The transition to employment: the perspectives of students and graduates with disabilities

Clodagh Nolan and Claire Irene Gleeson

ABSTRACT

Education and employment are basic human rights and during the past decade in Ireland, the number of students with disabilities progressing through universities has dramatically increased as a result of improved support (AHEAD 2012. Survey on the Participation Rates of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 2011/2012. AHEAD). However, embarking on the transition from college to employment can be fraught with challenges (Fichten, S. Jorgensen, A. Havel, M. Barile, V. Ferraro, M. É. Landry, D. Fiset, et al. 2012, “What happens after graduation? Outcomes, employment, and recommendations of recent junior/community college graduates with and without disabilities.”. Disability and Rehabilitation 34 (11): 917-924). Therefore, this qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives and needs of students and graduates with disabilities as they transition from college to employment. Semi-structured interviews were employed to hear the voices of thirteen students and nine graduates. Content analysis guided data analysis. Five themes were identified in the student group and four in the graduate group. This study concluded that students and graduates with disabilities need support in transitioning into the world of work and higher education institutions need to listen to the voices of students in developing and refining career-related resources.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 January 2015
Accepted 20 September 2016

KEYWORDS

Transition; university; employment; disability; disclosure; supports

Introduction and background

Being educated and being employed are human rights. However, people with a disability are less than half as likely as people without a disability to be employed. This is despite the advances in supports and access for people with disabilities in entering higher education, the introduction of legislation and the development of comprehensive employment strategies National Disability Authority 2014). This article addresses the issue of employment and the challenges faced by people with disabilities within Ireland as they transition from higher education to employment. Although employment is a given within modern western society, some individuals still find it difficult to gain access to employment and manage the world of work. It is recognized that people with disabilities may need additional supports in order to access employment (OECD 2011; AHEAD 2014); however, it is not yet clear what format these supports should take. Therefore, this study sets out to explore the perspectives of Irish students and graduates with disabilities who have and who plan to access employment, what format some of these supports might take and what their needs might be. This was carried out to inform the design of a transition programme from higher education to employment within one university. This study touches upon both
employment policies and disability policies that inform the pathway to employment for people with disabilities.

In Ireland, the employment rates for people with disability are considered to be lower than is typically found in other European countries (Watson, Kingston, and McGinnity 2012) and have remained static, even with the introduction of the Disability Act 2005 (Department of Health and Children 2005), Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011 (Office of the Attorney General 1998) and Equal Status Acts 2000-2012 (Department of Justice and Equality 2013). The National Disability Authority (2014) maintains that there is still considerable room for improvement in the labour market participation rates among people with a disability (Watson, Kingston, and McGinnity 2012) within Ireland.

Programmes such as Erasmus have been in existence within Ireland since the late 1980s; however, there has been little uptake of these programmes for disabled students and, indeed, they did not receive support until the mid-1990s (AHEAD 2015). In a Norwegian study examining the experiences of disabled students in higher education, Brandt (2011) found that it was problematic for students who were blind, with visual impairments, deaf, physically disabled and/or had dyslexia to study abroad despite it being an objective of the quality reform programme to provide equal access to all in higher education.

**Employment/work**

When asked ‘what do you do?’ most of us will describe ourselves in terms of our work. Employment and work not only define us, they add to our identity, but they also give us meaning and purpose in our day-to-day activities (Pratt et al. 2014). Bruyere, Barrington, and Albrecht (2012) maintain ‘that to a large extent we are what we do’ (2). Employment and work are both a reflection of our talents, skills, abilities and interests (Pratt et al. 2014) and are beneficial not only for monetary and personal fulfilment but also for the maintenance of health and even happiness (Bruyere, Barrington, and Albrecht 2012). The World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation 2011) maintains that work provides structure and regular activity, which are important for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Employment provides us with a social status in society, social contacts and a social network (Perkins, Farmer, and Litchfield 2009) and supports social inclusion.

Work promotes self-confidence, self-esteem, status in the community and economic well-being. Unemployment, on the other hand, may result in deterioration of physical, emotional, mental health as well as a person’s functioning (Pratt et al. 2014). ‘Unemployed persons with or without a disability tend to experience more health problems, more symptoms of psychological distress and/or mental illness and reduced coping skills’ (289) (Pratt et al. 2014).

Employment is something many of us take for granted, but for those with a disability, in particular, a mental health difficulty, employment is more difficult to procure and sustain (Boardman 2003; Boardman et al. 2003). In the Quarterly National Household Survey conducted in Ireland in 2010 (Watson, Kingston, and McGinnity 2012), it was identified that the odds of being outside the labour market are nine times higher for people with emotional/psychological disability than for those without a disability, thus challenging their right to be employed. The Snowdon Survey Report (2013) maintains that the employment gap between disabled and non-disabled individuals is 11 times greater in those who have no higher education qualifications compared to those who have graduated with a degree. Indeed, Watson, Kingston, and McGinnity (2012) also found that the percentage of disabled people completing third-level education remained less than half the rate of third-level completion among people without a disability in 2010. To date, there are over 7000 students with disabilities within higher education institutions (HEIs) within Ireland, which means that we have an increase in those with disabilities and a higher level education seeking employment on graduation (AHEAD 2012). Employment services such as Willing Able Mentoring (6-month internship with mentor), EMPLOYABILITY (State-run service for people with disabilities) and SPECIALISTERNE (organization for people with Asperger’s Syndrome) have been developed to cater to the needs of disabled individuals in Ireland; however, they are separate from the higher
education system which leaves a gap in service provision for students with disabilities. Given that the majority of students with disabilities have a hidden disability such as a mental health difficulty, they are less likely to identify themselves as having a disability and therefore are less likely to access services as they strive to enter the competitive labour market without disclosing (AHEAD 2014).

