one student most excited about 'never having to step foot in here again', another about 'never seeing some people from my class or some of my teachers ever again' and another about 'not being here'. Returning to the importance of school-based supports and being treated with dignity and respect, one respondent was excited about 'being acknowledged as a human and not a disappointment and being ignored as the school had me written off once there was a diagnosis'. While excitement about the future suggests optimism for many, the bitterness evident in some responses speaks to the impact of negative school experiences on others. Some had their eyes on nearer times with several excited about the prospect of a rest after the LC and for time to travel. Interestingly, many respondents looked forward to their post-school lives being less intense than SC, 'not having such long days' and 'having free time to do my hobbies and have a balanced lifestyle'.

Many were excited about the new setting ahead, whether it was a University, PLC, Apprenticeship, Training or Work. Responses coded under these headings specifically anticipated being in the new setting, while those looking forward to specific courses and subjects were coded under Course/ Subject. Some spoke of looking forward to learning new skills and information, suggesting a passion for or valuing learning in its own right. One, for example, was excited to be 'learning about what really interests me, enjoying what I'm learning'.

Finally, the social side of post-school life excited many students, especially the prospect of having time for hobbies and interests. Making new friends was slightly more ambiguously reported. While many responses straightforwardly anticipated meeting new people or making new friends, others were phrased cautiously, with one student looking forward to 'hopefully being included and getting friends'. The slightly nervous excitement around making new friends suggests another area where negative school experiences in school can affect a young person's confidence and optimism for the future. Somewhat linked to this, several responses coded under Fresh Start could indicate either a wish to move away from negative experiences or a desire to change and grow as a person. For example: 'I'm looking forward to having a clean slate, starting fresh as a person.'

Regarding excitement about their future after post-school settings, similar themes emerged among students attending various settings. They continued to be excited about starting their life in new settings, especially about starting a new course or getting a job. However, caution was expressed alongside their excitement, as indicated by their frequent use of 'hopefully' or 'perhaps' when describing the future they were striving for. For example, one student was excited about 'hopefully getting into college and finishing everything', and another looked forward to 'hopefully enjoying college life or finding a good job that suits me'. Those in post-school settings were eager for the social side of life, with making new friends and meeting new people being the most cited reasons for their enthusiasm. This was echoed in interviews in the School Leavers' Survey where respondents displayed a general sense of optimism and a sense that progression from their current setting to their next goal was possible and achievable. They all felt they knew what they had to do to get to where they wanted to be in later life. Specifically, several currently attending a PLC course planned to enter higher education after completing the course, while another was hoping to move on to an apprenticeship. Several attending a university intended to complete a Master's degree afterwards. The student on gap year was confident they would have decided on and secured a place on their course choice by year end. Those not planning on further study were confident they would find a job in their field after they finished their studies.

Overall, the various things these young people were most excited about capture the thrilling open-endedness of this inflection point in their lives. Everything was about to change and through the process of growing up, the allure of the new life ahead and the prospect of escaping the negative side of the current setting, respondents expressed an optimism about how this change would go. Again, it is worth noting that the hopefulness on display among interviewees may say more about who agreed to be interviewed than more generally about optimism among mainstream school leavers with special educational needs. Even so, the student voice recognises there are opportunities out there in education and employment, has the confidence to know what to do to avail of them and the skills and capabilities to take advantage of them. The open-ended nature of change, however, also brings worries, stresses and points of deep concern, which we turn to next.

7.4.2 Worry for the Future

Although among the 246 responses slightly fewer mainstream school respondents answered 'What are you most worried about after leaving school?' than answered the excitement question, the worry sources listed were more varied than those for excitement. Table 7.2 below shows the codes applied to these responses across five key themes.

Table 7.2 Students' worry for the future

Theme			
Course	Getting into course	Course choice	Managing course
Transition to Adulthood	Financial concerns	Responsibility/real life	Loss of school supports
	Change	Leaving home	
Contexts	Work	University	NLN quality
Social	Friends	Confidence	
Health and Wellbeing	Impairment causing issues	Mental health	
Long term 'success'/'failure'	Achieving potential	Failure	Regret

Data source: Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey, open-ended question.

Many worries focused on the course chosen after finishing school; getting into their preferred choice was a worry for many as was choosing the right one. A student worried about 'going to the wrong course and bouncing around from course to course and not knowing what to do'. Even if they got in and the course was right for them, there were worried about managing it. Some located that anxiety in course difficulty, fears of 'being overwhelmed by coursework', while others internalised it, worrying about 'not being smart enough for my course'. Many responses included two codes as, for example, those worried about 'how I will manage in my course or if I will even get into my course' or 'not getting the points I need for my course or not enjoying my course'.

The transition to adulthood and its various responsibilities featured in these worries. Money was a key concern for many, in the immediate and long-term. While some worried about 'not having money', others pointed to specific reasons for concern rooted in wider economic issues such as 'the price of everything, how ridiculous all the costs are for college/accommodation etc.' and 'being in a good financial situation. I really hope the housing crisis gets sorted in the next few years'. While these issues are obviously far beyond the scope of this project, the worry they cause young people in thinking about their future should nonetheless be noted. Aside from financial stress, worry about the responsibility inherent in adult life featured with one anxious about 'having to start taking responsibility for everything in my life'. Loss of school supports underpinned this for some students, general school support providing a sanctuary: 'The real world and what is going to happen, school in a sense is kind of a shelter to me.' Others were about specific supports that would end when they left – 'not having the support from the SEN coordinator that I have at the moment'. For some respondents, the change itself was a stress while for others the prospect of moving away from home was their main concern.

Respondents articulated worries about the contexts they were moving on to, whether work, university or a NLN course. Responses coded under work focused mainly on worry about getting a job. As the Course theme captured most worry around particular courses, the general prospect of university seemed to be the issue for those coded under University, where respondents simply gave 'university' or 'college' as their answer. Only one response referenced the NLN with 'hope NLN is interesting'.

Within the social theme, respondents worried a lot about friendships in their new settings. This included keeping in touch with school friends and making new ones – 'I'm worried that my friends and I won't be close anymore. I am anxious that I will be singled out and won't make any friends.' Some respondents felt they lacked the confidence to thrive in the new social environment: 'I am self-doubtful and hope I will fit in with everyone. New experiences are exciting but also nerve wracking.'

Only two were explicitly worried about their impairments or conditions causing issues for them. One was concerned about 'talking about my epilepsy to new people in a job or college course. Wondering if I will be able to work in my dream job due to having epilepsy and if it will impact my future decisions'. Another was worried about what they would do 'if my mental health tanks?'

Some took the long view in their response, worrying about not achieving their potential or seeing out their plans. One student looked forward and backwards simultaneously: 'I'm worried that I won't end up being good enough at what I want to do and that all the stress it took to get to this point will be for nothing.' Others reported a generalised fear of failure. One explicitly linked their fear to the situation of their peers, worrying about 'falling behind'. A small number were afraid they would regret their current plans or actions, adding another layer of anxiety to their decision-making.

