NDA Independent advice on the provision of Career Guidance in schools for learners with disabilities in Ireland

March 2023



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# Executive Summary

This policy paper sets out the National Disability Authority’s (NDA) advice on the delivery of an effective career guidance experience for all learners with a disability, including those with special education needs while at school.

The NDA is the independent statutory body with a duty to provide information and evidence-informed advice to Government and officials in the public sector on disability matters, and to promote Universal Design.

## Career guidance and guidance counselling

Career guidance in a school setting is an essential mechanism to empower young people to make informed choices about their post-school pathways. The correlation between career counselling and guidance counselling is important but a distinction between the two is important. Guidance counselling is ‘a collaborative professional relationship to facilitate clients in their unique identification of strengths, skills, possibilities, resources and options at key developmental milestones through their lifespan in areas relating to personal, social, educational and vocational concerns’. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Career guidance on the other hand refers ‘…to services intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers’. [[2]](#footnote-2)

## Policy Background

Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018. Article 24 on Education recognises the right to an inclusive education and facilitating persons with disabilities to live their life to their fullest potential. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides for the education of children aged under 18 years with special educational needs. Several parts of this act were never commenced which may limit the personalised understanding of the child’s needs and goals that can support the career guidance counsellor’s work.

There are several policy drivers influencing the delivery of career guidance. Budget cuts in 2012, as part of austerity cuts at that time, have meant a reduction in career guidance provision across the Irish education system. In 2020, Indecon Consultants published a report on career guidance in the Irish education and training system and made recommendations to improve the existing career guidance tools and information and to enhance engagement with enterprise. The content in the report relating to students with special educational needs was limited but it did highlight that there was no guidance counsellor allocation to special schools and recommended that teachers in special schools should be provided with career guidance training. It also recommended that the wider career guidance supports for special schools needed improvement. To implement the recommendations of the Indecon report in 2022 the Department of Education established a National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance to develop a coherent national long-term policy on guidance through the development of an overarching National Strategic Framework for Guidance.

## Career Guidance practice

The National Council of Guidance in Education[[3]](#footnote-3) developed a Whole School Guidance Framework (WSGF) in 2017 to support schools to plan and deliver their whole school guidance programme andto outline the “Guidance related competencies” that students should have by the time they are leaving school. In discussions held with young people with disabilities who had recent experience of the school system it appears that key aims of this framework to provide person-centred supports to students who need it are not believed to have been delivered. The advice which follows is informed by these discussions and suggestions are presented about how the framework could be strengthened.

## Key advice

A summary of our key advice is provided below.

With specific regard to the Whole School Guidance Framework consider:

* Introducing mentoring programmes for students to provide additional support.
* Delivering career guidance in an individually focused, person-centred way throughout the learner pathway with support and assistance to identify individual career goals which will achieve the best outcomes for learners with disabilities. Identify and address gaps in the current approach to ‘the few’ to provide more individualised supports. As part of this articulate what good person-centred supports look like.
* Implementing lessons from pilots and from good practice elsewhere to support students to transition from secondary education to further and higher education or to employment. Transition plans need to be developed from an early stage (1st year) and revisited regularly, building the skills, confidence and ambition of the student to transition successfully.
* Ensuring students in special schools have equal access to career guidance (see below)
* Designing and delivering high quality, impartial career information, advice and guidance for young people with disabilities and outlining how this can be built into the curriculum is necessary and is currently an identified gap in the system.
* Delivering Continuous Professional Development to ensure that guidance counsellors are continually updated and deliver expertise in supporting the career choices of young people with disabilities. This would include CPD around raising their expectations of young people with disabilities and supporting young people to develop a positive mind-set about themselves and what they are capable of achieving.
* Providing additional external supports for guidance counsellors to support young people in their career choices, for example, providing regional advisers who are more specialised in pathways for people with disabilities could be explored.
* Developing and using quality standards, benchmarking tools and Codes of Practice, using similar approaches in other countries as a model, as supporting mechanisms for future delivery including as external oversight.
* Adopting a Universal Design in Education (UDE) approach to reforming career guidance provision so that it is central to the concept of guidance for all. These principles are relevant to the design of career guidance resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities, regardless of the educational setting. It will also have benefits for the non-disabled student population.

Building on the work underway with the establishment in 2022 of a **National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance**, who have been tasked to develop a coherent long-term strategic framework, consider:

* Underpinning the guidance with UNCRPD principles
* Establishing an oversight body specifically on Career Guidance in schools that would have due regard to provision of guidance for learners with disabilities.
* Recognising the limited recommendations to support learners with disabilities in the Indecon report and review the status of special schools to ensure that students in these schools have equal access to career guidance, transition year, peer mentoring or work placements.
* Including a Universal Design for Education approach in the strategic framework. This approach will ensure maximum accessibility for all learners, including those with disabilities, those who have not yet received a diagnosis and those who continue to experience marginalisation.
* Improving policy integration and improved coordination between government departments and agencies. A clear example of how this can be achieved is through supporting career guidance within the context of planning and supporting transitions, better access to Intreo Public Employment Services, and a clear employment goals pathway.

