# Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs: Post School Transitions for Students with Special Educational Needs

**EVENT**
NCSE Research Conference 2025, Croke Park, Dublin
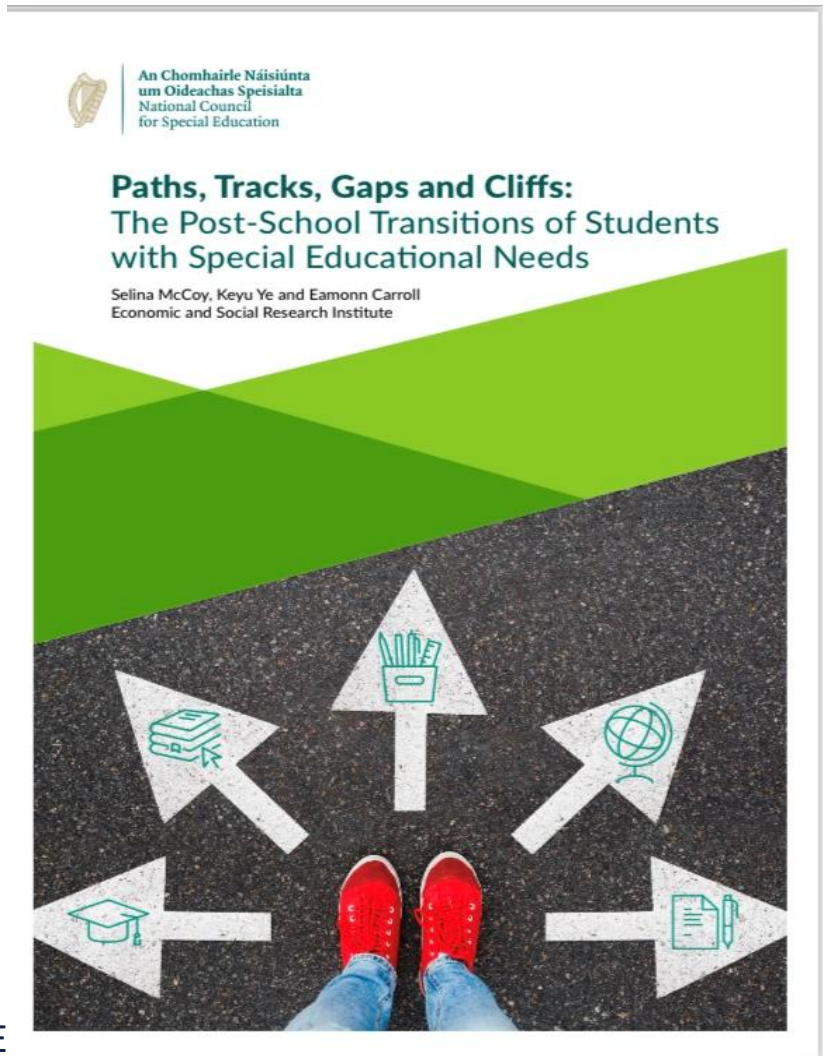
**DATE**
5 Nov 2025

**RESEARCH TEAM**
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# A "Pivotal Moment"

*"School leaving is a pivotal moment, where pathways diverge"*.

- Centred on **experiences of young adults**
    - Preparedness for leaving school
    - Skills development
    - Planned and realised post-school pathways
    - Experiences of transition
    - Outlook for the future
- **Key evidence on:**
    - Gaps between school & post-school
    - Support adequacy
    - Resourcing of non-mainstream education/training programmes
    - Pathways and progression opportunities

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

## Paths, Tracks, Gaps and Cliffs:
The Post-School Transitions of Students with Special Educational Needs

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# Research Focus and Questions

1. Where do young people with SEN go after school? (The Paths & Tracks)

2. What data exists to track them? (The Gaps)

3. Why do they choose these pathways? (The Factors)

4. What are their experiences? (The Views)

5. What are the key barriers? (The Cliffs)

# Our Study Design: Mixed-Methods

**Phase 1: Mapping**
- Secondary analysis of national data (e.g., GUI) to see the broad picture.

## Spring/Autumn 2022
- **Interviews** with key SEN personnel at school (e.g., Guidance Counsellors/SEN Coordinators)
- **Wave 1 survey** with school leavers with SEN in mainstream schools
- **Interviews** with school leavers with SEN in mainstream schools and parents
- **Case study research** in 8 special schools
- **Interviews** with national key stakeholders (e.g., NAMBE, NCSE, DE, HSE disability advocates)