**Policies supporting employment**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities maintains that individuals have the right to employment. Policies focusing on equality, fairness, accessibility and inclusivity within the European Union have been developed since the 1980s, which have had an influence upon how we treat individuals with disability. Within Ireland, the Disability Act 2005 (Department of Health and Children 2005) has promoted the inclusion of students with disabilities in their education system particularly at the higher education level. European Social Funding has been given to provide support for students with disabilities. This has been in place for the past 10 years and in a review of this fund, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2011) has noted that there has been a noticeable increase in students now accessing and attending third-level education. However, as the unemployment rate of young people within Europe increases, there is now concern that this fund is too focused upon access and support at higher education with not enough emphasis being placed upon accessing employment and transitioning out of higher education.

**Disclosure of a disability**

Disclosure of a disability is the process by which persons make their disability known by voluntarily providing information about their disability. Disclosure is a personal choice and there is no legal obligation to disclose a disability (Storr, Wray, and Draper 2011). However, often, employers are concerned about potential health and safety or liability issues in relation to employing people with disabilities (AHEAD 2008). Students may disclose a disability within college in order to seek and gain reasonable accommodations (RAs) they require to ensure that they are on a level playing field as their peers (Fichten et al. 2012; Kim and Williams 2012). However, for students with invisible disabilities (such as mental health difficulties), this can have a reverse reaction and individuals can incur discrimination and reprisal (National Disability Authority 2014).

Boardman (2003) found that ‘even students who are confident and comfortable about discussing their disability may still be uncertain about the nature of the careers market, their legal rights and responsibilities and the timing and pros and cons of disclosure’. A survey carried out by Silver, Strehorn, and Bourke (1997) examined the employment outcomes and employment experiences of 47 college graduates with a range of disabilities. They found that persons with disabilities did not receive the same quality and amount of career counselling services compared to their non-disabled peers. Similar research has found that career service providers are not adequately equipped to advise and support students with disabilities and have little knowledge on how to support them in disclosing their disabilities (Aune and Kroger 1997; Kim and Williams 2012).

In a study carried out by AHEAD (2008), 80% of those ‘seeking employment’ did not always disclose a disability when applying for jobs. In Ireland, persons with disabilities are protected by the Employment Equality Acts 1998–2011 (Office of the Attorney General 1998), which outlaws discrimination on the grounds of disability in employment, including training and recruitment. This Act also requires employers to take reasonable steps to accommodate the needs of employees and prospective employees with disabilities.

RA can be defined as some modification to the tasks or structure of a job or workplace, which allows the qualified employee with a disability to fully do the job and enjoy equal employment opportunities. Indeed, given the right environmental supports, most people with disabilities can be productive employees (Kulkarni and Kote 2014). However, employers are still cautious when
employing people with disabilities because of the perceived threat of litigation if the employment goes wrong and is connected to the disability (AHEAD 2008). Disclosure of a disability is fraught with ambiguity for both the employer and the employee.

Chan et al. (2010) maintain that there is a significant gap in the level of awareness of the state support schemes available to employers in promoting equality of participation in the workforce. Employers who implement RAs for employees with a disability, report satisfaction and maintain that there are minimal costs and benefits for the organization as a whole (Graffam et al. 2002). However, RAs are still being provided in a generalist way as opposed to being person-centred and are more easily identifiable for those with physical disabilities as opposed to those with hidden disabilities (Styers and Shultz 2009).

**Barriers to employment for those with a disability**

The barriers to employment for those with disabilities are numerous (Pratt et al. 2014). They can be identified as residing within the individual or within society (Robdale 2008). Within the individual, the barriers can be the disability itself; level of education; the cyclical nature of their condition; medication; cognitive deficits; and lack of work experiences (AHEAD 2008; Robdale 2008; Kim and Williams 2012). Societal barriers include the benefits trap (Pratt et al. 2014); prejudice; fear and discrimination (Boardman 2003); accessibility issues and low expectations for disabled people (Smith 2003). In addition, employers can be lacking in knowledge and understanding of disability issues. There is often ambiguity around what constitutes RAs and inconsistency in the organizational policies in relation to disabled employees (AHEAD 2008). All of these barriers may continue to keep employment opportunities elusive to the individual with a disability. For the purposes of this study, disability is defined as ‘persons with disabilities including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others’ (UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006).

Choosing a career can be arduous and difficult at the best of times and even more so for those with a disability. The path to employment for those with disabilities can be fraught with extra challenges such as access, low expectations and failure to provide the necessary support, thus continuing to deny many the opportunity and right to employment (Perkins, Farmer, and Litchfield 2009).

With over 7000 students with disabilities (AHEAD 2012) currently studying in HEIs and receiving RAs from Disability Services nationally, it highlights the necessity that we need to begin thinking about the students transitioning out of college. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2011) recommends that HEIs need to be preparing young adults with disabilities for the world of employment.

