

Education

Edited by: Carl O'Brien
cobrien@irishtimes.com

'People make assumptions about what we can and can't do'

Third level has become a real option for people with disabilities. New courses are opening doors to jobs and future learning – but campaigners say we need to go much further to promote real inclusion in education



Peter McGuire

Tamara Byrne did well in school and had been looking forward to going to college. But, because she has an intellectual disability, she was told she had to go to a day service.

"It wasn't what I wanted," says Byrne. "Like other people my age, I wanted to go to college, study, make friends and graduate. Nobody helped me plan for life after school. This happens to many people with intellectual disabilities.

"People talk about us, but don't ask us what we want. Others often make choices for us. I ended up at the day centre, feeling sad and angry. I felt stuck and had to fight for what I wanted.

"Things changed when I got into Maynooth University," says Byrne. "I studied Irish history and media. Yes, I needed some help, but I loved learning. Best of all, I graduated with my degree just like my classmates. I had a great time, made friends and presented my own college radio show."

Although some people with intellectual disabilities are non-verbal or may struggle to communicate, many are perfectly able to speak up for themselves.

Byrne, who has spoken at conferences in Ireland and abroad, says there is a lack of inclusion in Irish education.

She is a self-advocate with Inclusion Ireland, which campaigns for people with intellectual disabilities. Being a self-advocate means Byrne speaks out for what she wants and needs, and what could help others with similar disabilities.

"Everyone with a disability has different experiences," says Derval McDonagh, chief executive of Inclusion Ireland. "Disabled people should have a right to take part fully in our communities. Too often this is not the case. Why? Because people are not seen as rights holders."

Some things have got better in the past 10 years, she says, but problems remain.

"More people with intellectual disabilities go to local schools now. But people often don't have high expectations [of them], and that's a problem."

Many schools don't have enough resources, says McDonagh.

"Families must fight for basic rights, such as finding a suitable school. Even after getting into a school, students often struggle to get the support to learn like everyone else."

"Some children travel over an hour to school while their brothers, sisters and friends go to the local school. This sends a bad message: you're not equal, you don't belong."

Inclusion in education is at the centre of what the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) is about.

The centre, which ran its first accredited academic programme in 2016, is giving students the chance to take part in a college programme that can help them be full participants in society and live as independent adults.

"This isn't just a time-filling programme – it's a serious, level-five course that opens



“Our students study literature with other Trinity students – they recently chose to study Eavan Boland’s poetry because it speaks to their own experiences of feeling left out

door s to jobs and further learning,” says Prof Michael Shevlin, the centre’s director. “We aim high for our students. We teach real subjects.

“Our students study literature with other Trinity students – they recently chose to study Eavan Boland’s poetry because it speaks to their own experiences of feeling left out. Why shouldn’t they learn about history, culture, and everything else that makes life rich?”

“Too often, schools – both regular and special – decide what people with intellectual disabilities can’t do,” says Shevlin. “One of our students, who spoke Irish at home, was told they didn’t need to study Irish in school because of their disability. That’s not right.”

“Our programme is different. Instead of just teaching job skills, we offer broad learning. Many of our students never got career guidance in school, so we help them explore

Learning without limits

Ten new third-level courses are rolling out for about 150 students with intellectual disabilities in 2024-2025. They include:

- Atlantic Technological University’s two-year certificate in personal and vocational development;

- Dundalk IT’s certificate in general learning with career progression and work placements;
- Institute of Art, Design and Technology’s creative training pathways pilot, run by its school of film, art and creative technologies

- TU Dublin’s two-year certificate in independent living with supported work placements;
- University of Galway’s certificate in foundational living, featuring social activities and academic classes

all kinds of possibilities”. Programmes such as this are made possible with the support of Path4 funding, which is supporting the development of similar programmes for people with an intellectual disability in Ireland.

“It is a game-changer,” says Shevlin. “It offers hope for change in these young people’s lives, and it should have an influence on how they are educated in primary, secondary and special schools.”

Sadbh Feehan is a graduate of the centre and now works as a staff member. Her job is to help students join clubs and societies and feel at home in college life.