Similar concerns emerged when they progressed to post-school settings. At NLN centres, concerns focused on uncertainty about their futures, specifically in achieving desired outcomes such as obtaining a suitable job or enrolling in a preferred course and leaving familiar environments and losing friends. Comparable concerns were shared by PLC students, with many concerned about their acceptance into HE or FET courses. They were worried about the stress from managing work and study as well as their financial situation, such as not being able to afford their course and accommodation.

On the whole, survey respondents were excited about a range of factors that might be expected of any young person about to transition from school to the next part of their life, from being more independent and mature to the novelty of a new setting to happiness at the idea of not being in the current setting anymore, among other things. Their worries similarly touched on anxieties common to all young people (financial concerns, increased responsibility, social life and worry about whether their pathway would work out) but there were also a few mentions of concerns specific to the cohort to do with issues arising from their chronic condition and mental health.

Special school leavers spoke of their mixed emotions on exiting and embarking on the next step:

> *I am happy and worried. I am most excited about being more independent doing things on my own, worried about bus routes, money, how to handle everything (Special School Leaver).*

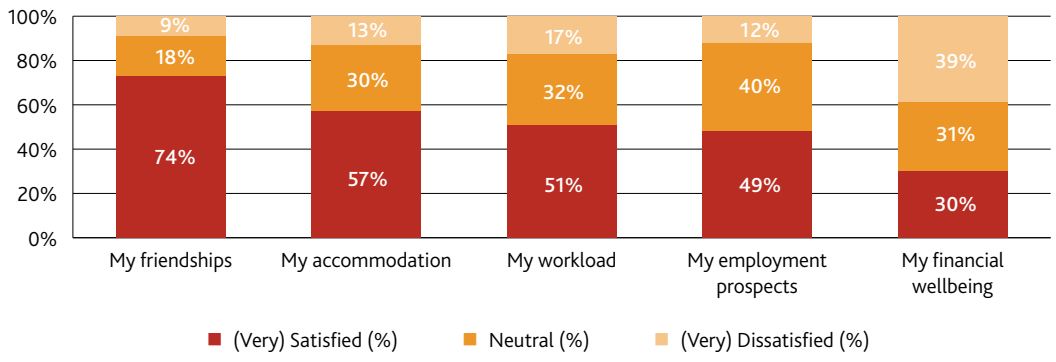
They and their parents spoke of specific skills training needed to support a more independent life. This included, for example, training in using public transport to be able to travel to day services and other destinations:

> *She is starting the Bus Éireann training soon – they accompany her for 50 trips with them and then they see if she is able to manage. She is excited about going on to college (Parent of Special School Leaver).*

7.4.3 General Satisfaction

In addition to excitement and worry about life after postsecondary settings, NLN and PLC students were asked to rate their general satisfaction with various aspects of life. Overall satisfaction was high in terms of friendships and accommodation, with 74 per cent and 57 per cent of PLC students satisfied (Figure 7.4). Students were slightly less satisfied with their workload, employment prospects and, particularly, financial well-being. Notable gaps are found across all five domains by SEN status, with 84 per cent of students without SEN compared to 64 per cent of those with multiple conditions satisfied with their friendships. In total, 62 per cent of students without SEN compared to 41 per cent of those with multiple conditions and 46 per cent with a single condition were satisfied with their employment prospects. Students with additional needs were less likely to report a satisfaction with their workload (45 per cent of students with multiple SEN were satisfied compared to 60 per cent of those without). Finally, 27 per cent of students with additional needs reported satisfaction with their financial wellbeing, compared to 37 per cent without. Those who reported positive PLC course experiences and generally more positive expectations for themselves were also more satisfied across these domains. Differences by socioeconomic background emerged – 83 per cent of students without economic difficulties compared to 68 per cent of those who did were satisfied with their friendships.

Figure 7.4 Satisfaction with key aspects of life



Data source: PLC Students' Survey.

NLN learners were asked to rate their satisfaction with life and personal relationships on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 indicating the highest satisfaction. High satisfaction levels were reported, with an average score of 7.6 for life and 7.5 for personal relationships, with no differences by gender or family background. These are higher scores than found among students with and without SEN across secondary schools (Carroll et al., 2024). NLN learners were positive about their overall health, with over six in ten rating it as 'excellent' or 'very good' (63 per cent). However, they were less positive about their mental wellbeing, with only 46 per cent describing this as 'excellent' or 'very good'.

7.5 Summary

This chapter examines how students look to the future, using evidence from multiple surveys and interviews with them and their parents. Overall, their outlook was positive towards the future and the new experiences ahead. However, they varied in their level of preparedness – just half the school leavers with special educational needs agreed they knew what to expect, less than half felt prepared for life and just half felt they had the same opportunities as their peers, suggesting diverging opportunities and pathways. Their experiences within educational settings shaped their expectations for the future and their orientation in educational progression.

Overall, the various things these young people were most excited about capture the thrilling open-endedness of this inflection point in their lives. The student voice captured in this research shows the feeling that opportunities are out there, in education and employment and they have the confidence to know what to do to access these opportunities along with the skills and capabilities to take advantage of them. However, the open-ended nature of the change brings worries, stresses and points of deep concern. Their worries touch on anxieties common to all young people (financial concerns, increased responsibility, social life and worry about whether their pathway will work out) but there are a few mentions of concerns specific to the cohort on issues arising from their chronic condition and mental health issues.

Uncertainty about the future was high among all pathway groups. While special school leavers were typically focused on the short-term placement or adult service setting, day service managers highlighted the importance of progression. They noted that provision had moved away from people being placed in a setting for many years, but these efforts required the support of employers and education providers working in a partnership approach. PLC students with special educational needs were less likely to feel confident in making decisions for themselves, to know what to expect after finishing their courses and to feel prepared for life. Those with more positive PLC course experiences and who felt their skills were well-developed were more optimistic about the future. Gender differences were notable for school leavers – with boys expressing greater confidence, awareness and preparedness for the future. Such gender differences were notable in terms of socio-emotional wellbeing – with girls more likely to express worry for the future, in line with recent research (Carroll et al., 2024).

While satisfaction was high in terms of friendships and accommodation, young adults were less satisfied with their workload, employment prospects and, particularly, financial well-being, with notable gaps across all five domains by SEN status. Overall, the results suggest that young people's expectations for themselves and outlook for the future are socially structured, pointing to a need to better support those with complex needs and limited family resources.

CHAPTER 8

Summary of Key Findings and Implications for Policy

8.1 Summary of Findings

This study maps with greater breadth the pathways of representative samples of young adults, through surveys and interviews with a range of stakeholders in school and post-school settings and through a diversity of secondary data sources including GUI. The school leaving study overrepresented DEIS schools and others providing high levels of additional support to students to reach those with the most complex needs. It engages in depth with students on pathways currently under-researched and poorly understood. Interviews were used to capture the diverse experiences characterising these pathways, involving a range of key stakeholders while centring the young adults' own accounts of their trajectories. The use of a mixed methods approach and a range of secondary data sources allowed us to engage with the wider picture of post-school transitions for young adults with disabilities; and the nuance of individual pathways.