## Summer 2023
- **Qualitative study** with school leavers in special schools
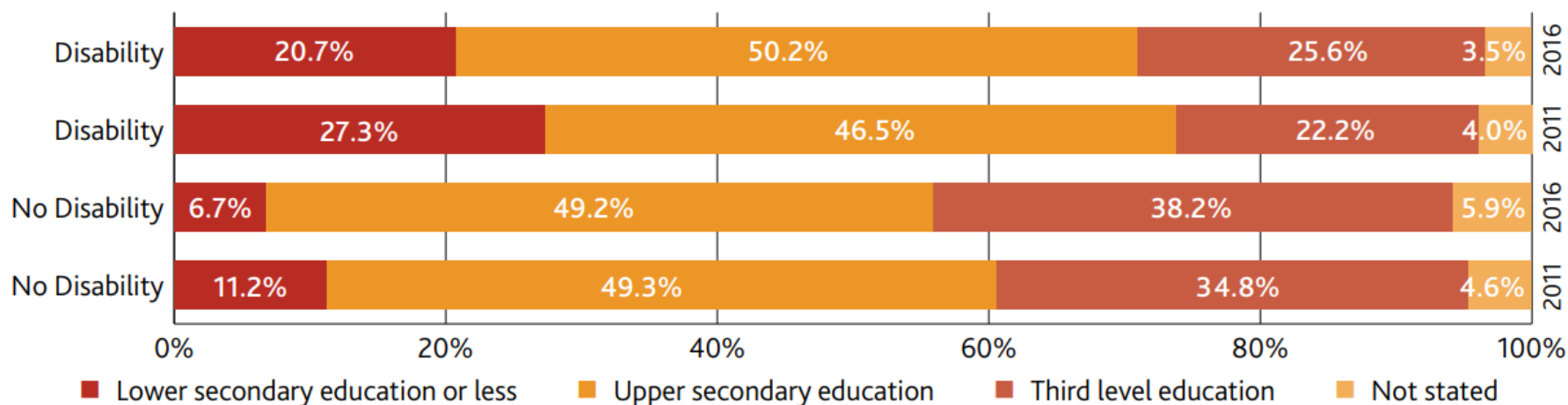- Interviews with young people in NEET group

## Spring 2023
- **Continued interviews** with national key stakeholders (e.g., NAMBE, NCSE, DE, HSE disability advocates)
- **Wave 2 survey** with school leavers with SEN in mainstream schools (following the same cohort recruited in Wave 1)
- **Survey** with young people recruited in PLC settings
- **Case study research** in adult day services
- **Interviews** with key post-school personnel and parents of young people with SEN at PLC/NLN settings

## Autumn 2023
- **Follow-up interviews** with students from special schools
- **Survey** with young people recruited in NLN settings

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# Clear Educational Achievement Gap Between Disabled vs. Non-Disabled Young People



| Category | Year | Lower secondary education or less | Upper secondary education | Third level education | Not stated |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Disability | 2016 | 20.7% | 50.2% | 25.6% | 3.5% |
| Disability | 2011 | 27.3% | 46.5% | 22.2% | 4.0% |
| No Disability | 2016 | 6.7% | 49.2% | 38.2% | 5.9% |
| No Disability | 2011 | 11.2% | 49.3% | 34.8% | 4.6% |

Data sources: Census 2011 and 2016

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# Clear Educational Achievement Gap Between Disabled vs. Non-Disabled Young People

- Young people with a disability are
  - **Less likely to achieve third level education.**
  - **Variation by type of disability.**
  - **Over-represented** in Further Education & Training (e.g., PLCs, NLN).
  - **Under-represented** in Higher Education (Universities/TUs).
- This study digs into the *where* and *why.*

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# Mainstream Schools:

# "The Two Funnels"

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# The Mainstream Experience: "Difficult to Decide"

- Over half of students found it difficult to decide on a pathway.

- Key Driver: Personal interest and career paths.

- Key Need: Students strongly preferred *individualised* guidance over group-based support.

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# Finding: The "Two Funnels"