It is impossible to predict the destination or outcome for graduates with disabilities when they leave college, as there is no centralized database within Ireland that collates information on the movement of graduates from third-level education onwards (AHEAD 2008). It is therefore difficult to ascertain the outcomes for this cohort. The Irish Government has developed a ‘Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities’ (2015–2024) (Department of Employment and Enterprise 2015), emphasizing the development of efficient and effective resources for those with disabilities in seeking employment. Yet, to date, poor evidence exists as to how this strategy has effected change in employment status for people with disabilities within Ireland. Given the fact that little is known from an Irish perspective or indeed the person’s perspective on what the needs of students and graduates with disabilities are, as they transition to employment, this study seeks to explore and answer these questions giving voice to their views. Consequently, the aims of this study were to explore (1) the needs, (2) the perspectives and (3) the support required by students and graduates with disabilities as they transition from college to employment.
Methodology

The researchers choose to use a qualitative descriptive approach (Neergaard et al. 2009) to answer the research question. A qualitative descriptive approach was chosen over a quantitative approach, as it was deemed to be the most appropriate manner to elicit the information from the participants and fully explore their first-hand experiences of managing the transition from college to employment. Semi-structured interviews were chosen: two semi-structured interviews were designed based on the evidence base, and advice from an expert panel working in the area of disability within one higher education institution in Ireland. The interview formats for both the students and the graduates were similar. All interview questions were open-ended and included questions such as: ‘Tell me about your work experiences to date’; ‘Tell me about your experience of disclosure?’ The graduates were asked if they wished ‘to share any advice for students to support them in their transition to employment’. The semi-structured approach allowed for a more open discussion between the researchers and the participants, allowing participants to lead and develop their responses.

The research questions included questions relating to personal circumstances about employment status, work-related experiences, college experiences and their use of support services and RAs. This research was to be used as evidence for the development of a student support service enabling a seamless transition to the world of employment. Therefore, individuals were not asked directly about their individual disability as the emphasis was upon managing work and the transition to employment.

Participants and recruitment

There were two participant groups: graduates with disabilities and students (both at the undergraduate level and at the post-graduate level) with disabilities. Purposive sampling (Morse 2000) was used to recruit the participants. Firstly, graduates who had previously availed of the disability services (n = 30) were targeted for inclusion within this study; of these, nine responded. Students who were currently engaged and availing of the Disability Service were also targeted for inclusion within the study and approximately 200 students (senior years in college and at the post-graduate level) were sent an email seven days before the interviews with the participant information leaflet inviting them to partake in the study. Of these, 13 responded and were interviewed. The purpose of the study was again explained at the beginning of the interview and consent was obtained at this point.

Pilot

The interview questions and structure were piloted with students and graduates for face validity; no changes were made to the interview format.

Data collection

All participants were interviewed within the disability office within the host university with two of the graduates opting for a Skype telephone interview, as they had moved overseas for work. There was no difference found between the face-to-face interviews and those who were interviewed using Skye technology. The interviews commenced with a brief introduction from the researcher and a full explanation of the purpose of the study. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and lasted between 40 and 50 minutes in duration. In order to provide each participant with the opportunity to comment on their transcript, they were each sent a copy of it following the interview and prior to analysis, thus ensuring trustworthiness of the data.
Ethical considerations

The study was granted ethical approval from the Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Committee of Trinity College, Dublin. In order to protect students’ and graduates’ identities and ensure confidentiality, all transcripts were coded with numbers and all identifying information was removed. (Table 1)

Data analysis

The data collected from both groups, the students and the graduates, were analysed using content analysis, based on guidelines from Elo and Kyngas (2008). Content analysis is a method to analyse written or verbal communication (Cole 1988), and allows the researcher to make replicable and valid inferences from data to the context, with the specific purpose of providing knowledge, new insights and greater understanding of facts (Krippendorff 1980). Content analysis was judged to be the most suitable approach to data analysis, as it takes account of meanings and intentions and allows for the data to be analysed using a content-sensitive method; additionally, it allows the researchers to attain a description of the phenomenon which can be presented in themes (Krippendorff 1980; Elo and Kyngas 2008). The data analysis was carried out in several steps as recommended by Elo and Kyngas (2008), utilizing the inductive approach. (1) All interview transcripts were read and reread independently by the two researchers, in order to gain an overall sense of the content and data as a whole. (2) The next step required the researchers to openly code, where the notes and headings relating to the information pertaining to the research questions were noted in the margins. (3) The headings from the margins were then added to coding sheets, for the next stage (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). (4) The headings were then grouped into categories with higher order headings, for example: ‘Stigma’, ‘Prejudice’ and ‘Personal Decision’ were grouped into ‘Disclosure’. This collapsed the words into categories which were relatable to each other. (5) The two researchers compared their coding and categories and further abstraction of the categories took place through

Table 1. Demographic details of student/graduate participants.

