

**Supporting non-traditional students:**

**The Student Journey, a new model of engagement –**

The move from a transactional service delivery model,

to a transformational resource

**Disability Service, Trinity College Dublin**

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# Abstract

The Trinity College [Disability Service Strategic Plan 2011-2014](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/assets/doc/pdf/DS-Strategic-Plan.pdf) aims to develop clear and effective support systems at all stages in the student journey, using a proactive strategy as opposed to traditionally reactive models. This model engages students across three phases of their Higher Education journey:

* Pre-entry, admission and the first year experience
* Building and maintaining a college career
* Progressing through College to employment

This is a strategic approach to enhancing the student experience by engaging prospective students, current students, and staff, with the intention of improving practice and implementing change across the whole institution. It is an example of evidence-based practice using on-going data collection and evaluation to improve the student journey. Each phase is aligned to i) the Strategic Objectives of Trinity College Dublin (TCD), ii) national targets for students with disabilities set by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland, and iii) recommendations from the OECD (2011) report on students with disabilities in higher education.

Each stage is supported using a model that facilitates the acquisition of skills such as self-awareness, self-determination and self-advocacy, which are transferable across the entire student lifecycle. The strategy can easily be adapted for use by student services in any Further and Higher Education institution, and the model is included in the [Compendium of Effective Practice](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/what-works-student-retention/What_Works_Compendium_Effective_Practice.pdf) (HEA, 2012), which presents a wide range of contributions all focused on improving the student experience. The Disability Service launched its Strategic Plan in September 2011 and this paper reviews the work that DS has undertaken during the second year of the Strategic Plan (2012 – 2013).

# Introduction

The Disability Service (DS) in Trinity College Dublin aims to move from a transactional service delivery model, to a transformational resource that can support a dialogue with the disabled individual in the acquisition of transferable skills that can be developed across all three phases of the student journey. It also aims to encourage the student to work as independently as possible from the beginning of their college career, whilst providing guidance in the achievement of such independence. This model places the student at the centre of the decision making process, with constant feedback mechanisms central to the development of the individual. The focus is not on rehabilitating the disabled individual (medical model) but in making the college environment accessible to disabled students as consumers (social model). This paper reviews the work that DS has undertaken during the first two years of its [Strategic Plan](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/assets/doc/Word%20Docs/DS%20Paper_1yr_STRAT%20PLAN_27TH%20JUNE.docx), and discusses the development of effective support systems by using a proactive, evidence-based strategy, as opposed to traditionally reactive and inefficient models.

## Phase 1 - Pre-entry, admissions and the First Year Experience

Phase 1 objectives are concerned with monitoring and developing college application and admissions processes, and providing opportunities for the development of skills required in third level, in a way that enhances the first year experience of disabled students. It also focuses on identifying promoters and barriers to transition and supporting successful progression to HE.

### Development of skills required in third level

The Pathways [transition website](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/prospective/), [transition planning tool](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/prospective/Tranistion-planning/about.php), and [transition outreach activities](https://blogs.tcd.ie/pathways-to-trinity/pathways-to-trinity-workshop-1/) for those considering third level education, are examples of DS evidence-based practice. A longitudinal research study is embedded in the transition website, providing quantitiative (surveys, n = 180 participants) and qualitative (interviews, n = 10 participants) data. Interim data will be presented in 2014. An analysis of website traffic indicates a global interest in site content; since April 2011, the site has received 28, 880 visits from 19,007 people in 61 countries. Of these visits, 32% accessed pages containing study skills resources for Leaving Certificate students, 23% are related to the process of applying to college, including the DARE programme, and 1,138 viewed pages outlining DS supports.

[The Transition Planning Tool](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/prospective/Tranistion-planning/about.php) was launched in 2011, and in 2012 DS was awarded TCD Equality Funding to re-design the tool in digital format, with video introductions to each unit. Since its inception, 907 visitors have viewed this resource. Completion of a registration form is required for access to the units, and demographic data from registration requests indicates strong interest from students and stakeholders working within the area of Asperger’s Syndrome, ADHD and Mental Health. Only two enquiries were received for sensory disabilities, and none with regard to students with physical disabilities. The majority of enquiries were related to 6th year and post-Leaving Certificate cohorts.