# Introduction

This policy paper sets out the National Disability Authority’s (NDA) advice on the delivery of an effective career guidance experience for all learners with a disability, including those with special education needs while at school. The NDA undertook this policy advice work to address gaps in current provision of career guidance for young people as evidenced in the Indecon report 2019.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The NDA is the independent statutory body with a duty to provide information and evidence-informed advice to Government and officials in the public sector on disability matters, and to promote Universal Design.

## Career guidance and guidance counselling

Career guidance in a school setting is an essential mechanism to empower young people to make informed choices about their post-school pathways. The correlation between career counselling and guidance counselling is important but a distinction between the two is important for this policy advice paper. The OECD 2018 describe guidance counselling as

a key tool to help students self-identify their aspirations and abilities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In Ireland guidance counselling is considered

a collaborative professional relationship to facilitate clients in their unique identification of strengths, skills, possibilities, resources and options at key developmental milestones through their lifespan in areas relating to personal, social, educational and vocational concerns[[6]](#footnote-6)

For learners who may, and sometimes do, leave school early[[7]](#footnote-7) guidance counselling is vitally important to their future employment and educational opportunities.

Career guidance refers

…to services intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. [[8]](#footnote-8)

This includes services provided in schools. Career guidance interventions have been described by researchers as being

…concerned not with telling people what to do but with helping them acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them make better career choices and transitions. [[9]](#footnote-9)

## Language and education

The language used to describe disabled people in education uses a variety of terms with the term ‘special’ being used most frequently as it features in current education legislation. This term can be perceived as patronising towards disabled children and students and can have the effect of ‘othering’ them.[[10]](#footnote-10) NDA research found no consensus regarding an alternative for the word 'special’ in an education context. Some people use the word ‘additional’ for example, ‘additional educational needs’. However, it is not fully satisfactory from an inclusive education perspective, as all children and students have individualised needs and no one’s needs are ‘additional’. For this policy advice paper, however, the terms ‘special’ and ‘additional’ are used inter-changeably as being those most commonly used by those operating within the system.

In this paper, the terms “people/students with disabilities” and “disabled people/students” are used interchangeably. The term ‘disabled people’ is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Ireland to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to acknowledge the fact that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term “persons with disabilities” because of the inherent understanding in the term that they are first and foremost human beings entitled to human rights. This also reflects the language used in the UNCRPD. We recognise that many people with an intellectual disability, people with a mental health difficulty or psycho-social disability prefer person-first language. We also recognise that some people do not identify with either term.

This advice paper is primarily focused on the experience of school going children, however the NDA is also aware of gaps in career guidance for disabled young people who exit school early. This advice paper is underpinned by the central principle that all learners with disabilities should have access to support regarding their career choices and ambitions.

## Evidence to support policy advice

The NDA undertook a number of work packages to inform this policy paper:

* A Literature Review examining career guidance for learners with disabilities in second level education[[11]](#footnote-11)
* Consultation with two groups of young disabled people who had recent experience of mainstream post-primary school, special classes within mainstream and of special education schooling. [[12]](#footnote-12) [[13]](#footnote-13) One of these groups was the youth section of a national Disabled Persons Organisation.
* Engagement with stakeholders including one-to-one and group meetings with individuals from various sections of the Department of Education, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science, the National Council for Special Education and the National Centre for Guidance in Education and academics involved in inclusive education practice and educators
* A midpoint roundtable discussion with a broad range of stakeholders including practitioners in the career guidance space examining the emerging findings from the literature review and current practice

## Structure of policy advice paper

This paper starts with a section on the policy background to the current provision of career guidance. The next section outlines career guidance in practice and includes feedback from young people interviewed to inform this advice. A critique of the Whole School Guidance Framework and suggested ways it could be strengthened is also included. The conclusion section summarises the key advice points.

# Policy background

Presenting the legislative and policy background to the delivery of career guidance allows for a better understanding of current practice and delivery as experienced by disabled learners. Relevant pieces of legislation and policies and policy drivers are outlined below. Appendix 1 lists other legislation, policy and guidance relevant to career guidance.

## UNCRPD

Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018.[[14]](#footnote-14) Article 24 is concerned with Education and section 1 recognises the right to an inclusive education and facilitating persons with disabilities to live their life to their fullest potential. Appendix 2 outlines the full text of Article 24. During 2023 the government will develop a UNCRPD implementation strategy.

General Comment No. 4 published in 2016 by the UN Committee on the Rights of People with Disabilities states that inclusive education should be embedded within the “whole educational environment” at all levels including counselling services, school trips and classroom teaching and relationships (UN, 2006).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Furthermore in its 2019 Progress Report on the policy advice to the Minister of Education, the National Council for Special Education advised that the UN Committee’s General Comment No.4 makes clear that

Having a mainstream educational system and a separate special education system is not compatible with its view of inclusion and that parallel systems are not considered inclusive.