| Student (S) number | Disability                  | Year/Faculty              | Graduate (G) number | Disability                          | Employment status               |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| S1                 | Visual disability           | Fourth year arts faculty  | G1                  | Visual disability                   | Employed                        |
| S2                 | Visual disability           | Third Year Arts Faculty   | G2                  | Significant ongoing illness         | Employed                        |
| S3                 | Mental health difficulty    | Third year arts faculty   | G3                  | Mental health difficulty            | Unemployed-in between jobs      |
| S4                 | ADHD                        | Fourth year science       | G4                  | Significant ongoing illness         | Internship                      |
| S5                 | Asperger’s syndrome         | Fourth year arts faculty  | G5                  | Significant ongoing illness         | Unemployed                      |
| S6                 | Visual disability           | Masters arts faculty      | G6                  | Asperger’s syndrome                 | Employed                        |
| S7                 | Mental health difficulty    | Fourth Year Arts Faculty  | G7                  | Asperger’s syndrome                 | Employed                        |
| S8                 | Physical and visual disability | PhD Arts faculty          | G8                  | Asperger’s syndrome                 | Internship                      |
| S9                 | Mental health difficulty    | PhD Arts faculty          | G9                  | Physical disability                 | Unemployed- going on to do a    |
|                    |                             |                           |                     |                                     | post-graduate Course            |
| S10                | Physical disability         | Third year arts faculty   |                     |                                     |                                 |
| S11                | Mental health difficulty    | Fourth year arts faculty  |                     |                                     |                                 |
| S12                | Physical disability         | Masters arts faculty      |                     |                                     |                                 |
| S13                | Physical disability         | PhD Arts faculty          |                     |                                     |                                 |
discussion and debate on the meaning of these categories, until a consensus was reached and the themes were devised (Table 2).

Findings
The findings are presented as the themes supported with quotes that arose from the interviews with students and graduates from the university (Table 2). The focus of the questions was upon exploring students’ and graduates’ experiences of their perspectives on the supports needed to transition to employment with a disability rather than the disability itself; therefore, no questions were asked about the individuals’ particular disability other than what they mentioned. Although the groups were at different stages with regard to transitioning to employment, both will be presented together as both groups had received the same level of support from the university and had been targeted for inclusion in transition to employment supports. There are differences in how students experienced their disabilities and there are particular challenges and expectations that each group encountered and, where possible, these have been highlighted and discussed in order to remain true to the students’ and graduates’ voices.

Enabling and building your career pathway/building personal strategies

The themes across the students and graduates were similar with both groups maintaining that students need to build their skills and capacity for work. Both groups stated that they needed to use college to broaden their personal experiences, thus building their skills for the future. Students discussed the need to become involved with student societies within college and to take on student leadership roles and responsibilities. These student roles were seen as a stepping-stone for personal growth and development and allowed students to build confidence in their abilities and to find self-fulfilment. Student 2 with a visual impairment stated that they;

would definitely say that like, from a college point of view, like try and get yourself into the societies, I found like, up until last year, like this year I’ve enjoyed it the most, and I’ve definitely grown like, like confidence wise.

Graduates also felt that making social connections through the societies would influence their job prospects later, which was important, given the recent economic situation within Ireland. They advocated for students to try and get jobs whilst still in college even if this was holding a leadership role within their societies as this could subsequently look well on their curriculum vitae. They appear to

Table 2. Themes that emerged from student and graduate interviews.

| Student (Undergraduate and postgraduate) themes (N = 13) | Graduate themes (N = 9) |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| **Enabling and Building your Career Pathway** – The theme relates to suggestions from students about enabling and building their CV and skills to enhance their career opportunities. | Building Personal Strategies – Graduates suggest that students need to develop their confidence through developing their CVs and broaden their personal college experiences. |
| Fit – This theme relates to the students personal view on disability and how to tailor their abilities to the job | Fit – Graduates discourse on fitting into the workplace and matching their skills to the job demands |
| Disclosure – This theme relates to how and when students choose to disclose a disability | Disclosure and Reasonable Accommodations (RAs) – This theme relates to the personal view of disability and the disclosure of their disability and suggestions for RAs within the work place (enabling the work environment). |
| Future Advice and College Support – This theme identifies supports and advice for students as well as advice for college service providers on future developments to enhance the student journey. | Advice for students and transitioning to work – This theme provides advice from graduates to students with disabilities as they enter into the workplace. |
| Enabling and Educating for the Work Environment – This theme is concerned with suggestions from students on how to educate employers on disability in the work environment and personal strategies that students need to develop to manage their disability in the work environment. | |

C. NOLAN AND C. I. GLEESON
hold more realistic expectations in relation to the job market, that is, understanding the difficulties now facing all students in obtaining employment, what employers are looking for and understanding the value of having a student job. Graduate 1 in employment with a visual impairment emphasizes this point by saying that something needed to be in place for students to encourage them to get jobs when they were in college:

Yeah but also try and put into place something to encourage them to get jobs when they’re in college. It’s a tough job market; it’s difficult to break into it if you don’t have previous experience.

Students were also aware of the economic situation and how it was impacting upon their employment opportunities. They were aware that they needed to highlight their skills and to showcase themselves in a positive light to prospective employers. Student 3 with a mental health difficulty was particularly aware of this by saying that:

anything you’ve done can be a skill, umm, and then, (pause), I always think put yourself in the most positive light in a CV, don’t be like afraid to …

By developing personal strategies, social connections and work experiences in college, graduates understood how these experiences could transfer to their later careers, thus highlighting their greater sense of awareness, whereas students themselves could only see the addition of an experience on their curriculum vitae without this valuable insight.

**Fit**

Most people need to marry their skill set to the job specifications, however; students with disabilities have additional hurdles to think about; for example, how they can be accommodated on a level playing field. Students and graduates struggled with the notion of just being offered a job because of their disability to fill quotas. Graduate 7 with Asperger’s Syndrome vocalizes this notion:

if I’m being completely and brutally honest, I didn’t want to get a job on the basis of being, of having Asperger’s Syndrome, I wanted to get a job on my own terms saying “Look at me, I’m employable, hire me, come on you idiots, I’m really good

However, other students maintained that they need to be mindful of their disability in matching their skill set to jobs, catering to their needs. This was a real dilemma for student 6 with a visual impairment, who maintained that they had to tailor what they did to what they knew they were capable of:

you must tailor everything that you do … what you know you can do.