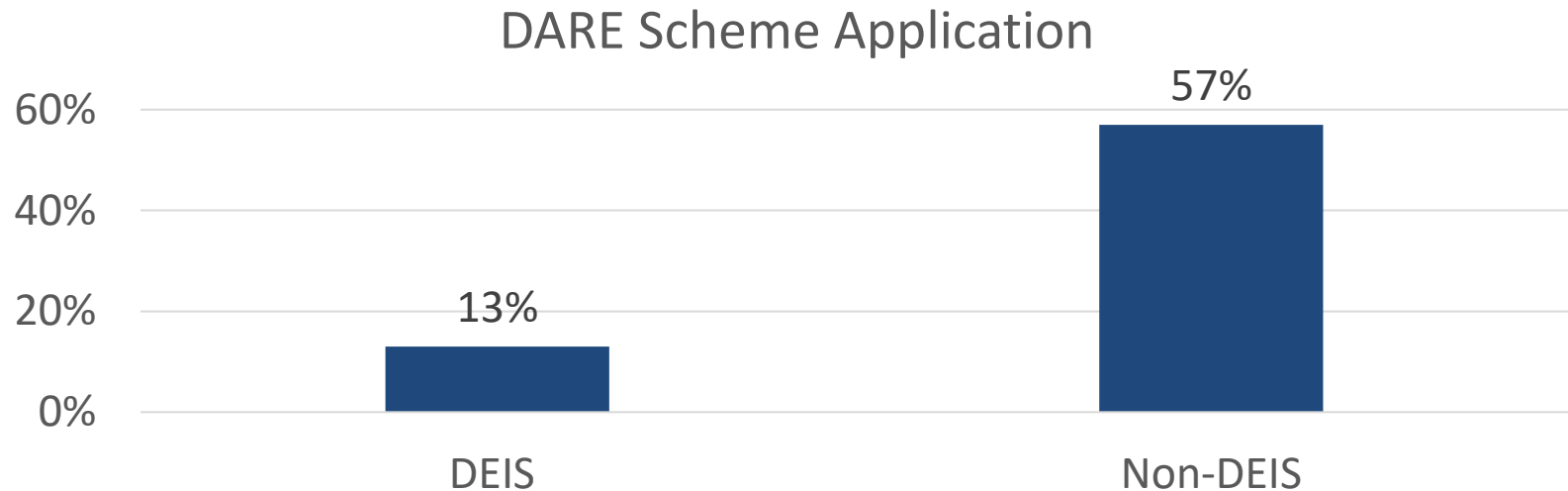Students reported contradictory experiences based on school context.

**Funnel 1: "Pushed towards HE."**

Some students reported receiving *only* information about Higher Education, not the full range of options.

**Funnel 2: "Funnelled into PLCs."**

While many students (mostly in DEIS schools) felt funnelled *only* into PLCs and apprenticeships, and lacked HE guidance.

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# Finding: The Social Capital Gap & Intersectionality

## DARE Scheme Application



- Family background and social capital play a huge role in what support students' access.

- Students in non-DEIS schools were **four times** *more likely* to apply for the DARE scheme than students in DEIS schools (57% vs 13%).

- This suggests students with the fewest family resources are missing out on key access routes.

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# Finding: The Gap for Young People with Complex Needs

- A recurring theme: outcomes are poorer for students with multiple or more complex needs.

- They were *less* likely to:
  - Feel encouraged to pursue education.
  - Feel adequately supported.
  - Be satisfied with friendships or employment prospects.

# Special School Transitions: "Gaps & Cliffs"

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# The Special School Experience: Positive... But...

- Students and parents reported very positive school experiences and strong, collaborative transition planning *within* the school.

  *'She came on in leaps and bounds here, she loved it...if she could have got another year she would have stayed' (Parent)*

  *'For years I was dreading adult services...I was terrified. But as the time went on, and especially in the last year, we were ready, [name of son] was ready, we were ready to leave the school which I never thought I would have been' (Parent)*

- The problem wasn't the school; it was the *system* they were transitioning into.

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# The "Curricular Gap"

- A "cliff-edge" at the end of Junior Cycle: lacking follow-on at Senior Cycle.

- **Great JC L1/L2:** Praised for life skills, but frustration over lack of formal certification *at that time*.

*That really upsets me because they spend so much time and effort…they left with **no paperwork basically**. They still get a certificate, but it's a school certificate. That's why we are fighting nationally to get the QQI [award]' (Principal)*

- Lack of focus on **special schools** in senior cycle review.

*'It's in the **absence of a programme** [is the challenge] – there is no suitable curricular programme for these young people – the LCA wouldn't be appropriate' (Teacher)*

# The "Curricular Gap"

**LCA**: provided in a few schools – **very positive** views on supports (now through Oide).

> *'PDST support is super, we would be lost without them'*

- Certification very important.
- Providing real world skills: *'fantastic preparation'*.
- **BUT**:
  - Work experience is difficult – school staff support, employer resources, insurance.
  - Shorter school day creates challenges.
  - School buildings 'aren't fit for purpose'.
  - Challenge of running multiple programmes in one classroom.
  - 'Special schools don't have enough specialist teachers to do the Leaving Cert Applied'.

# The "Transition Gap" (HSE Profiling)

- The HSE profiling process was generally valued by parents and schools.