“I know exactly what they’re going through – I was a student here myself,” she says. “Life isn’t always easy. Sometimes people see the disability first and the person second. People make assumptions about what we can and can’t do. During my two years at TCPID, I studied lots of different things. Art history, poetry, maths, even Stem subjects.”

“Before this, I went to a day service in Bagenalstown for people with intellectual disabilities. While there was nothing wrong with it, I knew I could do more. I’d been through regular primary and secondary schools, and I’d already finished level two

■ **Sadbh Feehan is a graduate of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities. “I studied lots of different things. Art, history, poetry, maths, even Stem subjects.”**

PHOTOGRAPH: NICK BRADSHAW

and three FetaC [further education] courses.

“So when I heard about this programme, I knew it was perfect for me. I was determined to do it. We get lots of support: occupational therapists, learning assistants and teachers who really care.”

TCPID now works with about 50 companies, including EY, CPL and Abbott. Abbott runs a six-week programme as part of the course, where students have done science projects including “jewellery under pressure” and “the science of baking”.

“Our graduates are getting real jobs based on their skills,” says Shevlin. “After two years, they do internships that often lead to jobs. Companies hire our graduates not out of charity, but because they’re good workers.”

People with intellectual disabilities, along with allies such as McDonagh and Shevlin, say we need to change how we think about education.

“Quick fixes are not enough,” says McDonagh. “We need to think about what kind of school system we want in Ireland. Some schools are doing great work, and they have leaders and helpers who understand what we need. But not all schools are there yet.”

“We want the new government to make this a top priority, so we need a citizens’ assembly, a real plan for inclusive education and better support and resources.”

Byrne and Feehan want to see more support for people with intellectual disabilities.

“Schools should teach students about disability, and this could help stop bullying,” says Byrne. “I am a woman with an intellectual disability, but it doesn’t define me, and I should not be judged for it. We can speak for ourselves, and we want people to listen.”

Ask Brian



Your questions answered by education analyst Brian Mooney. email askbrian@irishtimes.com

My daughter struggles with school but loves fixing things. Is an apprenticeship right for her?

Q My daughter is due to sit the Leaving Cert in June but has no idea what to do afterwards. She is not particularly interested in going to college. She struggles with book learning and finds it boring. She is great with her hands and always fixing something or pulling it apart to see how it works. I think she’d be suited to a job with a strong hands-on element or an apprenticeship. Have you any suggestions?

A As I read your question, one apprenticeship came to mind: OEM (original equipment manufacturing) engineering. It is aimed at those who enjoy the hands-on aspects of engineering, have a natural curiosity and enjoy problem-solving, analysing and diagnosing. Entry does not require CAO points. Instead, candidates need five passes in the Leaving Cert, one of which must be maths, and has no requirement to have previously studied an engineering subject.

This apprenticeship is targeted at the manufacturing, installation and services sectors of the economy. It serves employers in Ireland involved in everything from agricultural and transportation to pharmaceutical and medical devices industries. Companies that hire these apprentices are many and varied, including Irish Rail, Johnson & Johnson, Amazon, Comblif, Abbey Machinery, AMCS, Moffett Automation and Jungheinrich.

It is a three-year programme that combines learning in the workplace with learning in a training centre or educational college for a 16-week block each year, either in Raheen Training Centre in Limerick city or Monaghan Institute. Cavan Monaghan ETB is the national provider for the apprenticeship in partnership with Limerick Clare ETB.

From what I’ve seen, it offers young people a great opportunity to learn in a practical, supportive environ-



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ment while simultaneously working towards a recognised qualification.

Upon completion, an apprentice will qualify as an engineering technician with an advanced certificate, or level-six award, in OEM engineering. Graduates may progress into supervisory or management roles.

They will also be eligible to apply to a range of degree programmes in higher education. So, there would be nothing stopping your daughter taking this level-six qualification on to a full level-eight engineering degree, if she wanted to.

So, how do you get one of these apprenticeships? There are three routes: an applicant may apply directly to a company registered as an OEM engineering apprenticeship employer; alternatively, an applicant may find their own employer; and, finally, one can complete an expression of interest form through the OEM website which is sent to registered employers.