For the purposes of this policy advice paper it is worth describing some of the details of General Comment No. 4. In particular, the UN Committee highlighted the importance of recognising the differences between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion in education. The Committee encouraged States parties to adopt the universal design for learning approach. It set out the core features of inclusive education as follows:

* A whole systems approach
* A whole educational environment
* A whole person approach
* Supported teachers
* Respect for and value of diversity
* A learning-friendly environment
* Effective transitions
* Recognition of partnerships
* Monitoring

As evidenced in the literature review these core features of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) are often used as a benchmark to assess if domestic practices align with the principles of the UNCRPD ensuring a rights based approach to career guidance exists. The NDA recommends that the guidance framework refers to UNCRPD principles in particular highlighting how these principles will be used to ensure equitable implementation of career guidance. A UNCRPD implementation Plan is to be developed during 2023 and is likely to include actions around inclusive education and career guidance supports.

## EPSEN Act

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides for the education of children aged under 18 years with special educational needs. Several parts of this act were never commenced which may limit the personalised understanding of the child’s needs and goals that can support the career guidance counsellor’s work.

The EPSEN Act is currently being reviewed and as part of this the education system can address what the UN Committee General Comment No. 4 described as a ‘parallel system’ of education provision one which operates in both mainstream and special school / classes.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Irish Government’s stated policy has been that children with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers except where this is not practical.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, the number of children not educated in mainstream classes in mainstream schools continues to rise. In practice, this means that one system is in place in special schools and a parallel system is in place in mainstream schools and special classes. Research has found that while the administrative system currently in place continues to support this parallel approach to education and the system will continue to provide ‘add ons’ in education rather than becoming truly inclusive[[18]](#footnote-18)

The review of the EPSEN Act and the development of a UNCRPD strategy are an opportunity to provide a clear vision and a subsequent roadmap that will ensure an inclusive education system for Ireland especially for those with additional education needs.

## Comprehensive Employment Strategy

The vision as set out in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) 2015 to 2024 is one whereby ‘people with disabilities can get a job and enjoy a rewarding career’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The commencement of the journey to a rewarding career is typically through the support of a career guidance counsellor, which helps young people develop a positive mind-set about themselves and what they are capable of achieving.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The CES describes strategic pillars that include actions centred on building skills, capacity and independence and also on coordination and seamless delivery of supports. This overarching government strategy has resulted in projects examining raising expectations, transitions from school, further and higher education, and employment. Also included in the initial 3-year action plan of the CES from 2015 to 2018 were actions to address the role and provision of career guidance in schools.

The CES highlighted the importance of raising expectations amongst person with disabilities regarding their employment opportunities. This includes expectations of the individuals themselves, and those of their families, educators and support workers. As part of this, it has been demonstrated that consideration of employment goals and aspirations should begin at the earliest stage possible. Having strong and appropriate career guidance provision in all school settings in which students with disabilities are educated is a critical aspect of this work. Good practice from other jurisdictions referenced in the supporting literature review indicate that career advice and guidance for students with disabilities should commence at age 12/13 to improve the chances of achieving good employment outcomes. [[21]](#footnote-21) This view was supported by learners consulted with by the NDA.

## Policy drivers

### Indecon review of Career Guidance

International evidence on the changing approaches to career guidance was noted by the OECD in its 2018 report on career guidance and employer engagement.[[22]](#footnote-22) It stated that effective transitions between education and employment depend on intense guidance provision. It is within this context that the then Department of Education and Skills commissioned Indecon Consultants to report on career guidance provision in Ireland. The report published in 2020 examined aspects of career guidance in the Irish education and training system and made recommendations to improve the existing career guidance tools and information and to enhance engagement with enterprise.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The review found that learners had a variety of influences, including family and friends, work experience, guidance counsellors, and other teachers. It also found that the way learners form opinions regarding post school options varies by socio-economic groups, with those from lower socio-economic groups being less likely to consult with their parents. This illustrates the importance of career guidance for these groups in particular to work towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage. Econometric modelling in the review demonstrated that ‘one-to-one career guidance sessions’ appear to have a significant impact on outcomes and are a strong predictor of students progressing to further/higher education.

The content in the report relating to students with additional educational needs was limited but it did highlight that there was no guidance counsellor allocation to special schools and recommended that teachers in special schools should be provided with career guidance training. It also recommended that the wider career guidance supports for special schools needed improvement.

In brief, the Indecon review recommended a number of approaches under the theme of inclusion including:[[24]](#footnote-24)

* students in special education settings should have access to career support services including information on labour market opportunities
* a module on career guidance should be included as part of teacher training in special schools
* specialised and ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) supports should be provided for teachers in special schools
* Resource allocation for guidance teachers should be prioritised for learners most in need of support

### National Policy Group on Lifelong Learning

While the Indecon review has informed part of the Department of Education’s thinking on career guidance, the establishment in 2022 of a National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance to develop a coherent national long-term policy on guidance through the development of an overarching National Strategic Framework for Guidance is to be welcomed. [[25]](#footnote-25) The National Policy Group comprises five government departments.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The central focus of this policy advice paper is on delivery of an effective career guidance experience while at school for all learners with a disability including those with additional education needs. The NDA views career guidance, particularly for students with a disability, as an important element of a strategic guidance framework. The work of the national policy group on lifelong guidance while not the substantive issue in this policy advice paper should lead to:

* Better policy integration, with improved coordination between government departments and agencies. A clear example of how this can be achieved is through supporting career guidance within the context of planning and supporting transitions[[27]](#footnote-27), better access to Intreo Public Employment Services, and a clear employment goals pathway
* Delivery of personalised targeted supports within the context of career guidance and more universally delivered elements of an effective career guidance service within an overall guidance structure
* Implementation of evidence from research on good practice with regard to standards, continuous professional development and ensuring enterprise involvement in the career guidance process.