Some students, on the other hand, talked about ruling out the jobs they could not do at an earlier stage, as they could not visualize themselves doing the work, which perhaps limited their choices and narrowed them into picking the jobs that they could do. This is perhaps reflective of their lack of exposure to work experiences.

Graduates had a more realistic view and talked about making choices around what was important to them but were aware that it was an unequal world. This view was upheld by graduate 1 with a visual impairment:

but like it’s not equal and it’s not going to be equal today or tomorrow and as disabled people and disabled graduates, we need to accept that too and you need to make your choices about what is more important to you, like if I really want something like education-wise now or in a job or whatever I know I’m going to have to give more time to it.

Another (graduate 9) with a physical disability also talked about how it was not fair but that he had made a decision:

… to give a bit more time in my life to maintain my job … but like it’s not equal and it’s not going to be equal today or tomorrow and as disabled people and disabled graduates, we need to accept that too and you need to make your choices about what is more important to you …
Fitting one’s self into the work environment is complex and students with disabilities need to be mindful not to limit themselves because of their disabilities early on in their career choice. Graduates who had some experiences of work were aware of these dilemmas and were vocal in ensuring that students were educated about the real-world challenges.

**Disclosure/ RAs**

Disclosure was a prominent theme which emerged within both groups. Graduates with hidden disabilities described how in some cases they had not fully disclosed and that they were not in a rush to disclose. Graduate 4 with a Significant Ongoing Illness said:

I just haven’t disclosed anything, I don’t really. I wouldn’t, because of the nature of what I’ve to deal with, it’s not as apparent, you know, I don’t have an outwardly visible physical disability or something like that so they would not know, but I wouldn’t be averse to disclosing eventually but just not before getting a job for certain.

None of the graduates or students with mental health difficulties had disclosed a disability and some expressed that they feared discrimination as a result of disclosure. Student 7 with a mental health difficulty maintained that:

on the disclosure thing, I just, I feel like there is a lot of stigma and misunderstanding about it, and I also feel, that should a bad situation arise in the workplace, it could be used to, scapegoat me.

One graduate with Asperger’s syndrome had chosen to disclose to their boss only, while other graduates advised the students to be careful of the people you disclose to. Others felt that they needed more support in disclosing a disability and that it was a personal decision to disclose. Those who choose to disclose did so in order to receive RAs. This worked really well for student 1 with a visual impairment who talked about not being afraid to explain the RAs she required, as she could not expect them to know what she needed:

You know, be ready to explain everything from the beginning, and just kind of take a deep breath and just remember that maybe they don’t know and maybe they don’t understand and, you know, that they’ll get used to it.

Students who were more confident within themselves felt that they would have no problem in disclosing and that they would be safer disclosing. Student 7 with a mental health difficulty explained this:

Legally, it’s probably a good idea, because if there’s an insurance thing or something comes up down the line, it’s better to have said it … I mean you should never really feel that it’s something to hide away or feel embarrassed about or feel ashamed about, because that makes you a person and just get on with it!

However, those with hidden disabilities such as mental health difficulties felt that it was very much dependent on the confidence of the person as to whether or not they disclosed a disability. Indeed, graduates expressed reservations about the timing of disclosing a disability: do you disclose prior to being offered the job or after? Graduate 5 with a Significant Ongoing Illness debated this point as she was concerned about when to disclose:

Or is there like a second interview, do you say it at that point, but you don’t always know how the company works, if there will be a second interview or … do you lay that out straight away … at the first interview.

Where there was a choice to disclose or not particularly for those with hidden disabilities, most choose not to disclose or partially disclose. There was little consensus on when and how to disclose amongst participants, but reprisal for disclosing was still a palpable issue for participants.

**Advice/students/college support**

Graduates encouraged students to take up the Erasmus Programme to enhance their skills. Graduate 1 talks about her Erasmus experience. She maintained:
it was really difficult to go and to get the confidence to go.

But at the same time, recognizing the benefits of going, she talked about having an Erasmus and international background on your CV as being:

a massive asset to anyone who wants to work outside of Ireland, and it's not to say you can't, you know stay in Ireland and find a job, obviously you can, but even the fact that you've had that abroad experience will mean so much to Irish employers, and I think that's what the Disability Service does that is great because they sorted everything out for me when I went to Paris.

Graduates maintained that individuals should get as much support as they could from the college services. They recommended that students should obtain part-time work and try to develop coping strategies, which would enable them in the workforce. They also advised students to get information on employment opportunities earlier and suggested that students engage in mock interviews. Graduate 8 with Asperger’s Syndrome recommended that students start earlier looking for support for employment and that they develop a good work–life balance between their studies and relaxation, that is, build good working habits:

Yeah, start that bit sooner … ‘I joined the Debating society and then I was in the History society so yeah, you need to have good work-life balance and be aware, … of how much work you’re going to need, or how much time you’re going to need to relax … Don’t take on too much’. 

Graduates maintained that the services need to teach the students self-management strategies for dealing with work place environments and to work out the pragmatics prior to going for the interview, that is, have a checklist in their head as graduate 2 with a Significant Ongoing Illness advised:

Doing things like finding out what floor they might be on, would there be lift access … you know … just like a checklist in my head when I was looking at jobs.

