

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Access to tertiary education for young adults with disabilities, particularly for those with learning difficulties, has improved significantly over the past decade in the countries participating in the project (the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Norway, Ireland, the United States). This reflects the growing number of young adults with disabilities with the prerequisites for tertiary education as a result of policies to promote the inclusion of disabled people developed over the past 20 years.

The “school for all” has increased access to tertiary education

This increase illustrates the promotion of a “school for all” which seeks to be both efficient and equitable and to facilitate the participation of all in the economic and social development of society.

The “school for all” mobilises financial, technical and human resources to provide students with disabilities equal opportunities on an equal footing with their peers by compensating for the consequences of their disability. Financial and methodological incentives have encouraged schools to be receptive to the diversity of educational profiles and have prompted tertiary education institutions to incorporate impairment in their institution’s policy and to provide admissions and support services for students with disabilities.

The “school for all” makes the educational success of every student, regardless of his or her particularities, one of its goals and makes academic excellence the means of supporting the weakest while encouraging the strongest. The development of universal design learning environments flexible enough to be adapted to the diversity of educational needs, the reduction of dropout rates, and quality assurance policies have all helped to increase the number of students with disabilities able to aspire to tertiary education.

In addition, the growing number of students with disabilities in tertiary education reflects the growing mobilisation of educational systems around students’ prospects, through the diversification of educational opportunities on the completion of upper secondary education, the creation of the bridges to ease the transition into the various pathways between levels and educational sectors, and the existence of measures offering exemptions to disadvantaged groups, including disabled pupils and students.

Institutions' strategies determine access to tertiary education

The growing proportion of young adults with disabilities in tertiary education is a direct result of the strategies adopted by upper secondary schools and tertiary education institutions to build pathways to tertiary education and prepare upper secondary school students to cope with the demands of the transition to adulthood.

The strategies developed by secondary schools generally aim to provide upper secondary school students with disabilities with the information that will allow them to make informed decisions on the basis of their capacities and professional aspirations. Less often, they encourage students to plan carefully and sufficiently in advance the steps along the path to tertiary education, while few are designed to prepare them to cope with the demands that will be placed on them at the end of their secondary education.

In tertiary education, admission and support strategies, although they vary from one institution to another, are designed to prompt students with disabilities to involve themselves actively in their chosen courses and to encourage the institution to ensure that such students are successful and integrated into the university community.

To this end, they seek to reduce risks of failure by forging links with services that deal with extracurricular dimensions (transport, housing) or by extending the work done in secondary education. Institutions can take part in open days or information fairs, for example, forge links with staff from secondary education institutions or offer pathways to allow students to link their choices to a project and to start outlining a roadmap for the transition process.

Admissions strategies also tend to make students with disabilities responsible for themselves. They encourage them to mention their educational needs at as early a stage as possible so that the necessary arrangements and support can be prepared beforehand. They also advise students on the organisation of courses, inform them about their accessibility policy and the support and accommodations which they can expect. They raise their awareness of the implications of their choices in terms of academic requirements.

In addition, admissions strategies also aim to forge a contractual relationship with students with disabilities that can mobilise actors within the institution around a support plan that specifies the objectives pursued, the support and accommodations needed, and the conditions for their implementation.

An inclusive ethos facilitates transition

The quality of the transition process depends on the existence of an inclusive ethos at the level of the institution which makes openness to diversity one of its goals and pedagogical, social, psychological and physical accessibility a component of the institution's culture.

This inclusive ethos is predicated on making the university community aware of the role that diversity can play as a driver of innovation and creativity and of the counterproductive effect of prejudice against young adults with disabilities. It is also based on mobilising each member of the institution to ensure the success of individual students through training courses on inclusive education, by putting forward role models to rally the community and by promoting peer support.

This inclusive ethos can be seen particularly clearly in countries that have adopted an educational approach to disability which primarily encourages relating the difficulties faced by students with disabilities to institutions' modes of organisation and to teachers' pedagogical practices. Institutions in such countries tend to see diversity as a source of success for the entire university community, to consider support and accommodations as a way to facilitate the success of every student and to view accessibility as a source of development.

Where a diagnostic approach to disability prevails, tertiary education institutions tend to see diversity as the exception; they also perceive the presence of students with disabilities as a constraint and the provision of special arrangements and support as an additional cost.

Disabled students have a harder and bumpier transition to tertiary education

Despite the progress made, access to tertiary education for young students with disabilities, particularly those with an impairment (sensory, motor or mental) or psychological problems, nonetheless continues to be more difficult than for other young adults. For example, while the general rate of entry to tertiary education in Ireland rose by 8% between 2000 and 2006, the country report states that the increase for disabled persons was merely 2.6%.