8.1.1 Data on Pathways of Young Adults with SEN

The findings from the mapping chapter suggest young people with disabilities are, on the whole, pursuing different post-school pathways to their non-disabled peers, though with significant variation by type of impairment and at the individual level. In line with earlier research by Carroll et al., (2022b), the evidence highlights that this grouping is over-represented in FET and under-represented in higher education across multiple data sources. In addition to these pathways, many young people with disabilities are engaging with services specifically for them as recorded in the NASS database. The research reveals a significant proportion of these young people are NEET and thus not progressing in education, training or employment. Using existing data gives an overall picture of where students with special educational needs go on leaving school.

While the study shows the potential for greater usage of existing administrative and survey data in the Irish context, our review also identifies important limitations in using these sources. First are the challenges in comparing existing data sources, including the wide diversity in how disability is defined and categorised as well as evolving definitions over time. Second, our analysis shows that the opportunity to track students from special schools into postsecondary pathways along with the potential to identify second-level students with additional needs is limited based on the data currently collected across (administrative) datasets. Tracking individuals across administrative datasets will be crucial in better understanding risk factors for this cohort to more effectively target policy. Integrating multiple data sources, as with the Educational Longitudinal Database (ELD), offers a valuable opportunity to track individuals over time and across outcomes if key indicators are collected from primary and second-level schools. This approach could be further expanded by developing POD and P-POD systems to include individual indicators on receipt of additional supports and placement in special classes. This could potentially allow a mapping of the post-school educational and labour market trajectories of young adults with different types of supports and in different school and class settings and would provide valuable

insights for policy. However, linking or matching data sources provides no answers to key questions about why someone pursued a specific post-school pathway, what influenced their choices and their experiences of it. In this context, targeted, longitudinal and mixed methods research is key to filling the gaps. As with many countries, greater effort must be placed on developing and implementing robust SEN policy monitoring and evaluation. This should include efforts to improve national and international statistics on students with special educational needs and empirical evidence on the intersectionality of SEN with other dimensions of socio-economic and cultural diversity, which this study has shown to be hugely important in shaping opportunities and outcomes.

8.1.2 Reflections on School Experiences and Transition Preparation

Attitudes towards school experiences were generally positive across the quantitative survey data and qualitative evidence from mainstream settings, although students with complex needs fared less well. Often school enjoyment stemmed from the social connections created, the feeling of belonging to a community and positive experiences of specific subjects and activities. The positive impact of school being a place where students were treated as respected and valued members of the community was evident in different ways. For some, it was bound up with supports they received in school, and particularly with how these were decided on. Genuine student involvement in the process made them feel much more part of the school community than a process they felt they had no part in. Some students, however, linked their negative social experiences in school with their SEN, seeing themselves as excluded or othered by being labelled or receiving obvious supports such as an SNA. Issues with the school community were linked to SEN in cases where students spoke of having no voice in the supports they could access. Beyond this, several interviewees felt their school placed an excessive focus on academic results to the detriment of their overall development and, for some, their mental wellbeing. The results pointed to intersectionality – with student engagement stronger among those without SEN and those with degree-educated parents or attending non-DEIS schools. There were greater risks around school experiences among students with special educational needs from families with fewer resources and attending DEIS schools, as shown in earlier research (Carroll, et al., 2022a, 2022b). The results further highlight the need for statistics and empirical evidence on SEN intersectionality with other dimensions of socio-economic and cultural diversity in education.

Transition preparation at school was generally positively acknowledged by students, particularly in developing interpersonal and practical skills, and developing specific skills (literacy/numeracy and problem-solving). Positive reflections on transition preparation and support were evident among young adults and their parents in special schools. They reported a strong, collaborative approach to preparation for leaving in their final years at school. Supporting parents and raising awareness of opportunities and services was identified as an important goal, although not all schools were satisfied that enough efforts were placed on supporting parents in post-school transition more broadly. On readiness to leave school, findings reflect rigidity within the system and lack of flexibility where a young person is considered not ready to leave school – such flexibility should be guaranteed in all schools, special and mainstream. The absence of formal guidance was an issue for some, but not all special schools, suggesting a flexible approach is needed.

Young adults and their parents reflected positively on the HSE profiling process, but this could improve with earlier decision-making, greater input from parents, ongoing communication with school personnel and opportunities for families to visit settings. Support for work placements is key in supporting young adults at this critical juncture – resources for schools and employers (especially insurance costs) are clearly needed. Programmes to provide mentors (in education, training and workplace settings) would be of enormous benefit to young adults with disabilities in making informed choices and supporting their transitions.

Many students, particularly in mainstream, expressed dissatisfaction with school preparing them for adult life, independent living and career decisions, with students in our surveys being less positive than the cross-sectional population included in GUI. Further, students with special educational needs, especially those reporting multiple conditions, were less likely to report being encouraged to pursue education or training and to feel adequately supported in such decision-making. Social, self-advocacy and self-determination skills are all crucial in preparing these students for their post-school life (Dakwat, 2023; Ye and McCoy, 2024). However, students reflected less positively on self-determination skills development than other such domains. Differences emerged in their reflections on their communication skills with poorer views among those receiving additional supports, along with differences by socioeconomic background (students in DEIS schools and whose parents had lower levels of education were less likely to find school helpful here). School leavers highlighted shortcoming in their socio-emotional skills development at school.

Where interviewees were very unhappy with the preparation school gave them, it was often linked to issues with having their SEN recognised and accessing suitable supports, something highlighted in other studies (e.g. in Inclusion Ireland 2022). Our study finds evidence of a reluctance among some to share their SEN status in their post-school lives with implications for access to supports.

In relation to SEN supports, most students received support from guidance counsellors followed by learning support and assistance from SNAs. They favoured more individualised supports (such as individual tuition) over those in large group sessions that could include special class groupings. A recurring call for a support not currently widespread was for mentoring by someone already in their course or career of interest. Parents and students alike praised support that was proactive in meeting student needs rather than waiting for issues to arise, student-centred rather than prescriptive and tailored to specific student needs. The positive impact of 'good support' could be hugely impactful in the short term and life changing in the longer term. 'Bad support', on the other hand, relied on formal diagnosis (in some cases not available or very late in coming) that emphasised or even created difference from peers rather than fostering inclusion or it could not be accessed without 'a fight'. Our analysis highlights unmet need particularly in mainstream settings with responses attributing this to lack of awareness, family preferences and unavailability of supports. The results point to resource constraints in DEIS schools, particularly in access to extra subject support.

8.1.3 Planned and Realised Pathways

On post-school plans, in line with the national GUI sample, most students surveyed either planned to continue their education or work. Evidence consistently confirmed the negative impact of coming from a less advantaged background within the family and school contexts. For example, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those attending a DEIS school or not having a degree-educated parent, were less likely to apply to the CAO system. Family background plays a role in DARE application rates with students from more highly educated families more likely to apply. There was a striking difference in DARE applications between DEIS and non-DEIS schools (57 per cent of non-DEIS vs 13 per cent of DEIS students). The gap in school social mix is concerning as students from families with limited resources traditionally rely more on school supports than their family to access educational and employment opportunities.

While most students planned either to progress in their education or engage in work, more than half found it difficult to decide what to do. When making their post-school decisions, they were motivated more by intrinsic factors reflecting the skills or job they would find interesting or fulfilling. They relied heavily on their families, particularly their mothers, as an important information source. Overall, students in the School Leavers' Survey were less positive compared to the nationally representative population in the GUI study, with a much higher proportion in our sample finding a range of information sources 'not helpful' in making choices. The most useful information source students reported was from post-school settings, such as university or college open days, despite being less commonly accessed. The results highlight the need for better links between schools and post-school settings to support informed and effective decision-making. Calls for open days in non-mainstream settings, including adult day services and the NLN programme, were made.

