Educational Support and Guidance

There have been substantial advancements in the past number of years in relation to the provision of education for learners with special educational needs, most notably the enhanced provision of resources within mainstream schools and its underpinning by an administrative and legislative framework. In Ireland there is a commitment to supporting the education of learners with special educational needs and those from disadvantaged social backgrounds through the allocation of resources for specific targeted initiatives, through providing for continuing professional development for teachers and continuing to review the effectiveness of these resources on learners’ progress and achievement.

Special education provision in Ireland can be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century, when facilities were established to cater for learners with sensory impairments. At the foundation of the State in 1922, there were few facilities, educational or otherwise for learners with special educational needs and religious orders pioneered the growth of special education facilities from the 1920s. During the 1950s and 1960s, voluntary groups began to establish special schools and classes throughout the country, which were subsequently recognised by the Department of Education. Segregated special provision according to disability category was considered the most appropriate model of provision for learners with special educational needs.

In 1991, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was established by the Minister for Education to report and make recommendations on educational provision for learners with special educational needs. The SERC Report was published in 1993 and continues to provide a basis for special education policy and practice. The SERC Report proposed seven principles, which affirm the right of all learners with special educational needs to an individualised and appropriate education, acknowledge the important role of parents, provide for the availability of a continuum of education provision, create a presumption in favour of affording learners access to their local mainstream schools and articulate the need for the provision of adequate services and resources to achieve these principles.

In accordance with developments internationally a discernible move away from segregated provision towards including learners with special educational needs in mainstream education is evident in Ireland from the 1990s. In 1994, Ireland was one of ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations subscribing to the Salamanca Statement, which asserted that mainstream schools with an inclusive orientation were the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building inclusive societies and achieving education for all and that access to mainstream schools must be provided for all pupils with special educational needs (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1994). In October 1998, a Government decision announced automatic entitlement to educational provision for all learners with special educational needs irrespective of geographical location and pledged additional
teaching-support and care-assistants to support the integration of learners in mainstream education (Department of Education and Science, 1998).

Parallel to the development of special education provision and in the absence of education legislation, parents were seeking recourse to the courts in order to secure the constitutional rights of their children with reference to the right to education enshrined in Article 42 of 1937 Irish Constitution (Ireland, 1937). A number of key judicial decisions affirmed the rights of learners with special educational needs to education irrespective of the level of those needs. It was clearly unsatisfactory that an ever more complex education system was being operationalised through government circulars and regulations and the need for a legal framework for education was becoming increasingly evident.

The move towards providing a legal framework for education was formally commenced in 1998 with the enactment of the Education Act, 1998. The Act makes provision for the education of every person in the State, including those with a disability or other special educational need in order to ensure that all learners access, participate in and benefit from an education appropriate to their needs. The Act places a responsibility on schools to articulate the objectives of the school relating to equality of access to, and participation in the school and the measures which the school proposes to take to achieve those objectives including equality of access to and participation in the school by learners with disabilities or who have other special educational needs. The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004 prohibit discrimination on nine grounds including disability and access to education is stated to lie within the scope of the Act. Schools are required to provide reasonable accommodation to meet the needs of a person with a disability. Reasonable accommodation applies to a range of barriers such as physical, communication and attitudinal. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 provides for the entitlement of every child in the State to a certain minimum education. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act, was enacted in July 2004 to further provide for the education of persons with special educational needs (Ireland, 2004). The Act is underpinned by a presumption in favour of inclusion and stipulates that learners with special educational needs should be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools unless the nature or degree of those needs is such that to do so would be inconsistent with the best interests of the learner with special educational needs or the effective provision of education for other learners. The provision of an appropriate education, the centrality of parental involvement, the key role of assessment, the preparation of an education plan and an independent appeals process are among the provisions in the Act.

The National Council for Special Education [1] (NCSE) was established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003 and was subsequently formally established from the first of October 2005, under the EPSEN Act. Its statutory functions include planning for, and co-ordinating, the provision of education for children with special educational needs, conducting and commissioning research, advising the Minister for Education and Skills on policy in relation to special education, disseminating information on special education to parents and schools and reviewing the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of education. The provisions of the EPSEN Act were to be fully commenced by 2011 but due to economic restraints, this commencement date has now been deferred. The provisions in relation to assessment, education plans and the independent appeals process are among those sections of the Act that have not been commenced. The Disability Act, 2005 places a statutory obligation on public service providers to support access to services and facilities for persons with disabilities (Ireland, 2005). The Act provides an entitlement for people with disabilities to have their health and educational needs assessed, have individual statements related to the services they should get drawn up, access an independent complaints and appeals procedure and access public buildings and public service employment. Part 2 of the Act provides an entitlement for children under the age of five years to an independent
assessment of health and education needs and a statement of the services, which it is proposed to provide for the child. Individual pieces of legislation therefore complement and supplement each other and provide a robust context within which educational provision for learners with special educational needs is provided for.

Among the identified priorities for education over the coming years are the promotion of quality, relevance and inclusiveness by supporting schools in developing an inclusive environment for all learners, targeting interventions to address educational disadvantage, raising educational attainment, meeting the needs of learners with special educational needs, progressing the modernisation agenda, enhancing teacher education and professional development, promoting ongoing curriculum development, school evaluation and quality improvement and providing high-quality school accommodation, administrative and financial supports. In this context, the Department provides for a range of resources and supports for learners with special educational needs including additional teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs), assistive technology, specialist equipment, adapted buildings, school transport arrangements and programmes of continuing professional development in the area of special education.