The pathways of young adults with disabilities to tertiary education are also less straightforward than those of other young adults. There may be gaps along the way, resulting in breaks or forced changes of direction. In Norway, the country report noted that 24% of students with disabilities claimed not to have been able to follow their first choice of course.

Students with disabilities are also less likely than their non-disabled peers to complete their studies successfully, particularly when they have a specific learning difficulty, behavioural difficulties or psychological problems.

Transitions policies have expanded access opportunities but do not address all the obstacles that students face

In recent years transition policies have significantly expanded opportunities for access to and success in tertiary education for young adults with disabilities, especially among those with a specific learning difficulty. However, they have not always taken sufficient account of the factors that facilitate continuity and coherence along the path to tertiary education and employment. They therefore risk leaving the opportunity to enter higher education and employment to the individuals concerned and to their families. They also risk increasing the vulnerability of those with sensory, motor or mental impairments and/or from less fortunate socio-economic backgrounds.

They have also failed to recognise the obstacles that students with disabilities may encounter in the course of their studies. These can overexpose them to dropout at the end of the first year, to failure to complete their programme, or to more complicated itineraries. Moreover, they insufficiently link the financing modalities and additional resources allocated to institutions and to young adults with disabilities to their

possibilities for social and professional inclusion. As a result such individuals may remain unemployed or underemployed in spite of easier access to higher education.

Inclusive policies have not always succeeded in ensuring that the transition of young adults with disabilities is integrated in a system able to ensure a safe path forward at the end of secondary education and in tertiary education. Yet the development of policies that encourage a good transition to tertiary education and to employment is essential if education policies are to be efficient and equitable in terms of access, success and a promising future.

Some countries are developing specific transition policies but still face a range of challenges

While the forms of transition have been multiplied and extended over the last two decades, education systems face persistent difficulties for giving concrete form to the right to education for children and adolescents with disabilities and to ensuring their entry into the world of work. As a result, this issue has now taken on greater urgency. The United States and Denmark have developed specific transition policies, and these have become an integral part of the missions of the education system. Ireland and France have recently taken initiatives for securing educational pathways to tertiary education and employment. Norway also appears to be on the way to doing this and the Czech Republic has recognised the importance of the issue.

The role of transition in reinforcing the possibilities of inclusion, in optimising the planning and steering of inclusive policies and in avoiding excessive costs in a context of strong budgetary pressure has been pinpointed as a major issue. Countries continue to face a range of challenges (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Main challenges in optimising transition policies and their magnitude in participating countries

+ minor; ++ moderate; +++ important; ++++ crucial

	Czech Republic	Denmark	France	Ireland	Norway	United States
Mobilise stakeholders and systems around the future of young adults with disabilities and prevent them from being irremediably marginalised by discontinuities.	++++	++	+++	+++	+++	+
Promote synergies between systems and stakeholders involved in the transition process to ensure continuity and coherence in the career path.	++++	++	+++	+++	+++	+++
Empower young adults with disabilities and their families to meet the demands of the transition to adulthood and of tertiary education and employment.	++++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++
Make systems and stakeholders capable of satisfying the requirements imposed by the definition and implementation of transition processes.	++++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++
Provide the mechanisms and tools necessary for planning policies and monitoring transition processes.	++++	+	+++	+++	+++	++

Quality transition policies are needed to give equal opportunities and treatment for young adults with disabilities

The following recommendations aim at strengthening the capacity of education systems to give young adults with disabilities equal opportunities and treatment in terms of their access, success and future. They take account of a context of budgetary restrictions which calls for optimising the measures adopted by inclusive policies. They relate to the main challenges to be addressed to optimise policies on transition to tertiary education and employment. They also relate to the capacity of secondary and tertiary education institutions to prepare and empower young adults with disabilities to face the demands of the transition to adulthood and the world of work.

The following recommendations presuppose that quality transition policies are those that:

- provide young adults with disabilities, to the extent possible, with the same knowledge and skills as other young adults;
- furnish them, on the same basis as other young adults, with qualifications recognised by tertiary education institutions and the labour market;
- prevent them from being more exposed than other young adults to being neither in employment nor in education or training;
- offer them the same chances of access to the same quality of employment as young adults without disabilities;
- give them equal opportunities in terms of the length and quality of transition.