The results show that effective support is personalised, student-led and supportive rather than prescriptive, encouraging students to decide for themselves what they want to do with their lives while helping them along the way. While respondents expressed a high level of satisfaction with school-based guidance, there was considerable diversity in their preferences ranging from adequate and relevant information, logistical supports, to space to reflect on and make their own decisions, stressing the importance of including student own voices in supporting their SEN and decision-making (Bohan, 2023). Personal factors played a crucial role in their decision-making from excitement over starting something new to financial concerns to implicit or explicit family pressure to enter a specific pathway. However, only a third felt they held consistent expectations as their teachers, with most either neutral (47 per cent) or disagreeing (22 per cent). This expectation gap might indicate a lack of teacher awareness on options for students with special educational needs, particularly considering their diverse needs profile. It could signal teachers holding higher expectations than young adults, who may have lower expectations as a consequence of a SEN label (McCoy et al., 2016a). Given the importance of expectations for later achievement and outcomes (Engels et al., 2021; Rubie-Davies, 2006; McCoy et al., 2016a), these findings warrant attention. Positive teacher expectations are linked with students being more likely to approach their teacher with a problem. Overall, where they cannot access guidance support through school they often turn to family and friends, exploiting their social capital to find people to talk to. It is not hard to see how unequal social capital leads to socioeconomically differentiated pseudo-mentorship opportunities, and how inequality is thus reproduced through the absence of public provision. Framed decision-making surfaced throughout the evidence, with a lack of information about apprenticeships or other non-HE options in some schools raised as an

issue, with students feeling they were being funnelled into HE. On the other hand, in some DEIS schools they reported feeling there was too much focus on PLCs and apprenticeships and not enough information on higher education, which was where they aspired to go.

Across special schools, there was a focus on engaging with parents and taking a collaborative approach to transition preparation. Supporting parents and raising awareness of opportunities and services were identified as important goals although not all schools were satisfied that enough efforts were placed on supporting parents in post-school transition more broadly. Young adults and parents in special schools generally appreciated the thorough HSE profiling process. However, concerns were noted, particularly about communication with post-school settings and application forms for day service/programme placements, highlighting the need for improved access, visits and comprehensive support throughout the process. There was a desire for greater participation in work placements, but schools reported growing barriers to organising and supporting work student experience and placements. Some noted that while small businesses were often willing to explore offering work placements to young adults, securing the relevant insurance was a significant barrier. Overall, school leavers and their parents were much more likely to reflect positively on preparedness where both were familiar with and informed about the chosen pathway, where everyone 'decided together'. There was a recognition that the goal was to find the most appropriate placement from what is available and within available resources, which may fall short of securing the placement that best aligns with a young adult's needs and interests. Options for those with behaviour and communication needs were seen as weak in some areas of the state.

When exploring student experiences with their post-school settings, positive responses emerged from mainstream settings and NLN attendees, where evidence was gathered for the first time. Among PLC respondents, there were significant differences in the experience of those with and without SEN. Overall, students in these settings reflected positively on their chosen pathways, emphasising personal enjoyment, high teaching quality and opportunities for exploration. Despite this, challenges arose with the most prevalent relating to balancing commitments, meeting deadlines and adapting to programme difficulty level. Most NLN learners were satisfied with their programme, stemming from making new friends, being in a friendly environment, having supportive and approachable centre staff, appropriate course difficulty level and content, a good mix of classroom teaching and practical work experiences and learning new skills, especially those relevant for future work and education. However, concerns were raised that included having insufficient opportunity to engage with peers due to age gaps, finding the course boring and just following what they were told to do.

Most PLC students were satisfied with their choices, although some reported a SEN and those who struggled academically were more likely to report regret. In terms of difficulties encountered by PLC students in their first year, most found it challenging to balance study and other commitments, to finish coursework on time and adapt to programme difficulty level. Close to half struggled with paying fees or other study costs (46 per cent). Students with special educational needs, particularly those with multiple conditions, were more likely to find course difficulty level a problem compared to their peers (80 per cent of those with multiple conditions vs 66 per cent with a single condition vs 60 per cent without SEN). A higher proportion of these students, especially with more complex needs, found it challenging to fit in and make new friends and were more likely to struggle with public transport to attend their course. Those with SEN

were more likely to find inflexible study options problematic. The results highlight the importance of accessible public transport and flexible study options, such as online courses, to accommodate the increasingly diverse needs of students. Students reflected positively on their transition preparation, however emphasising the development of personal and interpersonal and specific skills (literacy/numeracy, problem-solving) and the practical nature of PLC courses.

While most appreciated supports at post-school settings, limited access to emotional and mental health support was evident despite high numbers reporting need. Reasons for not receiving relevant supports included a preference for (and likely a fear) not revealing SEN, unavailability and unawareness of the supports needed. Masking or reluctance to share SEN status in their post-school life emerged as an important issue for young adults in our study.

Challenges emerged in specialised settings. While the goal to find the most appropriate placement from what is available and within available resources was recognised, this may fall short of the placement best suited to the young adult's needs and interests. While many successfully progressed to education/training programmes or services, others experienced delayed or disrupted transitions. These reflected challenges in staff turnover in day services, impacting the readiness of providers to enrol young adults as planned and the intensity of the service provided. Meanwhile, transport support and continuity of supports remained two major issues for those transitioning to post-school settings.

8.1.4 Outlook for the Future

SEN status, complexity of need and family background together played a key role in shaping young people's life expectations. PLC students with special educational needs were less likely to feel confident in making decisions for themselves, to know what to expect after finishing their course and to feel prepared for life. Fewer of them, particularly those with multiple conditions, believed they had the same opportunities as their peers and were less likely to feel they had the same plans as them. Notably, over a third of PLC students were worried about their future. Similar patterns emerged among students tracked from the School Leavers' Survey with around three in ten either being (really) worried or neutral about their future. Conversely, NLN learners were less likely to be worried in this regard.

Among PLC students, despite an equal proportion of girls and boys reporting being excited about their future, girls were more likely to report feeling worried. In terms of SEN status, those with multiple conditions were particularly concerned about their future. Those with more positive PLC course experiences and who felt their skills were well-developed were more optimistic.

Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction in terms of friendships and accommodation, but lower satisfaction with the workload, employment prospects and, particularly, financial well-being. Notable gaps were found across all five domains by SEN status, with 84 per cent of students without SEN compared to 64 per cent of those with multiple conditions satisfied with their friendships. In total, 62 per cent of students without SEN compared to 41 per cent of those with multiple conditions and 46 per cent with a single condition were satisfied with their employment prospects. Students with SEN were also less likely to report a satisfaction with their

workload. Finally, 27 per cent of students with special educational needs reported satisfaction with their financial wellbeing, compared to 37 per cent of those without. Students reporting positive PLC course experiences and generally more positive expectations for themselves were also more satisfied across these domains.