The NDA has inputted to the consultation exercise underway by the National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance.

### Budget cuts to career guidance funding

Budget 2012 altered the provision of career guidance teachers in Irish schools. Prior to 2012 schools were entitled to employ guidance professionals/teachers and this was reflected in a higher teacher allocation. Post 2012 the responsibility for deciding on the appropriate guidance resources for each school was delegated to each school principal. In addition to a budget cut, this measure resulted a depletion of the provision of career guidance provision within the school setting[[28]](#footnote-28).

A return to the pre 2012 circular for guidance allocation was a core recommendation of a 2021 pre-Budget submission from the Institute of Guidance Counsellors[[29]](#footnote-29). This submission also asked that

…an enhanced guidance allocation should be allocated to guidance counsellors to facilitate our response to: …. fully addressing the needs of students with SEN and/or socioeconomic disadvantage

An ESRI Bulletin (2023) recommends ‘the need to target additional guidance resources towards schools serving more disadvantaged populations to help counterbalance the resources (within and outside school) available to their more advantaged peers. Addressing the disparity in access to guidance resources is a crucial element in bringing about greater equality in higher education participation across social groups.[[30]](#footnote-30)

# Career guidance practice

This section will outline the model of guidance that is in place in Ireland and present how gaps can be addressed to ensure all learners are included. Notably this section will discuss how the lack of career guidance provision in special education can be addressed to ensure that learners with additional education needs are supported to have clear career goals and ambitions and are supported to achieve them.

## Experiences of young learners of career guidance

In order to inform this advice paper, the NDA had discussions with key education stakeholders and focus group discussions with young people with a range of disabilities from WALK[[31]](#footnote-31) and ILMI.[[32]](#footnote-32) When asked about their experiences of career guidance, focus group participants described an experience of not being included. Their experience ranged from a lack of involvement with career guidance in school, to decisions being made on their behalf with limited involvement from the learner. The language used by these learners described career guidance as ‘not for them’ or that they ‘did not belong’.

Many of the learners who participated were unaware of schemes such as DARE or HEAR.[[33]](#footnote-33) Participants/young people also revealed that psychometric tests and vocational role profiles, frequently used by guidance counsellors in schools, were not useful for a number of reasons including the inability of these test to take into account individualised needs of the learner and not acknowledge the particulars of a student’s disability.

In contrast however, evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey revealed that students aged 17 to 18 said they valued the support provided by guidance counsellors and over half (55%) of young people considered individual guidance sessions and guidance classes as “important or very important” in helping them make informed choices about post-school pathways. [[34]](#footnote-34) These experiences lie at the centre of this policy advice: inclusive career guidance is about ensuring disabled students are included and that they receive career guidance and support that is relevant to them. Participants were asked who they consulted with to help them make decisions about their post-school pathway and how important this individual was in their decision making. Mothers (88%) followed by career guidance professionals (class session 77%; individual appointment 65%) were most frequently consulted with. Although parents were considered as the most important source of decision making for young people, over half (55%) ranked individual career guidance and guidance classes as important or very important. Having a supportive career guidance professional who understood the learner’s needs was reported as not being available to many of the young people involved in the NDA consultation.

The core conditions needed for those providing career guidance support include empathy, being genuine in approach, and being fully accepting of the person’s situation.[[35]](#footnote-35) These conditions, when explored with learners, allowed learners to describe access to a career guidance professional who understood their needs. Learners who reflected on their school experience questioned the training available to career guidance teachers with regard to believing in the potential of disabled learners. The Literature Review found that career guidance teachers must have competence and awareness of disability and be knowledgeable of the options available for young people with additional needs.

## Organisation of career guidance in schools

Section 21 of the 1998 Education Act[[36]](#footnote-36) stipulates that schools develop a school-plan based on the need of the school and that this includes a school guidance plan. Individual schools decide on the principal activities to include in their guidance programme.[[37]](#footnote-37) This process allows schools to have freedom and autonomy in drafting a school guidance plan to suit individual schools and student needs[[38]](#footnote-38) whilst being cognisant of “available resources” and “contextual factors”.[[39]](#footnote-39)

While this framework has allowed a certain degree of autonomy in delivery of guidance, the reliance on ‘available resources’ has led to gaps, as noted in the 2006 Inspectorate review that found a significant variation in experience of guidance delivery in different schools. This included variation across school types as well as within schools, “students in the same schools had different experiences of accessing and experience of delivery of the guidance service”[[40]](#footnote-40).