This apprenticeship is a proven way for employers to develop talent for their company and industry. For learners, it opens a pathway to new and rewarding careers, grounded in the practical experience of undertaking a real job. And, of course, there is also the attraction of “earning and learning” in contrast to steep college costs. It is certainly an option worth exploring in more detail.

We need a reforming minister to deliver on plans for a new Leaving Cert

Emma Duggan

Broadening the range of learning and assessment at senior cycle has the potential to provide pathways for all students to realise their full potential

the reins at the Department of Education. So, what will be in store when the new minister is installed?

The pre-election political party manifestos indicated that Fianna Fáil was the only party prioritising curriculum redevelopment, the field where I work. The party pledged to “continue the reform of the Leaving Certificate in order to broaden the range of learning and examination approaches involved”.

To her credit, Norma Foley – who has been at the helm of that department since 2020 – has been committed to reforming the 100-year-old and largely unchanged Leaving Certificate since the publication of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment’s (NCCA) Senior Cycle Advisory Report in 2022.

This involved a standard partnership or

stakeholder model of curriculum policy development, a model nabbed from postwar West Germany where government, unions and business united in social partnership to create economic and social stability; it has been used here since the 1980s for national pay agreements and curriculum development.

In addition to this, Foley also set up a Senior Cycle Redevelopment Delivery Board, a programme management office with a set programme of work and a Senior Cycle Redevelopment Partners’ Forum (a group which includes young people, parents and the inclusion sector).

The standard partnership model which involves representatives from a wide range of groups (including teacher unions, management bodies, Ibec, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the inspectorate, teacher subject professional networks, and the State Examination Commission among others) gives each group a say in the development of curriculum policy – although student and parent groups are excluded from these deliberations.

While seeming democratic, the wisdom of developing curriculum using this overtly representative model is open to question (some partners may participate with a view to watering down, blocking or

undermining any proposed developments).

The fact that we have seen so little change in the upper secondary curriculum since the foundation of the State tells its own story. In any case, the NCCA, the

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statutory body responsible for drafting the curriculum based on the deliberations of partners, can have its advice accepted or rejected by the minister. Ultimately, educational policymaking is the prerogative of the government and specifically the minister for education of the day.

I hope we get a reforming minister, someone with the vision of “the school man” Donogh O’Malley, who, in one fell swoop, introduced the free education scheme. It turned out to be, in the words of JJ Lee, “one of the most important

developments in independent Ireland”.

Oponents of O’Malley’s free scheme argued secondary education for all would be “both financially impractical and educationally unsound ... only a minority would be capable of benefiting from such education and standards would fall”. They said the voluntary system of education worked and preserved “a sense of the value of education”.

Do those unfounded worries about declining standards sound familiar?

It’s not a million miles away from the dissenting critics of curriculum redevelopment we are hearing today.

Will broadening the range of learning and assessment opportunities offered at the Leaving Certificate have as big an impact as the free education scheme in 1967?

Possibly not, but it does have the potential to positively improve the educational experiences and outcomes for all of the young people in this country and open up broader opportunity to the next generations.

Curriculum is something every single school-going child engages with; from preschool to post-primary, special school to Gaelscoil. Children have a right to have multiple routes open to them through that curriculum.

If education’s ultimate aim is human flourishing in its multiplicity of manifestations, then curriculum’s role is to provide pathways for all students to develop the competencies to realise their potential and to thrive.

The Leaving Certificate is not a sorting house for third-level institutions (neither is it, as used to be the case not so far back in its 100-year history, a vehicle to prepare students for vocations or the Civil Service).

For sure, a very important part of senior cycle’s brief is to facilitate the attainment of academic qualifications, but other aspects of the curriculum’s remit are important too: the socialisation of students and the curriculum’s role in providing a space for students to learn how to navigate the world independently with dignity, empathy, open-mindedness and perseverance; its role in providing the conditions in which students might “try themselves out” so they can readily assume the responsibilities and opportunities of being a human in today’s society.

I hope we get a minister for education who will fund, resource and deliver on the promise of curriculum reform.

Emma Duggan is a teacher and teacher educator. She is writing in a personal capacity

Here we are on the eve of a new Fianna Fáil-led government taking office for a five-year term. It looks like it will be well into 2025 before we find out who will take