8.2 Recommendations and Implications for Policy

This study raises implications for policy across the educational system and for HSE service provision. We begin with specific recommendations and follow these with a wider discussion of the implications of this comprehensive evidence.

8.2.1 Data on Pathways of Disabled Young Adults

Recommendations

1. Continue developing administrative datasets to track students through their education and allow detailed evaluation of the system.
2. Complement these with richer sources like GUI and targeted longitudinal studies and qualitative investigations of young people with special educational needs.

This study has highlighted the importance of effective data gathering and data linkage to support timely and robust policy provision. Innovative use of administrative data in examining the experiences of students with special educational needs can be illustrated in Northern Ireland. Drawing on data from the DE and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), O'Connor Bones et al. (2021) profile these students across a range of disaggregated variables, including: region, school type, SEN stage, over-arching SEN category, individual SEN type, gender, year group and demographic variables including free school meal entitlement and multiple deprivation measure. Looking at change during 2010-11 and 2018-19 in SEN prevalence, they found a proportionately higher increase (21 per cent) in the overall numbers with SEN compared to the wider student population. Of seven over-arching categories used, most students were categorised as having cognitive and learning; social, emotional and behavioural; and communication and interaction difficulties. The work provides important insights into SEN prevalence over time and could be extended to examine post-school pathways.

It should be acknowledged that recent moves towards inclusive education have seen resources for school SEN provision automatically provided via a 'frontloading' system based on an individual school's profiled need (NCSE, 2017). As a result, schools receive resources to support inclusive educational practice as assessed by its own staff without the need to wait for formal diagnostic assessment of a disability category. In other words, schools have additional autonomy in distributing resources internally based on need, rather than disability category (Kenny et al., 2020). This means not all students getting additional supports are formally identified with a specific SEN type, making mapping exercises more challenging. Any SEN indicators would need to be based on receipt of support and/or school/class placement rather than (solely on) formal SEN diagnosis. This approach makes monitoring educational outcomes (formal and informational), engagement and progress, as well as capturing information about students particularly important (Douglas et al., 2012).

This frontloading approach within Ireland and internationally reflects a trend away from formal assessment or diagnosis of SEN and towards needs-based supports in education. While this is a positive step in terms of diverting the resources currently put towards assessment into provision, avoiding long waiting times for assessment and potentially avoiding the negative impacts and deficit mindset which can arise from labelling children as having a disability or impairment, it raises questions about monitoring outcomes and acting on this information to tackle inequality. Given that education policy appears to be moving in this direction for at least the medium-term, it is imperative that data collectors and educational researchers grapple with this new understanding of SEN in their work.

It is important to acknowledge that linking or matching administrative data sources, recent efforts here (notably the Educational Longitudinal Survey [E]LS) are to be commended, does not provide answers to key questions about why someone pursued a specific post-school pathway and what their experiences of that pathway were. In this context, targeted, longitudinal, qualitative and mixed methods research has the potential to fill the gaps in existent data sources. This could offer insights into the reasons young people with special educational needs pursue their chosen pathways, their experience on them and insights into the dynamics associated with pathways other than education or work (e.g., day services, NEET). The GUI study gives an opportunity to understand how a nationally representative sample of young adults, including those with additional needs, fare in their post-school transitions and trajectories. Critically, the longitudinal nature of the data allows insights into processes over childhood and adolescence and not simply at the point of school completion. For example, the transition from primary to second-level education has been shown to present greater challenges for these students (McCoy et al., 2020). Further, students with all types of additional need achieve lower Junior Certificate average scores than students without and they – with the notable exception of young people with a physical disability – make less academic progress between age nine and their Junior Certificate examination (Mihut et al., 2021). Performance in the latter is itself an important predictor of LC performance (McCoy et al., 2014a). Thus, post-school outcomes do not arise from decision-making at a moment in time; they are the product of cumulative ecological factors over time, requiring a longitudinal perspective at research and policy levels.

8.2.2 Curriculum, Guidance and Supports at School

Recommendations

1. Work with special schools to ensure a suitable curriculum at Senior Cycle, whether in the form of LCA or a modified LCA, the forthcoming Senior Cycle L1 and L2 programmes or a QQI-aligned framework.

2. Develop a clear template for the post-school transition for special schools to base their programmes on, with a suitable timeline for key events within the year.

Ensuring all young people have appropriate and challenging curricular provision throughout their school careers is central to equipping them with the knowledge and skills to support fulfilling post-school lives. For students with additional needs such provision may need to be more flexible and tailored to their needs. While the introduction of levels 1 and 2 programmes has provided schools and young people with inclusive curricular pathways, the lack of follow-on provision at SC remains a serious weakness. Also, the move to common level papers at JC is seen as creating accessibility problems. Where available, the LCA provided valuable learning and skill development opportunities, and support from the PDST (now Oide[54]) was particularly appreciated. This study has highlighted notable challenges in supplying appropriate and challenging curriculum for young adults in special schools, that point to significant policy issues around school organisation and design, status as primary schools, teacher allocation, funding, insurance and programme/curricular provision and guidance. Certification on leaving school emerged as another issue, with some students leaving without any official certification, particularly those leaving from JC levels 1 and 2 programmes. The issue of national certification has been addressed – assessment of Priority Learning Units and short courses are now part of the JC level 2 programme and awarding the JCPA.

On transition preparation in special schools, many schools reflected on the absence of a standard or template transition programme for them, leaving them having to develop their own without any overall guidance from the Department of Education. In terms of readiness to leave school, the findings reflect rigidity within the system and lack of flexibility where a young person is considered not ready to leave – such flexibility should be guaranteed in all schools, special and mainstream. The absence of formal guidance was an issue for some, but not all special schools, suggesting a flexible approach is needed. Young adults and their parents reflected positively on HSE profiling, but that it could improve with earlier decision-making, greater input from parents, ongoing communication with school personnel and opportunities for families to visit settings. Support for work placements is key to supporting young adults at this critical juncture – resources for schools and employers (particularly for insurance costs) are clearly needed. Programmes to provide mentors (in education, training and workplace settings) would be of enormous benefit to students with disabilities in making informed choices and supporting their post-school transitions. The new National Lifelong Guidance Policy Group can play an important role in addressing these guidance and transition support issues, although it would benefit from HSE inclusion within the group, working alongside the five government departments.

Students with special educational needs in mainstream schools are less likely to feel prepared for leaving school and less confident in their decision-making. These issues can be compounded by social disadvantage such as limited family resources and social capital (Carroll et al., 2022a). While pointing to the need for additional guidance support for those with fewer resources, enhancement of social capital, especially for under-resourced students with additional needs, would also enhance opportunities. Other research has shown a substantial positive impact of family networks on the academic success of these children (Hrabéczy et al., 2023). Potential strategies to build social capital could involve mentoring and peer support programmes, to provide access to guidance, support and networks not otherwise available (Eddy et al., 2017;

54 Oide is a support service for teachers and school leaders in Ireland, funded by the Department of Education, which integrates four existing support services and aims to provide accessible, inclusive, innovative and reflective professional learning opportunities. See details at: https://oide.ie/about/

Samuel et al., 2023). Encouraging participation in extracurricular activities can help enhance social capital, providing opportunities for students to develop social skills, build relationships with peers and mentors and gain confidence (Mahoney et al., 2005). Furthermore, the evidence highlights the importance of enhancing engagement among families, schools and communities to build support networks for students from all backgrounds (Henderson and Mapp, 2022).