## Development of the Whole School Guidance Framework

The National Council of Guidance in Education[[41]](#footnote-41) developed a Whole School Guidance Framework (WSGF) in 2017 to support schools to plan and deliver their whole school guidance programme andto outline the “Guidance related competences” that students should have by the time they are leaving school. Within this framework the model of ‘Guidance for All, Guidance for Some and Guidance for Few’ provided a template for each school to look at its own student cohort and to instigate a guidance programme that could be adapted to meet the needs of all students. This approach stated that guidance should be delivered in classroom / group activities and in one-to-one guidance counselling sessions.

The Framework recognised that guidance competences and skills development can be achieved within the overall school curriculum when appropriately integrated and agreed with other school staff / subject teachers and support staff. The Framework also identified three areas of learning to facilitate students’ development in eight areas of competence including:

* learning relating to oneself (personal/social development)
* educational opportunities (educational development)
* career decision making (career development)

The framework is presented visually as a wheel in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Whole School Guidance Framework Wheel**

**Graph.  Whole School Guidance**

### Strengths and weakness of the Framework

A key strength of this this model in relation to career guidance is that guidance can be delivered through individualised supports for students. The NDA notes that this is important as learners with disabilities require training and education designed to suit their individual learning style, rather than a one size fits all approach. It is also important that delivery of career planning is flexible to the learner’s personal circumstances, for example: persons with mobility disabilities who may require distance learning; learners with intermittent health problems who may need to start, stop and pick up again; and learners with different communication needs who require alternative communication channels such as Irish Sign Language or Easy to Read documentation.

However, the NDA consultation with learners who left the education system in recent years identified a number of gaps in their experience of career guidance while at school, including:

* Access to Individualised supports
* Accessible information on careers
* Access to Transition year
* Access to Work Placement
* Assistance with the articulation of work goals and ambitions

This implies that the mainstreaming approach which makes provision for ‘the few’ - which would frequently include students with a disability - is not working as it should. While mainstreaming disability supports and services is national policy in Ireland, for this policy to be successful the individual needs of the learners must also be addressed.

### Suggestions to strengthen the Framework

#### Mentorship

NDA advises that to strengthen the support for ‘the few’ within the mainstream framework there may be merit in embedding a specialist approach to ensure that students with disabilities who require extra specific supports are supported.

One such specialist approach could be mentorship programmes where an individual with a disability is linked to a mentor. A systematic review of mentorship programmes found a range of mentors were used including peer mentors with a disability, peers without a disability, parent led mentoring, coaches, and rehabilitation providers.[[42]](#footnote-42) This approach can be very valuable and a support to career guidance staff who may have limited time for individual students. Mentorships can take many configurations but often involve a planned curriculum, training for the mentor, a paid programme co-ordinator and both formal and informal mentorships. These programmes are especially beneficial when the mentor has a disability. The accompanying literature review contains evidence of mentorship interventions that have the potential to help transitions to post-secondary education and/or employment, with young people experiencing improvements in their self-confidence, communication skills and knowledge of their own disability.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Peer mentorship programmes have shown that coaching “in a non-stigmatizing and cost-effective way[[44]](#footnote-44)” is beneficial and may be particularly beneficial to pupils with learning disabilities. In their work WALK have clearly shown how peer mentoring can be delivered in an Irish context[[45]](#footnote-45) while in relation to the d/Deaf community having role models and/or mentorship opportunities of d/Deaf adults and children will contribute to their self-esteem and their sense of identity[[46]](#footnote-46)

#### Person-centred approach

The WSGF may benefit in clearly articulating what ‘person-centred’ or ‘individualised’ support looks like within an overall career guidance programme. The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) commissioned the development of guidelines to facilitate career development for young people with a disability. This 2012 guidance consists of seven steps, each with an overarching aim and subsets.[[47]](#footnote-47) These Guidelines aim to ensure that:

* career guidance is provided in a person-centred way responsive to each young person;
* encouraging and providing young people with the skills to be self-managing and self-determining individuals;
* attaining suitable work experience;
* expanding the young person’s support networks;
* ensuring career information is accessible to all;
* developing working relationships with relevant agencies and service providers;
* Providing organisational support to deliver effective career development programs and services.

The NDA advises that one approach to strengthening a person-centred approach in WSGF is to critically examine CICA’s 7 steps (or similar) and match them within the WSGF to see where improvements and specific supports could be provided. This approach would help address the significant gaps identified by disabled Irish students who described their experience of limited emphasis on accessible career information, or on access to transition year and on relationships with external agencies and service providers. Ultimately these gaps must be addressed to ensure students with disabilities are included in career guidance.

Targeting support is often located in the context of supporting transitions and post school options for learners. NDA (2017) conducted a mapping of post-school options for learners with special educational needs, which demonstrated that the post-school options[[48]](#footnote-48) and support structures for young adults with disabilities are fragmented and provision is often localised. This mapping exercise noted that individual Career Guidance Counsellors may support people with particular disabilities only a few times in their careers, highlighting the need to build capacity in this regard.