The aim of these recommendations is to optimise transition opportunities to tertiary education and employment for young adults with disabilities, through policies that:

- are organised around an educational approach to disability which focuses on the enabling or disabling effect of policies and practices rather than treating it as an intrinsic personal characteristic;
- promote a legislative framework that prohibits all forms of discrimination and requires institutions to draw up an annual action plan specific to young adults with disabilities which includes the question of transition;
- ensure that the support offered acts as an incentive for tertiary education and access to employment;
- develop bridges between stakeholders involved in the transition process to tertiary education which foster the continuity and coherence of the paths between educational levels and sectors;
- provide education systems with financial and methodological incentives to improve their transition strategies and strengthen their linkages with their environment, particularly with employers and career services;
- link financial resources more closely to the definition of an individual education plan which includes an individual transition plan, the basis of which is the individual's independence and empowerment;

- are rooted in reliable indicators and statistical data which allow for comparing the situation of young adults with disabilities to that of the general population, for determining the enabling effect of the strategies and practices employed and of the support and arrangements provided, and for evaluating the quality of the paths taken by students with disabilities;
- create or improve co-ordination arrangements to facilitate local synergies among stakeholders in the education, employment, social and health sectors;
- improve initial and continuing training for personnel in the education system and provide them with methodological tools and support.

Secondary education institutions lay the foundation for successful transition

Enhancing opportunities for transition to tertiary education and employment also assumes that secondary education institutions will:

- be concerned for every student's success and include transition in their institutional policy;
- define and implement as early as possible an individual transition plan that encourages students to plan for their future, prepares them for the demands of passage to adulthood, and gives them the skills required for tertiary education and employment;
- make sure that students with disabilities and their families, as well as the different categories of stakeholders concerned, are involved throughout the definition and implementation of the transition process;
- be sufficiently integrated into their local environment to mobilise the resources needed to ensure the quality of the transition process during and at the end of schooling;
- ensure that their arrangements and support are flexible enough to be adapted to the individual needs of students with disabilities;
- have statistics to track the progress of students with disabilities and identify the impact of their arrangements and support;
- ensure that staff members responsible for transition are properly trained and equipped.

Tertiary institutions need to adopt appropriate admission and support policies along with strategies to ensure they work well

Enhancing opportunities for transition to tertiary education and employment also implies that tertiary education institutions will:

- define their admissions and support strategies in co-ordination with secondary schools, non-governmental organisations representing persons with disabilities or parents of persons with disabilities, and the employment sector;

- define a specific policy for students with disabilities which covers the training of staff working in admissions services, the inclusion of representatives of students with disabilities in institutional governance bodies, and awareness raising among staff and students;
- include the employment issue in their admissions and support strategies;
- ensure that disability support services work closely with other student services as well as those that provide support to young adults with disabilities in extracurricular activities;
- include distance education and new technologies in their policy;
- establish and formalise links with employers and employment support services to take advantage of existing initiatives to promote employment of young adults with disabilities.

Access to tertiary education does not necessarily lead to employment

The growing presence of students with disabilities in tertiary education only partly translates into successful entry into the labour market. The rate of employment of young adults with disabilities is lower than that of the working population of the same age.

These students' difficulty in gaining access to employment leaves them overexposed to unemployment and exclusion, a trend that is increasing in some countries. It may be due to a growing demand for qualifications, as this particularly penalises young adults with cognitive impairments, and to the growing importance attached by employers to behavioural aspects. It may also reflect certain weaknesses in policies designed to promote access to the labour market.

Gaining work experience while studying is a key element that can facilitate future labour market success

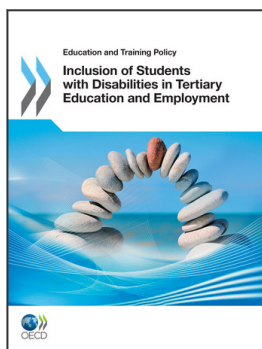
However, it also illustrates the difficulties young adults with disabilities face for gaining access to potentially rewarding professional training, given the fact that, while diplomas have become increasingly important, they are no longer sufficient to obtain a job.

Optimising the transition to employment presupposes that:

- the vocational education and training initiatives undertaken in secondary education to optimise the employability of young adults with disabilities offer a real educational alternative;
- tertiary education institutions attach the same importance to the professional future of students with disabilities as they do for other students;
- tertiary education institutions create sufficiently deep-rooted and formalised links with the economic sphere and the actors involved in active employment policies to be able to make full use of initiatives to encourage firms to recruit workers with disabilities;

- admissions and support services for students with disabilities give greater attention to access to employment in their strategies and work more closely with agencies that assist with job searches for persons with disabilities or job placement agencies.

Such initiatives would allow students with disabilities to acquire work experience while studying. They would also mean that at the end of their studies, students would not be facing a leap into the unknown, a situation that can be destabilising for young adults with disabilities. These initiatives would also encourage potential employers and lead to stronger links between tertiary education institutions and the professional world.



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