Across mainstream and special schools, the importance of high expectations for all students is clear and across the study they pointed to SEN labels unfairly impacting on the expectations others held for them. It is vital to address low expectations for these students through more inclusive and individualised support strategies and curricular approaches that accommodate their diverse needs. Developing flexible and appropriate plans, ensuring joined up provision across settings and promoting ambition to progress in learning and development are important to ultimately support all students in reaching their full potential.

On skills development, this study has highlighted a need for stronger focus on self-determination skills development at school, such as promoting an interest in learning, preparing young people for their future lives and, in particular, for living independently. This aligns with a recent study using GUI data that found young adults with disabilities were less likely to feel supported in decision-making at school compared with their non-disabled peers (Ye and McCoy, 2024). It is notable that a third felt their school 'did not help' develop an interest in learning. This echoes earlier findings showing student concerns about the heavy workload and exam focus during their final-year programme (McCoy et al., 2019). Clearly the exam focus creates little incentive to foster a love of learning and development of independent learning skills. These domains, independent learning, self-determination skills and broader life skills will be particularly important as SC provision is being redeveloped and as part of curricular and programme reform across the school system.

In terms of supports, where mainstream school interviewees were very unhappy with the preparation school gave them, it was often linked to issues with having their SEN or disability recognised and accessing suitable supports. Parents and students alike praised support that was proactive in meeting their needs rather than waiting for issues to arise to react, student-centred rather than prescriptive and tailored to their specific needs. 'Bad support', on the other hand, relied on formal diagnosis (in some cases not available or very late in coming) that emphasised or even created difference from peers rather than fostering inclusion or which could not be accessed without 'a fight'. Ensuring school supports for these young people are adequate, individualised and responsive to their wishes is therefore of paramount importance in their progression and development. They especially value individual or small group support, raising questions about the ongoing proliferation in special class provision and are vocal on availability of psychological supports. Finally, the findings highlight the need for wider and timelier availability of specialised supports, like OT, speech and language therapy and socio-emotional supports, as children and young people progress through and beyond school. Progress on, and adequate resourcing of, the 2023-2026 Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People (HSE, 2023) will be particularly important, given its focus on enhancing integrated services among various organisations and partner agencies, and development of inter-disciplinary CDNTs across geographic areas.

8.2.3 Post-School Adult Services

Recommendations

1. Ensure the 2023-2026 Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People is implemented as a matter of urgency.

2. Extend transport supports accessible by students in school to their post-school settings.

In terms of decision-making, there would be benefit in running open days for students moving to non-mainstream education and training settings. In some special schools there was a perception that they were doing a lot of work in preparing the young adults for leaving, but very little work was happening at the other end (service providers) to give an insight into their service or prepare for the school leaver's arrival. It was also felt that parents should be part of the sampling and visits to settings to support their awareness and to allow them to support their child's decision-making process. Interviews with school leavers and their parents further highlighted a need for greater parental involvement to ensure a full picture was gathered and an optimal placement followed. They expressed concern about decision-making being too rushed and the process ultimately orientated towards what was available rather than finding a suitable setting.

The availability of skilled and qualified educators is key to supporting the transition of young adults with special educational needs (Khan and Aftab, 2023; Bohan, 2023). Significant challenges in resourcing and staffing adult day services were highlighted, particularly by school personnel preparing students for transition. Across the state, there was evidence of difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff in adult day services, affecting the readiness of service providers to enrol young adults as planned and the intensity of the service provided. This underscores the need for a comprehensive workforce plan in this sector, which is also a focus of the 2023-2026 Roadmap for Service Improvement for Disability Services for Children and Young People. Such a plan should address issues like competitive compensation, professional development opportunities and improved working conditions to attract and retain qualified staff. This research shows difficulties in the diversity of provision available in different geographic areas, emphasising the importance of policies to ensure equitable access. This may involve expanding services in underserved areas or implementing strategies to make existing services more accessible. The HSE needs to ensure the 'roadmap' is implemented as a matter of urgency given their impact on young adults' progression towards meaningful adult lives. It might require more immediate measures to alleviate staffing shortages and long-term strategies to improve service provision and accessibility.

Finally, transport support and continuity of specialised supports remained two major issues for many school leavers, particularly for those in special schools. There is an urgent need to ensure transport support is in place where needed, and greater coordination between the relevant government departments, including the Department of Transport, the local authorities, the Department of Education and the HSE, may be the first step in achieving this. As highlighted in earlier research (e.g. White et al., 2024a; Inclusion Ireland, 2022; Dakwat, 2023), addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach and collaboration between relevant stakeholders, including the HSE, other government departments, service providers, school personnel, and the young adults themselves and their families. Policies should therefore promote such collaboration and ensure all stakeholders have a voice in decision-making and pathways available.

8.2.4 Postsecondary Education

Recommendations

1. Strengthen links between the different sectors of tertiary education.
2. Commission a more detailed study of the apparent under-utilisation of DARE among less advantaged students.

The findings from the mapping chapter suggest that young people with disabilities are, on the whole, pursuing different post-school pathways than their non-disabled peers, though with significant variation by type of impairment and at the individual level. Overall they are over-represented in FET and under-represented in higher education. It is welcome to note that the ambition of the National Access Plan extends beyond access to a greater focus on participation and student success and includes specific targets for new entrants with a disability to HE, including those with intellectual disabilities. The study has highlighted the important role of DARE and HEAR in supporting this access but the dominance of more socially advantaged young people among DARE applicants warrants attention.

Given the positive experiences with PLC (and NLN) programmes, the findings underscore the importance of a unified tertiary system, where adults can move through and across programmes with ease. Ongoing development of a unified tertiary system are to be welcomed and will hopefully achieve the goals of offering a wide range of more joined-up learning and development opportunities to learners and develop equality, diversity and inclusion across the system.

Finally, and to reiterate, across all pathway groups, the need for responsive and timely socio-emotional and mental health services was highlighted repeatedly and vociferously.

8.3 Conclusion

This report is being published at a time of considerable focus on disability services and development of the new network teams throughout the state lends an optimism that services and supports for children and young adults with disabilities are a policy priority. The EPSEN Act is being reviewed, but there have been many calls for a review of the Disability Act to ensure timely service access for people. This study further illustrates the substantial challenges families face in securing access to appropriate (specialist) services at critical developmental timepoints. Cross-departmental and joined up approaches are increasingly visible and offer the best opportunity to address gaps and disjunctions in provision between education levels and sectors which this study has shown. Ensuring all young adults, particularly those with complex needs, have opportunities to progress in their learning and development beyond age 18 and flourish in society is of critical importance and will require planning, resources and commitment, and above all listening to the voices of these young adults and their families.