#### Transition planning

Over the last decade significant project activity in the area of managing and supporting transitions for leaners with disabilities, has occurred including the Disability Activation Fund (DACT projects 2012) and the Ability Fund (2018). These projects have addressed school based support needs across the spectrum of disabilities and at local, regional and national level. Projects also focused on supporting young people with disabilities between the ages of 15 and 29 who were not currently work ready using a range of person-centred supports. A key outcome from the Ability project work was to assist young people to identify and follow progression routes based on both their potential and their needs. As a result, these programmes promoted positive pathways into education, training and employment for participants[[49]](#footnote-49).

Building on this evidence two further pilot projects were announced in 2022. The first is a pilot project to support school leavers with disabilities,[[50]](#footnote-50) and targets pupils with Intellectual Disabilities and complex education needs in 20 post-primary and special schools in Dublin and Galway. Schools will be supported to help students and families complete a skills audit identifying skill gaps and necessary supports. Each student will develop an individual transition plan with school support on the specific skills required to ensure a positive transition from school. The pilot will be overseen by the National Council for Special Education and progress will be monitored with a view to expanding the pilot to other schools.

The second pilot is a collaboration between the Department of Education and Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK). This project will deliver the WALK ‘peer Ability programme’ to 170 pupils across 10 schools based in Louth, Dublin, Kerry, Cork and Kilkenny. There is evidence from an earlier evaluation of the WALK PEER programme[[51]](#footnote-51) that learners and their families and others valued mentorships as a career support tool. The findings from this extended delivery of the WALK PEER programme will be evaluated and it was announced that the evaluation will inform future policy direction.[[52]](#footnote-52)

#### Review provision for students in special schools

The Indecon report suggested that specialised and ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD) supports should be provided for teachers in special schools. Current special education provision has a designated status of primary education provision, which means there are no career guidance teachers allocated special schools despite the fact that most of them include students between the ages of 4 and 18. This leads to sporadic or no career guidance provision.

The NDA advises that the Indecon recommendation is a limited response to what is required for the delivery of career guidance in special education, as it depicts the classroom teacher as the sole provider of this skill. There needs to be a more fundamental rethinking of how special schools are designated, how career guidance is administered and how the limited access to transition year and work placements impact on students. This is perhaps something that can be looked at as part of the ongoing EPSEN review. While the classroom teacher in special education can assist students self-identify their aspirations and abilities[[53]](#footnote-53), other practitioners experienced in career guidance are required for more specialist guidance.

#### Continuous Professional Development

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in career guidance specific to students with disabilities or special education need is required, as a ‘one size fits all’ approach to disability and guidance support is not sufficient. A guidance counsellor may not engage frequently enough with certain disabilities to become confident and competent in advising these students. It may be unrealistic to expect them to be intimately familiar with all the pathways that exits. Therefore, there is a need in addition to CPD to have supports available for guidance counsellors to seek more specialist advice and there may be a case for regional specialist advisors to build the capacity of the school based guidance counsellor.

#### External oversight

The recently established National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance is tasked with the development of a new coherent long term strategic framework which should result in an inclusive career guidance approach across the life cycle. This new cross department structure has the opportunity to introduce a clear vision of and plan to show how an inclusive lifelong career guidance model of service is operated, accepting that the foundational work of career guidance will commence with guidance as delivered while at school.

Recent oversight of career guidance within the school system was conducted by the Department of Education Inspectorate as part of the whole school evaluations (WSE) process conducted every 5 years. However the NDA advises that a standards and quality assurance system become part of the new national framework on lifelong guidance. One recommendation of external oversight is in its ability to ensure that career guidance is grounded in local and national structures and service provision. There is however a lack of uniformity on the implementation of standards and quality assurance systems for career guidance globally. A number of approaches are evidenced in the supporting literature review but two from the UK maybe worth considering.

**Code of Practice**

In January 2015, the Department of Education and the Department of Health in the UK jointly published a special educational needs and disability code of practice as statutory guidance for organisations which work with and support children and young people who have special educational needs or disabilities. It covers the age range 0 - 25 years.[[54]](#footnote-54) Section 8 covers ‘preparing for adulthood from the earliest years’. There are a number of features which are pertinent to this policy advice including:

* How local authorities and health services should plan strategically for the support children and young people will need to prepare for adult life
* How early years providers, schools and colleges should enable children and young people to have the information and skills they need to help them gain independence and prepare for adult life
* Support from Year 9, including the content of preparing for adulthood reviews for children and young people with EHC plans
* Planning the transition into post-16 education
* How post-16 institutions can design study programmes and create pathways to employment
* How young people should be supported to make decisions for themselves
* Leaving education and training and progressing into employment

There may be merit in having such a code of practice in Ireland especially with regard to non-school personnel who are involved in a young person’s life (including those in the health and social care roles) who would then have identified roles that collectively support the young person including in career guidance.

**Benchmarks**

Another oversight mechanism used to implement good career guidance provision in the UK is entitled the Gatsby benchmarks on good career guidance. [[55]](#footnote-55) When developed they were framed within the OECD (2004) definition of career guidance “as a set of services and activities intended to assist individuals to make choices and manage their career”. Taken collectively these tools address both school based activity and wider community activity necessary to ensure career guidance is relevant to the individual and their wider circle. While not on a statutory footing, they are used to ensure a good standard of career guidance. In brief the Gatsby Benchmarks provide clear descriptors of organisation structures that need to be in place to facilitate career guidance practice.