Between October 2011 and April 2013, senior cycle student (n = 28) and parents (n = 17) attended the transition workshops. Parents expressed improved student confidence and engagement with the transition process, and students felt that they had benefited from content, and enjoyed the opportunity to experience a third level environment, and to interact with third level students. No feedback was received from any of the practitioners (care workers, support assistants, Guidance Counsellors and SENOs), from either cycle of the workshops. Only a small number of students intended to apply to TCD, and this greatly affected the level of engagement in the programme, and the degree of interest in TCD-specific course and student information.

### Monitoring and developing college application and admissions processes

Students with sensory and physical disabilities continue to be under-represented in HE, and this trend continued in 2012 – 2013 (Table 1).

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2008** | **%** | **2009** | **%** | **2010** | **%** | **2011** | **%** | **2012** | **%** |
| AS / ASD | 36 | 2.20% | 76 | 3.40% | 68 | 3.70% | 94 | 4.30% | 129 | 5.30% |
| ADHD | 40 | 2.50% | 107 | 4.80% | 70 | 3.80% | 114 | 5.20% | 156 | 6.50% |
| Blind / VI | 24 | 1.50% | 54 | 2.40% | 36 | **1.90%** | 36 | **1.60%** | 1 | **0.04%** |
| Deaf/HoH | 67 | 4.20% | 110 | 4.90% | 70 | **3.80%** | 77 | **3.50%** | 70 | **2.92%** |
| DCD | 32 | 2.00% | 74 | 3.30% | 88 | 4.70% | 143 | 6.60% | 153 | 6.30% |
| MHC | 49 | 3.00% | 115 | 5.10% | 89 | 4.80% | 129 | 5.90% | 226 | 9.40% |
| Neuro | 0 | 0% | 43 | 1.90% | 39 | 2.10% | 36 | 1.60% | 36 | 1.50% |
| PD | 17 | 1.00% | 94 | 4.20% | 62 | **3.30%** | 94 | 4.30% | 92 | **3.83%** |
| SOI | 178 | 11.10 | 72 | 3.20% | 189 | 10.20 | 226 | 10.40 | 269 | 11.20 |
| SLC | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 17 | 0.90% | 14 | 0.60% | 26 | 1.08% |
| SpLD | 1152 | 72% | 1560 | 69.90 | 1108 | 60.30 | 1197 | 55.40 | 1199 | 50.02 |
| **Total**  | **1595** |  | **2229** |  | **1836** |  | **2160** |  | **2397** |  |

Table 1: Applications to DARE 2008 – 2012. Source: TCD Disability Service / DARE season reports.

Consequently, in recognition of the need to increase admissions from these target groups, two amendments have been made to the TCD admissions process. Firstly, from 2014, offers will be made first to DARE eligible applicants with sensory and physical disabilities, and remaining places offered to all other DARE eligible students. Secondly, the waiver of the Mathematics / modern language requirement has been extended to students with sensory or communication disabilities, provided that the study of Mathematics/modern languages do not form part of their chosen course of study. It is hoped that these amendments will provide additional admissions opportunities for these groups.

Examining TCD data, of the 191 students who accepted a DARE offer between 2008 and 2012, 89% subsequently registered with DS; 24% are students with a Significant Ongoing Illness, 23% Specific Learning Difficulties, and 14% have a Mental Health Condition. However, there is a significant discrepancy between points reduction and engagement with DS. For example, students with SOI account for 24% of DARE offers, and yet the majority are identified as ‘non-active’, having engaged with DS for less than 10 hours during the period of their course. Although 31% of DARE students availed of exam supports, and 27% exam and Unilink supports, 11% did not request any support at all, despite being awarded a reduced points place due to the disadvantage of their disability. In addition, students with Significant Ongoing Illness, Specific Learning Difficulties and Mental Health Difficulties, are less likely to use support systems in DS, but are more likely to Withdraw, Defer or go Off Books.