Students maintained that they needed to research their jobs closely, and advised other students with disabilities to use links such as Grad Link. They viewed the disabled student cohort as setting the standards for people with disabilities within the workforce and they maintained that they would have to learn to manage the social environments. Student 13 with a Physical disability identified having a mentor with a disability as a valuable asset to them.

I think a mentor with a disability would be even more useful, ahh, that maybe has come across the barriers you’ve come across, and also who would be able to advise you as to what to do.

Gaining support and maintaining support were clear messages within this theme with useful suggestions such as having mentors with disabilities who could act as advisors, enabling graduates to transition to the workplace more easily.

Enabling the work environment

This theme is concerned with suggestions from students on how to educate employers on disability in the work place and on personal strategies that students need to develop to manage their disability. Student 5 with Asperger’s Syndrome maintained that managers needed to know about your disability in order to understand why you were not getting it sometimes:

and the other thing I recommend I suppose is just making sure that the managers know that you have ahh, AS (Asperger’s Syndrome), because there’s a few cases where you’re not picking up on any emotional context.

Students maintained that as part of their own self-management, they needed to plan their annual breaks at the beginning of the year in order to manage their worker role as illustrated by Student 13 with a Physical disability who said:

I think it’s, you know, looking at things like, for a person starting their, you know, or a new student starting ahh a new job, I think what also is quite important is, they need to be looking at the whole year and looking how it ahh, it’s going to work for them, and maybe like things like holidays.
Discussion

Individuals with disabilities have a right to the opportunity to gain a living by work which is freely chosen or to be accepted into a labour market and work environments that are open, inclusive and accessible (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 Article 27: Work and Employment). Within Ireland, the period from 2004 to 2010 was a crucial one for people with a disability, as there was an intense focus upon disability. This resulted in a shift from a medical model to a social one, with the development of new disability policies where the emphasis was upon enabling disabled people to participate in society. However, the onset of the recession in 2008 meant resources were scarce to implement these policies (ESRI 2010). Thus, the employment of disabled people remained low in comparison to our European counterparts, threatening an individual’s human right to employment and as such a barrier in itself to gaining meaningful employment. The students and graduates in this study referred to additional barriers that existed. They identified societal barriers such as attitudes and stigma and personal barriers such as one’s own disability, building personal strategies and having work experience, as opposed to any physical barriers such as doors, steps or assistive technology. This may have been more apparent in this study, as over 60% of the participants experienced hidden disabilities and therefore this may have influenced the type of challenges they perceived as barriers. This highlights that the cultural and social environment maybe more of a barrier than the physical environment for this cohort of students in transitioning to employment.

Disclosure was a strong theme and was identified as an area of concern within the study and this was echoed by the graduates and students. What was most interesting from the findings was the fact that the students and graduates with visible disabilities were more likely to disclose their disability compared to those with invisible disabilities, such as mental health difficulties. Those with visible disabilities tended to disclose earlier usually at the application stage or when they were offered an interview for practical reasons such as access. Those with mental health difficulties tended to disclose when offered a job or through necessity whilst within the job for safety or legal reasons but were still were less likely to disclose for fear of stigma and discrimination. This highlights a hidden societal and cultural barrier that exists and which can have detrimental effects upon an individual’s full participation in society. This is in line with the findings of other studies such as Boardman (2003), and Boardman et al. (2003). Perhaps for this group, more work needs to be done on informing them about disclosure policies and on how to articulate their needs, so that they obtain the supports they require. Equally more work needs to be done in educating the employers on disclosure and to foster a more positive culture on hidden disabilities. Indeed, HEI support services could take up this mantle more effectively. This is important so that these graduates remain in employment as Watson, Banks, and Lyons (2015) found that those with hidden disabilities such as mental health are more likely to leave employment as a result of their disability, subsequent stigma and their lack of knowledge about their rights.

Differences existed between the graduates and students on fitting themselves into a job depending on their disability; some students had a difficulty visualizing themselves in a work situation and were found to be lacking work experiences. This view may be limiting their opportunities and narrowing their career paths. Graduates, on the other hand, who had some work experiences felt that there was a need to marry their skills with the job and they put less emphasis upon their disabilities preferring instead to focus upon their competencies and their interests. They preferred to see themselves as not just filling a disability quota but as obtaining the job on their own strengths and merit. This highlights the need to provide opportunities for students to obtain work experiences, thus offering openings for students to develop their skills, and gain life experiences including coping with real-world challenges.

Work experience was identified as being one of the most important reasons for graduates getting jobs, with a good number of the graduates encouraging future students to engage in some type of employment, whether it is internships, paid work or voluntary work in order to build their Curriculum Vitae. Likewise, it appears that many industries are currently seeking out graduates who have
completed internships or paid experience. This finding was also similar to the AHEAD (2008) study. However, despite this, it was found that employers were more reluctant to invest in RAs for a short period of time, that is, summer months/internship periods which poses a risk to this cohort of students with disabilities. Again, this is an issue which could be addressed by the disability services within the HEIs.

The value of being employed even at the undergraduate level was appreciated and in particular, some graduates felt that being employed during college stood to them when they were transitioning to employment. Pratt et al. (2014) maintain that building work-related experiences supports students in their transition to employment, by giving them the opportunity to gain confidence and develop a sense of purpose and a role.