#### Universal Design in Education

Universal Design in Education (UDE) is a whole systems approach that allows the physical and digital environments, the educational services, teaching and learning to be easily accessed, understood and used by the widest range of learners and all key stakeholders, in a more inclusive environment. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is one of the core elements of UDE and it caters for the diversity of learners in each classroom. UDL includes a variety of teaching methods in order to give all learners equal learning opportunities.[[56]](#footnote-56) It incorporates flexible methods of teaching and assessment, therefore inclusive of different learning styles: for example, some students are auditory learners and other students are visual learners.[[57]](#footnote-57) Applying UDL principles gives learners more choice and agency in how they learn and interact with educators.[[58]](#footnote-58) Applying UDE and specifically UDL to career guidance could be an important step in making career guidance more accessible.

Advances in the UDE approach in Ireland have been developed in Further Education and Training[[59]](#footnote-59) and are currently being expanded on in Higher Education through the National Access Plan 2022- 28[[60]](#footnote-60). This progress sets a context for the development of pathways from school to post-school options and further education and training options beyond school. There may be learning from this initiative that could be applied at second level education. In practical terms developing a fully inclusive educational environment of which career guidance is an element, can be designed by using a UDE approach, especially as this approach provides a framework for the inclusion of diverse groups from the start of this process. Fundamentally using UDE should include all learners not only learners with disabilities but learners from the other diverse groups such as Roma and Traveller students and other marginalised students.

A UDE approach to reforming career guidance provision needs to be central to the concept of guidance for all. These principles are relevant to the design of career guidance resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities, regardless of the educational setting. A practical tool to assist the production of clear user-friendly and accessible career guidance material is the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) prepared toolkit called ‘The Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service’. This Toolkit[[61]](#footnote-61) describes sections on the design of Written, Spoken & Signed and Digital Communication, with selected statements, examples, tips, checklists and links to learn more.

The delivery of these supports is especially important for some learners in special education provision who on leaving school may be offered a HSE funded adult day service with limited ability to pursue career goals. Delivery of education or training by distance learning, including e-learning, should also be designed as accessible to people with disabilities. Universal Design of the curriculum is also important, to ensure that the learning is accessible to people with different forms of disability or learning styles. As online delivery of curricula continues to expand schools will be required to be aware of developments from the EU in this regard, for example the [EU Web Accessibility Directive](https://nda.ie/monitoring/eu-web-accessibility-directive/eu-web-accessibility-directive-monitoring-reports)[[62]](#footnote-62), which came into force in September 2020, requires Member States to ensure that websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies are fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

There are three principles in UDL that provide a framework to support educators develop their curricula:

1. Multiple Means of Representation, acknowledges that students learn differently (visually, auditory or through touch, tactile) and providing multiple, flexible ways of learning is optimal
2. Multiple Means of Action and Expression, refers to the variety of ways that students express what they have learned and
3. Multiple Means of Engagement acknowledges the many ways that a student can be motivated to learn. These three principles form the basis of UDL Guidelines, which to assist educators ensure their lessons are accessible to all types of learners (Levey, 2021).

Translating these UD principles into the design of a career guidance approach and its supporting tools is key to designing future provision that works for all learners and to a system that is more accessible and inclusive. The NDA advises that the WSGF embeds Universal Design for Education.

# Conclusion

As the Irish education system continues to evolve an effective career ‘guidance for all’ model can be realised. As shown in this advice paper there is a clear legislative framework to underpin new developments. The new national policy for lifelong guidance has the capacity to implement such a model.

This paper provides evidence of gaps in the provision of career guidance for disabled learners and their experience of feeling ‘not being included’ in career guidance while at school. It lays out the context for inclusive delivery of career guidance for a group of learners who traditionally have fallen between two stools when leaving schools. This gap in their experience leaves them with no clear career pathway.

While there are pilot projects in place developing better transition planning processes for learners with disabilities, transitions to post-school options cannot be achieved in isolation of good career guidance. It is important that career guidance delivery in Ireland becomes an established part of education and training, where it is ‘working in alliance with teachers and trainers to infuse career aspects into the curricula. It begins early and intensifies at key decision points, acting as a bridge to help people see the links between learning and the changing world of work. Guidance is a shared responsibility within education institutions’[[63]](#footnote-63).

With this independent policy advice paper the NDA outlines essential mechanisms for the reform of career guidance provision in Ireland. We look forward to the programme of actions from the Taskforce in the Department of Education and the Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and Science on guidance. The details of this policy advice paper are to support the work of these governments departments.

NDA advises that lessons from over a decade of pilot projects and good practice from other jurisdictions relevant to Ireland, as outlined in the literature review and with some highlighted in the advice below, should now be implemented in mainstream school practice to ensure access to career guidance for learners with disabilities.