**The First Year Experience.**

In 2012-2013, DS completed the second year of a mixed methods study investigating the first year experience of DARE students, with 122 participants. Quantitative data examined ease of transition from school to college, the registration and orientation process, quality of human support provided pre and post-transition, access to disability supports, and experience of the DARE process. Qualitative data explored knowledge of College structure and organization, pre-registration / pre-entry initiatives, registration and orientation, connecting with other students, provision of advice and support, campus ethos and environment, level of academic ‘readiness’ and skills, diversity and inclusiveness of college population, and the overall First Year Experience.

Key findings indicate that 75.8% of students found transition to college unproblematic, with 82% stating that they had a clear understanding of college structures and organization, 24% of students finding registration problematic / confusing, and 68% of students indicating that they needed help with gaining or improving academic skills. Most students stated that ease of transition was related to support from DS (72.4%), appropriate course choices (60%), and positive encouragement. Overall, students indicated that the transition process was a positive experience, with 100% of students stating that TCD is an open, inclusive and welcoming place, which they would recommend to other students. An overall improvement on 2011 – 2012 results is noted in every aspect of the transition process, suggesting that the student journey approach has been effective.

## Phase 2: Building and maintaining a college career

The focus of Phase 2 of the student journey is on continuing to provide supports that are appropriate to the student, their disability and their course while seeking to create opportunities to facilitate independence and the retention and progression of students through College. From the range of initiatives undertaking during the year, highlights are summarized below:

#### Monitoring retention, withdrawal and progression rates to identify at risk groups.

Withdrawal rates for incoming students with disabilities in TCD are monitored by year of intake as follows: 2009 intake: 15.3% withdrawn after four years; 2010 intake: 13.8% withdrawn after 3 years and 2011 intake: 3.5% withdrawn after two years. The vast majority of students with disabilities make the transition into and through College successfully. However, a minority struggle and withdraw at some point after registration. Outcome measures indicate that students registered with DS have a higher rate of retention and course completion compared to non-disabled peers, when entry cohort is used as a method of tracking progression.

Students with mental health difficulties or who are Deaf or hard of hearing have shown much higher rates of withdrawal compared to students with other disabilities. Students who have a specific learning difficulty (SpLd) or Asperger’s Syndrome have withdrawn at a rate proportionate to their numbers in College. Finally, students with a physical disability, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or significant on-going illness (SOI), developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD) or who are blind or visually impaired are least likely to withdraw.

[**Developing a model of support for disabled students on professional courses in College**](http://www.tcd.ie/disability/strategic-plan/phasetwo/supports-placement.php)

To ensure that students with a disability and academic and placement staff are in compliance with the College Fitness to Practice Policy, DS launched this project to develop effective support systems for students participating in professional courses. The project had three main elements:

* An evidence-based research strand gathered information from all stakeholders, to determine what were the main issues and concerns regarding the placement process for students with disabilities.
* During 2012 – 2013 pre-placement planning meetings for all stakeholders were piloted for incoming first year students on professional courses. A needs assessment template was developed and agreed supports were implemented on placement.
* In June 2013, a symposium for all stakeholders was held presenting findings from the research and **providing an opportunity to discuss recent research and support models for students on placement. A guide for students on placement was launched** describing routes to disclosure and the pre-placement support structure.

In 2013/14, we will continue to work with incoming and continuing students to promote and encourage independence, self-determination and self-advocacy in their communications with academic staff, and through completion of course requirements. We will establish separate tracking systems for students with disabilities registering at entry and post entry, so that a more complex picture of the student journey can be captured; and continue to work with academic and placement staff to encourage relevant students to register with DS and engage in the placement planning process.

## Phase 3: Progression from college to employment

The focus of this phase is the examination of personal, occupational and environmental issues that disabled students deal with as they prepare for participation in work. Ultimately, the aim is to articulate the employability factor into the disabled student’s journey through college. It allows students to acquire employment-focused skills in college, that can be transferred to the workplace. Finally, it will identify issues from the perspective of employers and employees that arise in the employment of disabled students.