Graduates also maintained that developing personal strategies and a work–life balance was important once you transitioned to employment. The participants in this study highlighted the need to manage employment and to develop other purposeful leisure occupations to support their health and well-being, manage the impact of their disability within a work environment. Packer et al. (2012) also maintain that the development of personal strategies through self-management is important for managing risks and using services effectively to support your disability. It is important for disability services to take account of developing personal strategies with students prior to transitioning which could address work–life balance and self-management strategies in managing their disability in the workplace.

The graduates’ voice was powerful in advising students to seek advice and support in managing their transition to employment, that is, they advised them to use Careers Services and Disability Services. This is an important piece of advice if transition to employment is to be successful for those with disabilities, given that the research shows that college graduates with disabilities do not receive the same level and quality of career support services compared to their non-disabled cohort (Silver, Strehorn, and Bourke 1997; Kim and Williams 2012). This therefore highlights the need to develop more tailored and individualized supports for students and graduates with disabilities as they transition from college to employment, thus ensuring that they receive equal access to services and are successful in gaining the same standard of employment as their non-disabled peers. The most developed approach to supported employment is the Individual Placement and Support Model (Rinaldi et al. 2008; Drake et al. 2012), which was established to support those with severe mental health difficulties to enter the workforce. This model of support has produced excellent outcomes; this approach is not necessarily required for graduates with disabilities exiting college, given the high support nature, although some elements and fundamental principles are particularly valuable in developing a student-centred and tailored transition service.

Traditionally, professional work placements have only been associated with professional courses such as teaching, Medicine and Nursing; however, more recently, the Faculties of Art and Social Sciences have been more aware to provide students with the opportunities to engage in internships and forge links with employers and industry, in order to ensure more successful transition to employment on exiting higher education. The graduates who studied Arts subjects within this study found these internships to be useful in preparing them for the world of employment and would encourage all students to engage in them. Students themselves need to avail of the opportunities for employment and support staff need to actively promote employment opportunities. RAs in the transition to work need to be identified in collaboration with students and employers and should address the cultural and societal barriers and not just the physical barriers, as disabilities are complex and varied and impact upon individuals differently.

Limitations of the study

This study was qualitative in nature and offered a voice to students and graduates on the transition to employment. The research has gone onto inform the design of a transition planning service for students; however, a further study could highlight more in-depth concerns and perceptions raised
within this study. Nevertheless, this research offers interesting insights into both students and graduates with disabilities, as it gives voice to their opinions and perceptions on their transition to employment and the challenges they face from an Irish perspective. They offer sound advice for future directions for service users as well as service providers. The majority of participants within this study had hidden disabilities and therefore findings in relation to perceived barriers cannot be generalized to all students with disabilities.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study heard the voices of students and graduates as they transitioned from college to employment. Although employment is a basic right and more educated individuals with disabilities than ever are graduating from HEIs, the transition to employment continues to be fraught with challenges as evidenced from this study. The main findings show that students and graduates with disabilities do experience challenges in making the move into the world of employment and both groups emphasize the need to build work-related skills and experiences into their student journey.

Disclosure was a prevalent concern for the students and graduates particularly for those with hidden disabilities. They feared stigma and discrimination, which resulted in non-disclosure, thus creating additional barriers impacting upon their full and effective participation in the workplace. This highlights how hidden societal barriers can impact upon the person. As a result, it is very clear that all students need to be further informed about disclosure and to debate the implications of disclosure for themselves. They also need to think through how they might be supported to develop personal strategies in managing their disability in the workplace. Furthermore, it was clear that supports need to be tailored and individual in nature, thus ensuring their successful transition from higher education to employment. Equally, hidden societal and cultural barriers need to be exposed, debated and confronted within the workplace.

The OECD recommends that the next step for disability support services is to build supports for students to enable a seamless transition into the world of employment, thus ensuring that graduates can contribute to the economic fabric of society. This study has highlighted issues and direction for service users and providers in supporting the transition of graduates to the world of work, and has provided an evidence base for the development of a support service within one institution. Employers need to rethink the culture and ethos of the work environment taking account of disability policies, providing a more open and inclusive atmosphere for all employees including students on internships. They also need to invest in RAs so that students with disabilities can benefit from internships in the short term.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the students and graduates for their time, honest opinions and advice which have made this research possible and which will provide a basis for the development of a model of support for the future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Clodagh Nolan is an Assistant Professor with the Discipline of Occupational Therapy at Trinity College and is the co-founder of an occupational therapy service for students with disabilities at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. This service was established in conjunction with the Mr. Declan Treanor who is the Head of the Disability Service in Trinity College and it has been in operation for the past 14 years.

Ms. Claire Irene Gleeson is a Senior Occupational Therapist with the Disability Service delivering occupational therapy services to students enrolled within the disability service.
References

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability). 2008. *Disabling Disability: A Study of the Employment Context of Graduates with Disabilities in Ireland.* Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press.

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability). 2012. *Survey on the Participation Rates of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education for the Academic Year 2011/2012.* Dublin: AHEAD.

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability). 2014. “Numbers of Students with Disabilities Studying at Higher Education 2012/13.” [http://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/PARTICIPATION20RATES20REPORT%202012-13.pdf](http://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/PARTICIPATION20RATES20REPORT%202012-13.pdf).

AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability). 2015. “Past Student Experience of Erasmus.” [http://www.ahead.ie/studyabroad-experience](http://www.ahead.ie/studyabroad-experience).

Brandt, S. 2011. “From Policy to Practice in Higher Education: The Experiences of Disabled Students in Norway.” *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education,* 58 (2): 107–112.