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APPENDIX

Table A1.1 Disability Categorisation Across Main Data Sources

Data Sources	Disability Categories	Possibility to Identify 5 Main Groups: Sensory Disability; Physical Disability; Learning Disability; Intellectual Disability; Psychological/ Mental Health Disability
Census 2022	• Blindness or a vision impairment • Deafness or a hearing impairment • A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching or lifting or carrying • An intellectual disability • A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating • A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue • A difficulty with pain, breathing, or any other chronic illness or condition	✓
Primary Online Database (POD)	No individual disability or SEN indicators	
Post Primary Online Database (P-POD)	No individual disability or SEN indicators	

Table A1.1 Disability Categorisation Across Main Data Sources *continued*

Data Sources	Disability Categories	Possibility to Identify 5 Main Groups: Sensory Disability; Physical Disability; Learning Disability; Intellectual Disability; Psychological/ Mental Health Disability
Growing Up in Ireland	Varies by cohort and wave. '98 Cohort at 9 years (most comprehensive source, widely used) draws on evidence from parents and teachers: Parents: Do you think the Study Child has a Specific Learning Difficulty, Communication or Co-ordination Disorder (Yes/No). If yes, what is the nature of the difficulty or disorder? • Dyslexia (incl. Dysgraphia, dyscalculia) • ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) • Autism • Asperger's Syndrome • Speech and Language Difficulty • Dyspraxia • Slow progress (reasons unclear) • Other (specify) Teacher: Do any of the following limit the kind or amount of activity the Study Child can do at school? • Physical disability or visual or hearing impairment • Speech impairment • Learning disability • Emotional or behavioural problem (e.g. Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder – ADD, ADHD) Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire completed by teacher about the study child.	✓

Table A1.1 Disability Categorisation Across Main Data Sources *continued*

Data Sources	Disability Categories	Possibility to Identify 5 Main Groups: Sensory Disability; Physical Disability; Learning Disability; Intellectual Disability; Psychological/ Mental Health Disability
Equal Access Survey	• Blindness, deafness, severe vision or hearing impairment • Physical condition • Specific learning difficulty • Psychological/emotional condition • Other, including chronic illness.	✓
Fund for Students with Disabilities	• Autistic Spectrum Disorder • Attention Deficit Disorder • Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder • Blind/vision impaired • Deaf/hard of hearing • Developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia/dysgraphia) • Mental health condition (for example bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression, severe anxiety, severe phobias, OCD, severe eating disorders and psychosis) • Neurological condition • Significant ongoing illness • Physical/mobility • Specific learning difficulties (dyslexia or dyscalculia) • Speech and Language Communication Disorder	✓
AHEAD Survey	The 2023/24 edition of the survey collected data on the following disability types: • Specific learning difficulty • Mental health condition • Significant ongoing illness • Asperger's/autism • DCD – dyspraxia • ADD/ADHD • Neurological/speech and language • Physical disability • Blind/visually impaired • Deaf/hard of hearing • Other	✓

Table A1.1 Disability Categorisation Across Main Data Sources *continued*

Data Sources	Disability Categories	Possibility to Identify 5 Main Groups: Sensory Disability; Physical Disability; Learning Disability; Intellectual Disability; Psychological/ Mental Health Disability
Programme and Learner Support System data	Learners can report the following disabilities, in line with the Census classification: • A Psychological or emotional condition • Deafness or a serious hearing impairment • Blindness or vision impairment • A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating • An intellectual disability • A difficulty with basic physical activities • Other disability, including chronic illness	
National Ability Support Systems Database	The following disability types are recorded: • Intellectual • Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) • Deaf Blind – dual sensory • Developmental delay (under 10 years only) • Hearing loss and/or Deafness • Neurological • Physical • Specific learning disorder (other than intellectual) • Speech and /or Language • Visual • Mental health • Not verified	

Table A1.2 Key characteristics of main data sources on young adults with a disability

Data Sources	Who Young People with Special Educational Needs Are	Where They Come From	Where Do They Go	Reasons for Going There
Census 2011 and 2016	Cross-sectional data allows comprehensive identification of people with disabilities.	Breakdowns by other characteristics can be conducted (e.g., sex, age, race, ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, nationality)	Basic information about highest level of education and employment status is available.	N/A
Primary Online Database	Data allows identification of students in special schools and students in special classes in mainstream primary schools.	Breakdowns by other characteristics can be conducted (sex, age, race, ethnicity, religion, and school ethos)	Information on the leaving status of students is recorded in the dataset.	N/A
Post-Primary Online Database	No data is reported on individual students with SEN or in receipt of supports. Schools report the number of students receiving additional supports.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Growing Up in Ireland	Longitudinal data allows comprehensive identification of young adults with SEN.	Further disaggregation by demographic, home, school, and other characteristics over time is facilitated by the data.	At the time of publication, data from 17-year-olds allow mapping of pathways for 17% of the sample. Further mapping of planned pathways is facilitated by the data.	Unlike other data sources, GUI allows mapping of processes and factors shaping decision-making on post-school pathways.
Equal Access Survey and the Fund for Students with Disabilities compiled by the HEA; AHEAD survey	Cross-sectional data allows identification of learners who disclose disabilities.	Further disaggregation by demographic and institutional characteristics is possible.	The data does not track where students come from or where they go after finishing education.	N/A

Table A1.2 Key characteristics of main data sources on young adults with a disability *continued*

Data Sources	Who Young People with Special Educational Needs Are	Where They Come From	Where Do They Go	Reasons for Going There
Programme and Learner Support System data	Cross-sectional data allows identification of learners who disclose disabilities.	Further disaggregation by demographic and FET characteristics is possible.	The data tracks prior economic status and prior educational achievement of learners.	N/A
National Ability Support Systems Database	Data allow identification of people with disabilities.	Breakdowns by characteristics can be conducted including sex, age, and ethnicity.	Data on current employment status is collected.	N/A
Educational Longitudinal Database	Identification of people with disabilities from Census 2016. Longitudinal analysis by matching to a range of administrative data sources.	Breakdowns by other characteristics can be conducted (e.g., sex, age, race, ethnicity, religion, immigrant status, nationality). Matching to Department of Education POD and PPOD allows analysis of Leaving Certificate programme type.	Matching to administrative data (including SOLAS, HEA, QQI), allows analysis of post-school pathways.	N/A

Table A1.3 Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey – School profile

	Number of Schools	%	National Statistics 2023/2024 School Enrolment
Total N of school	59	100%	100%
DEIS			
Non-DEIS	45	76.3%	68%
DEIS	14	23.7%	32%
School Location			
Dublin	17	28.8%	25%
Munster	16	27.1%	28%
Ulster/Connacht	11	18.6%	21%
Leinster	15	25.4%	26%
Fee Charging			
Non fee-charging	55	93.2%	93%
Fee-charging	4	6.8%	7%
School Type			
Community	9	15.3%	11%
Comprehensive	2	3.4%	2%
Secondary	32	54.2%	52%
Vocational	16	27.1%	34%
Irish Classification			
All pupils taught all subjects through Irish	1	1.7%	7%
No subjects taught through Irish	56	94.9%	90%
Some pupils taught all subjects through Irish	2	3.4%	2%
Some pupils taught some subjects through Irish	0	0%	2%
Ethos/Religion			
Catholic	31	52.5%	47%
Church of Ireland	1	1.7%	3%
Inter denominational	11	18.6%	20%
Multi denominational	16	27.1%	29%
Other	0	0	1%

Table A1.3 Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey – School profile *continued*

	Number of Schools	%	National Statistics 2023/2024 School Enrolment
School Gender			
Boys	12	20.3%	13%
Girls	10	17.0%	16%
Mixed	37	62.7%	71%
School Size[55]			
Small	5	8.5%	14%
Medium – Low	20	33.9%	29%
Medium – High	19	32.2%	29%
Large	15	25.4%	27%

Data source: wave 1 ESRI student survey. Post-primary school enrolment 2023/2024 provisional data from Department of Education. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/post-primary-schools/#20232024.