The number of disabled students participating in third level education has grown significantly, and consequently the number of disabled graduates entering the labour market is at unprecedented levels. Historically, Disability Services have primarily supported students through college to the point of graduation. With the development of the three-phased approach within DS, and development of synergies with other stakeholders internally and externally, a re-focus of resources has allowed mainstream services such as Careers and specialist supports such as Unlink, to integrate employment transitioning issues into the student journey.

There are few studies relating to the status of graduates with disabilities in the Irish labour market, and there is no national data through the HEA First Destination Survey (HEA, 2010) that provides an indication of the employment levels of disabled graduates. This lack of information continues to be a concern, as it is impossible to plan effectively without awareness of emerging issues.

# Leonardo Project – Univers’ Emploi

Trinity became a partner in the EU Leonardo project ‘Univers’ Emploi’ in 2010, the purpose of which was to develop an employment tool to assist Universities to embed employment into their needs assessment process. A review of the current Needs Assessment Process and Reasonable Accommodations was also undertaken. Moving from a transactional service to a transformational resource ensures that supports are not a ‘fix’, but are a more feasible accommodation in the workplace. Improved information on issues that emerged through this project, such as disclosure, managing disability in the workplace and how to assert needs, was further enhanced with the development of an information booklet called ‘Supporting Trinity College students with disabilities into employment’. This publication prompts students to start thinking about the above issues, and employment and volunteering opportunities.

Year two of the strategy continued to explore the needs of students with disabilities when transitioning from college to work, the key research question being: **How should the University enable students with disabilities to prepare for transitioning to employment?** Preliminary themes emerging include: i) enabling work environments, ii) personal strategies, iii) enabling college experiences, iv) college supports and accommodations, v) advice for students, vi) personal views on disability and disclosure, and vii) personal development and confidence. Key objectives and actions relating to the progression into employment for students with disabilities, has been progressed with a significant Genio Trust grant awarded over two years, to develop a model of support for students with mental health difficulties in their transition to employment. This project aims to move the ownership of the transition to employment process to the individual, within a supported framework, by developing a clearly delineated approach which combines work-orientated and self-management elements. The specific strands of this project are:

**Strand 1:** An undergraduate student strand providing access to a specialist work-orientated Occupational Therapist and a specialist careers advisor, during their college journey. The aim is to enable students to focus on managing their disability as they seek, apply and transition to employment.

**Strand 2:** A recent graduate strand in which students are supported in their first year of work through a ’long arm’ method approach, via the use of on-line resources and, if required, access to individualised support from an Occupational Therapist and a specialist careers advisor.

**Strand 3:** A student/graduate-led on-line peer support service involving current students and recent graduates.

**Conclusions**

Significant changes have taken place in DS work practices and how we articulate our strategies across the student journey pre and post-entry, and into employment. The focus has allowed for a constructive dialogue with all partners, and most importantly the disabled student. Being mindful that we are working with individuals with unique experiences and who are at different stages of their transition to independence, we are building a confidence in an evidence based strategy.

At phase one the transition into HE and the first year experience there is a need to actively engage those students who transcend the HEAR and DARE criteria, in particular students with sensory and physical disabilities, as it is evident they are not progressing to HE. Progression through HE outcome measures indicate that students registered with the Disability Service have a higher rate of retention and course completion, compared to their non-disabled peers, when entry cohort is used as a method of tracking progression. The vast majority of students with disabilities make the transition into and through HE successfully. However, specific cohorts - students who are D/deaf or who have a Mental Health Condition - are more likely to withdraw. Retention data needs to capture these issues and influence changes in how we engage and support these students. The development of transition to employment strategies are beginning to produce clear pathways to employment. This allows for the disabled student/graduate to develop self-awareness of their disability story, that can be managed into employment, thus allowing for reduced anxiety associated with non-disclosure, or fear of being seen as invalid in employment. The Genio project and the appointment of specialist careers advisers and a work-focused Occupational Therapist, will provide a model that can be shared across the HE sector.

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