Today a continuum of educational provision is provided for that promotes the maximum level of inclusion of learners with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, within their locality, or where necessary to provide for learners in special classes or schools. The NCSE Implementation Report, Plan for the Phased Implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 estimated that 18% of children have special educational needs, and thereby estimated that approximately 89,837 primary school pupils and 63,124 post-primary school students have special educational needs. There are 6,905 learners with special educational needs attending special schools, a figure which is less than one per cent of the total student population at primary and post-primary levels.

**Guidance**

In its definition of supports for students (Section 2), the Education Act, 1998 includes guidance and counselling services. The terms now generally used are guidance and guidance counselling. In its outline of the functions of a school, the Act also states that a school shall use its available resources to enable students to have access to appropriate guidance (Section 9(c). The Inspectorate of the Department elaborated on the implications of the Act in its 2005 Guidelines for Second-Level Schools on the Implications of Section 9(c) of the Education Act 1998, Relating to Students' Access to Appropriate Guidance.

The National Guidance Forum met from 2004 to 2006 as a joint initiative of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The forum met as ‘an assembly of all the relevant actors concerned with the development of policy, systems and practices for lifelong guidance’. The report of the Forum, Guidance for life: An integrated framework for lifelong guidance in Ireland was published in 2007. The National Guidance Forum stated that: guidance facilitates people throughout their lives to manage their own educational, training, occupational, personal, social, and life choices so that they reach their full potential and contribute to the development of a better society.

A new forum, the National Forum on Guidance, was established in 2011 to support communication, collaboration and co-operation in the education and labour market sectors in Ireland. Two meetings are held annually.

At primary school level, while there is no formal provision, the programme of guidance is part of an integrated curriculum that includes Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). Training for SPHE is part of initial teacher education. Psychologists of the National Educational Psychological Service
(NEPS) work in partnership with teachers, parents and children in identifying educational needs. They offer a range of services aimed at meeting these needs. These services include assessment and consultation with schools in supporting individual students and in supporting schools’ responses to crises. Some primary schools in designated areas of disadvantage have been allocated support teachers by the Department of Education and Skills to work with students with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The development of guidance services in the education sector for adults in Ireland has been led, since 2000, by the Adult Educational Guidance Initiative (AEGI). The AEGI is a Department of Education and Skills funded initiative, co-ordinated by the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE), which provides quality educational guidance services for adults. Forty AEGI services in local centres are managed nationally by the Vocational Education Committees and Waterford Institute of Technology. Staff in the local centres includes adult education guidance co-ordinators/counsellors and adult guidance information officers. The AEGI offers a guidance service to adults. This includes impartial adult education information, one-to-one guidance and group guidance, which help people to make informed educational, career and life choices.

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills evaluates the quality and effectiveness of guidance provision in post-primary schools and of SPHE in primary and in post-primary schools. Provision for guidance in post-primary schools is mainly evaluated during Whole School Evaluations (WSE) or WSE-Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL) evaluations. In keeping with recent developments in the areas of guidance and support for students, these evaluations focus on Guidance as one element of an integrated approach within the school to identifying and responding to the needs of students. Specific evaluations of Guidance are also carried out on a sample of schools each year.

The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is the national centre of excellence in guidance. The NCGE, as an agency of the Department of Education and Skills, has responsibility for informing DES policy on matters relating to Guidance. The remit of the NCGE includes the promotion and support of strategies for the provision of guidance counselling in the context of lifelong learning, promotion of the development and dissemination of good practice in guidance, and the management of National and European initiatives and projects in the field of Guidance for the Department and for the EU Commission. The NCGE is a member of the Euroguidance Network of European national resource centres for guidance. Guidance policy in Ireland is informed not only by domestic policies and issues but also by European policy. NCGE is the DES’s designated representative at the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) is co-ordinated by the NCGE and strong links have been established between European and Irish policy on lifelong guidance in the context of lifelong learning.

In the past decade, there has been a large increase in the resources available to cater for the additional needs of students. The legal framework has been provided by legislation such as the Education Welfare Act, 2000, the Equal Status Acts and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004. The outcomes in schools, both primary and post-primary, have included the further development of learning support, including provision for the language needs of students for whom English is an additional language, the provision of individual time allocations (resource hours) for identified students, the employment of special needs assistants (SNAs) and the development of the services of local special educational needs organisers (SENOs).

Higher Education

The social and economic benefits of creating an inclusive and equitable education system have been enshrined in policy and legislation in Ireland since the late 1960’s. The Higher Education Authority Act; 1971, the Universities Act; 1997, the Qualifications Act, 1999; the Institutes of Technology Act,
2006 and the Student Support Act, 2011 are the legislative framework within which policy targeting equity of access to higher education operates. The provisions of equality legislation, such as the Equal Status Act, 2000 also apply to all agencies providing education and training.

The Department of Education and Skills [2] has responsibility for developing policy to promote equity of access to higher education and established a National Access Office in the Higher Education Authority to advise it in this regard. Target groups are those under-represented in higher education, including mature students, students with a disability and those from lower socioeconomic groups.

Currently work to improve access to third level education is being progressed through the implementation of the six-year National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2008-2013). The Plan identifies six goals and associated actions in the following key areas; communicating the rationale for Access; supporting the development of national framework of policies and initiatives to achieve access; the creation of further routes of access and progression to higher education; teaching and learning practices; financial support and resources and makes the case for a more robust data collection and evaluation framework to advise the development targets and indicators of progress.

A mid-term review of this plan is being finalised for publication. The review indicates that there is steady progress towards the objectives and targets in the national plan, while further work remains to be done. Key achievements include the development of access and lifelong learning plans all higher education institutions. The plans incorporate the continuation and development of programmes of work with young people and adults in schools and communities, particularly those in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and unemployment.

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