Chan, F., D. Strauser, P. Maher, E.-J. Lee, R. Jones, and E. T. Johnson. 2010. *Demand-side Factors Related to Employment of Persons with Disabilities: A Survey in the Midwest Region of the United States.* *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation,* 20: 412–419.

Cole, F. L. 1988. “Content Analysis: Process and Application.” *Clinical Nurse Specialist* 2 (1): 53–57.

Department of Employment and Enterprise. 2015. *Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015–2024).* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Department of Health and Children. 2005. *Disability Act 2005.* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Department of Justice and Equality. 2013. *Equal Status Acts 2000-2012.* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Drake, R. E., G. R. Becker, D. Becker, and R. Press. 2012. *IPS Supported Employment: an Evidenced Based Approach.* New York: Oxford University.

Elo, S., and H. Kyngas. 2008. “The Qualitative Content Analysis Process.” *Journal of advanced Nursing* 62 (1): 107–115. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.

ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute). 2010. “Peer Review of the Economic and Social Research Institute.” [http://www.esri.ie/pubs/Report_of_Peer_Review_Panel.pdf](http://www.esri.ie/pubs/Report_of_Peer_Review_Panel.pdf).

Fichten, C. S., S. Jorgensen, A. Havel, M. Barile, V. Ferraro, M. É. Landry, D. Fiset, et al. 2012. “What Happens After Graduation? Outcomes, Employment, and Recommendations of Recent Junior/Community College Graduates with and Without Disabilities.” *Disability and Rehabilitation* 34 (11): 917–924.

Graffam, J., A. Shinkfield, K. Smith, and U. Polzin. 2002. “Employer Benefits and Costs of Employing a Person with a Disability.” *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* 17: 251–263.

Hsieh, H. F., and S. Shannon. 2005. “These Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis.” *Qualitative Health Research* 15: 1277–1288.

Kim, M. M., and B. C. Williams. 2012. “Lived Employment Experiences of College Students and Graduates with Physical Disabilities in the United States.” *Disability and Society,* 27 (6): 837–852.

Krippendorff, K. 1980. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Kulkarni, M., and J. Kote. 2014. “Increasing Employment of People with Disabilities: The Role and Views of Disability Training and Placement Agencies.” *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 26 (3): 177–193.

Morse, J. M. 2000. “Determining Sample Size.” *Qualitative Health Research,* 10: 3–5.

Neergaard, M. A., F. Olesen, R. S. Andersen, and J. Sondergaard. 2009. “Qualitative Description—the Poor Cousin of Health Research?” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 9 (1): 52–56.

OECD. 2011. “Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Tertiary Education and Employment.” [http://www.oecd-library.org/education/inclusion-of-students-with-disabilities-in-tertiary-education-and-employment_9789264097650-en](http://www.oecd-library.org/education/inclusion-of-students-with-disabilities-in-tertiary-education-and-employment_9789264097650-en).

Office of the Attorney General. 1998. “Employment Equality Acts 1998-2011.” [http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0021/](http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1998/en/act/pub/0021/).

Packer, T. L., D. Boldy, S. Grahari, L. Melling, R. Parsons, and R. H. Osborne. 2012. “Self-management Programmes Conducted Within a Practice Setting: Who Participates, Who Benefits and What can be Learnt?” *Patient, Education and Counselling* 87 (1): 93–100.

Perkins, R., P. Farmer, and P. Litchfield. 2009. *Realising Ambitions: Better Employment Support for People with a Mental Health Condition.* Department for Work and Pensions. Cm7742.

Pratt, C. W., K. J. Gill, N. M. Barrett, and M. M. Roberts. 2014. “Employment.” Chap. 10 in *Psychiatric Rehabilitation.* 3rd edition. London: Elsevier.
Rinaldi, M., R. Perkins, E. Glynn, E. Montibeller, M. Clenaghan, and J. Rutherford. 2008. “Individual Placement and Support: From Research to Practice.” *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 14: 50–60.

Robdale, N. 2008. “Vocational Rehabilitation: Variety is the Key to Success.” *Mental Health Today, Vocational Rehabilitation*, Sept: 24–27.

Silver, P., K. C. Strehorn, and A. Bourke. 1997. “The 1993 Employment Follow-up Study of Selected Graduates with Disabilities.” *Journal of College Student Development* 38: 520–525.

Smith, L. 2003. “The Need to Empower Students with Disabilities Towards Employment: On Consumer’s Experience and Observations.” *Disability and Society* 26: 1–19.

Snowdon Survey Report. 2013. “A Shared View. Snowdon Trust Supporting Students with Physical Disabilities.”

Storr, H., J. Wray, and P. Draper. 2011. “Supporting Disabled Student Nurses From Registration to Qualification: A Review of the United Kingdom Literature.” *Nurse Education Today* 31: e29–e33.

Styers, B. A., and K. S. Shultz. 2009. “Perceived Reasonableness of Employment Testing Accommodations for Persons with Disabilities.” *Public Personnel Management* 38 (3): 71–91. ProQuest.

United Nations. 2006. “United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” [http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf](http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf).

Watson, D., Banks, J., and Lyons, S. 2015. “Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Strategy.” Research Series, Number 41. The Economic and Social Research Institute.

Watson, D., G. Kingston, and F. McGinnity. 2012. *Disability in the Irish Labour Market Evidence from the QNHS Equality Module 2010*. Dublin: The Equality Authority and Economic and Social Research Institute.

World Health Organisation. 2011. *World Report on Disability*. Geneva: Author.