Table A1.4 Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey responses by school characteristics

	Number of Responses	%
Total number of responses	562	
DEIS		
Non DEIS	336	59.8%
DEIS	226	40.2%
School Location		
Dublin	180	32.0%
Leinster	144	25.6%
Munster	83	14.8%
Ulster/Connacht	155	27.6%
Fee charging		
Non fee charging	544	96.8%
Fee charging	18	3.2%

55 The number of students of each school is provided by NCSE. School size here is defined as: schools with 0-265 students is defined as 'small', school with 266-500 students is defined as 'medium – low', school with 500-750 students is defined as 'medium – high' and school with over 751 students is defined as 'large'.

Table A1.4 Wave 1 School Leavers' Survey responses by school characteristics *continued*

	Number of Responses	%
School Type		
Community	33	5.9%
Comprehensive	30	5.3%
Secondary	230	40.9%
Vocational	269	47.9%
Irish Classification		
All pupils taught all subjects through	4	0.7%
No subjects taught through Irish	549	97.7%
Some pupils taught all subjects through	9	1.6%
Ethos/Religion		
Catholic	204	36.3%
Church of Ireland	44	7.8%
Inter denominational	47	8.4%
Multi denominational	267	47.5%
School Size[56]		
Small	15	2.7%
Medium – Low	141	25.1%
Medium – High	228	40.6%
Large	178	31.7%

56 The number of students of each school is provided by NCSE. School size here is defined as: schools with 0-265 students is defined as 'small', school with 266-500 students is defined as 'medium – low', school with 500-750 students is defined as 'medium – high' and school with over 751 students is defined as 'large'.

Table A1.5 Disability related questions on the Census

2011/2016 Census	2022 Census
'Do you have any of the following long-lasting conditions or difficulties?' Options: (1) Yes; (2) No	'Do you have any of the following long-lasting conditions or difficulties?' Options (1) Yes, to a great extent; (2) Yes, to some extent; (3) No*
• Blindness or a serious vision impairment. • Deafness or a serious hearing impairment. • A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching or lifting or carrying. • An intellectual disability. • A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating. • A psychological or emotional condition. • A difficulty with pain, breathing, or any other chronic illness or condition.	• Blindness or a vision impairment*. • Deafness or a hearing impairment*. • A difficulty with basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching or lifting or carrying. • An intellectual disability. • A difficulty with learning, remembering or concentrating. • A psychological or emotional condition or a mental health issue*. • A difficulty with pain, breathing, or any other chronic illness or condition.
If 'Yes' to any of the categories specified in Questions 16, do you have any difficulty doing any of the following?	As a result of a long-lasting condition, do you have difficulty doing any of the following?
• Dressing, bathing or getting around inside the home. • Going outside the home alone to shop or visit a doctor's surgery. • Working at a job or business or attending school or college. • Participating in other activities, for example leisure or using transport	• Dressing, bathing or getting around inside the home. • Going outside the home to shop or visit a doctor's surgery. • Working at a job or business or attending school or college. • Participating in other activities, for example leisure or using transport.

*Notes: * text indicates changes between the 2011/2016 editions of the Census and the 2022 edition.*

Table A1.6 Selected disability questions on GUI at age 9

Instrument	Child Cohort	Infant Cohort
Primary caregiver main questionnaire at age 9	Do you think the Study Child has a Specific Learning Difficulty, Communication or Co-ordination Disorder (Yes/No). If yes Looking at Card J22, what is the nature of the difficulty or disorder? A. Dyslexia (incl. Dysgraphia, dyscalculia) B. ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) C. Autism D. Asperger's Syndrome E. Speech and Language Difficulty F. Dyspraxia G. Slow progress (reasons unclear) H. Other (specify) Strength and difficulty questionnaire completed by primary caregiver about the study child.	Do you think <child> has a Specific Learning Difficulty, Communication or Co-ordination Disorder (Yes/No). If yes Looking at Card C52, what is the nature of the difficulty or disorder? A. Dyslexia (incl. Dysgraphia, dyscalculia) B. Speech and Language Difficulty C. ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) D. Dyspraxia E. Autism F. Slow progress (reasons unclear) G. Asperger's Syndrome H. Other (specify) Does this difficulty hamper <child> in his/her daily activities? (Yes, severely/Yes, to some extend/No) Strength and difficulty questionnaire completed by primary caregiver about the study child.
Teacher on pupil questionnaire at age 9	Do any of the following limit the kind or amount of activity the Study Child can do at school? a. Physical disability or visual or hearing impairment b. Speech impairment c. Learning disability d. Emotional or behavioural problem (e.g. Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder – ADD, ADHD) (additional not-SEN related items are included with this question). Strengths and difficulties questionnaire completed by teacher about the study child.	Do any of the following limit the kind or amount of activity the Study Child can do at school? a. Physical disability or visual or hearing impairment b. Speech impairment c. Autism spectrum disorders d. General learning disability: mild e. General learning disability: moderate/ severe/profound f. Specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) g. Emotional or behavioural problem (e.g. Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder – ADD, ADHD)

Notes: These questions are included for illustrative purposes. Other waves and instruments include questions that can be used to identify SEN status.

Table A1.7 Tracking Phase – Participation Rate

School Setting			Post-School Settings	Interviews with National Key Stakeholders
Summer/Autumn 2022	**Spring/Summer 2023**	**Autumn 2023**	**Spring/Winter 2023**	**Summer/Autumn 2022**
Wave 1 of longitudinal survey with school leavers with SEN in mainstream school: n= 421*	3 interviews with young people in NEET group and 4 interviews with their parents	Follow-up wave of longitudinal survey with young people recruited in mainstream school settings: N=80	3 interviews with key post-school personnel and parents of young people with SEN at PLC/NLN settings	6 interviews with senior officials of the NCSE, HSE, NABMSE and programme umbrella organisations, and other departments and agencies
20 interviews with school leavers with SEN in mainstream schools and 5 parent interviews	Qualitative study with school leavers in special schools: 11 interviews with students from special schools and 10 interviews with their parents	10 follow-up interviews with students and/or their parents from special schools	Survey with young people recruited in PLC settings: N=951	
20 interviews with key SEN personnel at school (e.g. Guidance Counsellors/SEN Coordinators)			Survey with young people Recruited in NLN settings: N=152	
Case study research in 8 special schools: Interviews with 8 principals, 7 teachers or coordinators of transition planning, 11 parents and 5 young adults			Case study research in adult day services: 5 interviews with young adults attending day services, 3 interviews with parents, and 4 interviews with centre staff.	

Note: In total, we received 562 survey responses. The number of valid responses reduced to 421 after we restricted the sample to where responses were given to at least two questions (specifically, the questions asking date of birth and gender), to exclude empty entries (i.e. 'invalid responses').

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