Finally the NDA advises that any future reform of the provision of career guidance must conduct practical meaningful engagement with learners with disabilities. This requirement is central to the Irish governments’ commitments to the UNCRPD. A recent publication by the NDA, Participation Matters, may be helpful in this regard. **[[64]](#footnote-64)**

A summary of our key advice is provided below.

With specific regard to the Whole School Guidance Framework, consider:

* Introducing mentoring programmes for students to provide additional support.
* Delivering career guidance in an individually focused, person-centred way throughout the learner pathway with support and assistance to identify individual career goals which will achieve the best outcomes for learners with disabilities. Identify and address gaps in the current approach to ‘the few’ to provide more individualised supports. As part of this articulate what good person-centred supports look like.
* Implementing lessons from pilots and from good practice elsewhere to support students to transition from secondary education to further and higher education or to employment. Transition plans need to be developed from an early stage (1st year) and revisited regularly, building the skills, confidence and ambition of the student to transition successfully.
* Ensuring students in special schools have equal access to career guidance (see below)
* Designing and delivering high quality, impartial career information, advice and guidance for young people with disabilities and outlining how this can be built into the curriculum is necessary and is currently an identified gap in the system.
* Delivering Continuous Professional Development to ensure that guidance counsellors are continually updated and deliver expertise in supporting the career choices of young people with disabilities. This would include CPD around raising their expectations of young people with disabilities and supporting young people to develop a positive mind-set about themselves and what they are capable of achieving.
* Providing additional external supports for guidance counsellors to support young people in their career choices, for example, providing regional advisers who are more specialised in pathways for people with disabilities could be explored.
* Developing and using quality standards, benchmarking tools and Codes of Practice, using similar approaches in other countries as a model, as supporting mechanisms for future delivery including as external oversight.
* Adopting a Universal Design in Education (UDE) approach to reforming career guidance provision so that it is central to the concept of guidance for all. These principles are relevant to the design of career guidance resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities, regardless of the educational setting. It will also have benefits for the non-disabled student population.

Building on the work underway with the establishment in 2022 of a **National Policy Group on Lifelong Guidance**, who have been tasked to develop a coherent long- term strategic framework, consider:

* Underpinning the guidance with UNCRPD principles
* Establishing an oversight body specifically on Career Guidance in schools that would have due regard to provision of guidance for learners with disabilities.
* Recognising the limited recommendations to support learners with disabilities in the Indecon report and review the status of special schools to ensure that students in these schools have equal access to career guidance, transition year, peer mentoring or work placements.
* Including a Universal Design for Education approach in the strategic framework. This approach will ensure maximum accessibility for all learners, including those with disabilities, those who have not yet received a diagnosis and those who continue to experience marginalisation.
* Improving policy integration and improved coordination between government departments and agencies. A clear example of how this can be achieved is through supporting career guidance within the context of planning and supporting transitions, better access to Intreo Public Employment Services, and a clear employment goals pathway.

# Appendix 1: Irish legislation, guidelines and policies

Relevant legislation underpinning the provision of education within the Irish education system includes:

* Education Act (1998) Section 9c. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/51/section/9/enacted/en/html>
* Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html>
* The Disability Act 2005. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html>

Relevant guidelines and policies relevant to career guidance, includes:

* Guidelines for Second Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9 (c) of the Education Act 1998, relating to students' access to appropriate guidance. <https://assets.gov.ie/15383/e1246a14da804faa942221abe2809f0a.pdf>
* DES Programme Recognition Framework (2016). <https://assets.gov.ie/25003/f6b754be708443469ae7d569da311a81.pdf>
* DES Circular 0079/2018 : Arrangements for the Implementation of the Framework for Junior Cycle. <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/12182/0ef5b2ab823e46a6a30f1d810d3ed346.pdf#page=null>
* DES Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023. <file:///H:/My%20Documents/Downloads/24725_07cc07626f6a426eb6eab4c523fb2ee2%20(1).pdf>
* Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines 2017. <https://ncca.ie/media/2487/wellbeingguidelines_forjunior_cycle.pdf>
* National Council of Guidance in Education: A whole school guidance framework 2017. <https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/NCGE-PP-WholeSchoolGuidanceFramework-PDF-EN.pdf>

# Appendix 2: Article 24 – Education

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;

b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;

c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:

a) Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;

b) Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;

c) Reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided;

d) Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;

e) Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

a) Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;

b) Facilitating the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community;

c) Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including teachers with disabilities, who are qualified in sign language and/or Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

5. States Parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. To this end, States Parties shall ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities.

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2. Watts, A. G., & Sultana, R. G. (2004). Career Guidance Policies in 37 Countries: Contrasts and Common Themes. International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 4, 105-122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-005-1025-y> p107 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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5. <https://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=EDU/WKP(2018)11&docLanguage=En> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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12. <https://www.walk.ie/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://ilmi.ie/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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21. <https://www.gowise.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
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29. <https://igc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2021-IGC-Pre-Budget-Submission.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
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31. https://www.walk.ie/ [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. https://ilmi.ie/ [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. <https://accesscollege.ie/hear/> scheme for students from socio-economic backgrounds underrepresented in college [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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