- Parents felt heard:

  *'I did find that process quite good because I was listened to, this is what I said I wanted and its what we got. ….They talked about all his needs, they went through everything…We got all the information we needed' (Parent)*

- But schools reported a "**disconnect**". HSE process ran "parallel" to the school's, not in partnership.

  *'From the Department's point of view, they have no real programme to prepare students for transition. So it is really up to each school and I know special schools have different needs but there is no real framework there for schools to work within' (Principal)*

- Some parents left waiting until May/June for a placement.

- Lack of school follow-up with post-school setting.

# The "Therapy Cliff" (Post-18)

- Specialised supports (OT, S&L, Psychology) **end abruptly at 18**, leaving families to navigate a new, under-resourced adult system.

*'The supports were non-existent. We were lucky... we would have over the years paid... OT, speech and language. Non-existent, it really was, it's a joke really. You'd have somebody seeing [name of YP] once every 6 weeks, there was no continuation of the person giving the service...if a new person came in you had to start from scratch'. (Parent)*

*'All of that is gone [specialised supports], everything is gone...the minute you hit 18 it's meant to be a miracle that everything is meant to be right, and to be honest it's when they are older you need more medical support' (Parent)*



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# The "Service Cliff" (Staffing Crisis)

- The biggest *barrier* to a smooth transition.

- A severe recruitment and retention crisis in adult day services.

- Placements are delayed or hours are cut.

*"They had the funding; they **just don't have the people** and the resources... they could only offer 3 days a week". (Parent)*

*"He still hasn't started there... they cannot find staff". (Parent)*

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# The "Transport Cliff"

- A simple, practical barrier that can stop a transition completely.

  *"If they have to get to a centre, it's [transport] going to be a huge factor and a lot of the time there isn't enough of a budget to put transport in place". (Transition teacher)*

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# The "Social Cliff"

A hidden loss. Parents noted that the rich social life of school (camps, classes) disappears.

*"Once they hit adulthood, there's no literature coming in your door ... Now is when they need social interaction. **They're adults just sitting in houses**".(Parent)*

# The "Paths": Post-School Experiences

# Positive "Paths": NLN & PLC

- Despite barriers, experiences on chosen pathways were largely positive.

- **National Learning Network (NLN):** Over 90% satisfied. Praised for supportive staff, making friends, and practical skills.

- **PLC:** Most students satisfied. Valued for high-quality teaching and personal development.

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# Lingering "Gaps" (Post-School)

- **Mental Health:** A clear need for more accessible socio-emotional and mental health supports across *all* settings.

- **Anxiety:** Over a third of PLC students were worried about their future.

- **Financial:** Nearly half of PLC students struggled with "fees or any other study costs" (46%).

- **Limited Opportunity** to engage with peers due to age gaps & overly prescriptive course structure (e.g. finding the course 'boring' and just following what they were told to do for NLN students)

The "Tracks":

What Can We Learn from Evidence?

(Policy Implications & Future Research)

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# "Bridging the Gaps" (Policy Developments since our study)

- Increasing awareness and availability of post-school educational opportunities, as well as links between them
  - NLN, ETB, service providers
- Valuable programmes like WALK - certainty in funding needed
- Slowly filling roles in Progressing Disability multi-disciplinary teams
- Pilot of career guidance in special schools
- Senior Cycle L1 & L2 curricula

Are these impacting on the ground?

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# Future Research

- **Opportunities for Co-created Research**
  - Increasing recognition of need for student voice and involvement in research at all stages
    - "Nothing about us without us"
    - UNCRPD
  - Ties in with wider developments around self-advocacy and self-determination for disabled people
    - HSE New Directions
  - More and more expertise to draw on, among DPOs/ disabled people and across the international literature
    - Steering groups and best practice
- Needs to be built into research from the very start, and properly resourced.

# Key Implications (For Schools)

- **Individualise Guidance:** Move away from "one-size-fits-all" guidance.

- **Break the "Funnels":** Actively promote high expectations for *all.*
  - Inform students about options for movement within and across pathways.
  - Pro-actively highlight DARE programme for all students who may be eligible, especially in DEIS schools.

- **Build Self-Determination:** Focus on self-determination and independent living skills to prepare students for adult life.

# Key Implications (For Policy)

- **Fix the "Service Cliff":** Address the staffing & resource crisis in adult day services. This is the *biggest* barrier.

- **Fix the "Therapy Cliff":** Create integrated pathways for therapies (OT, S&L) post-18.

- **Fix the "Transport Cliff":** Coordinate transport between Depts. of Ed, Health, and Transport.

- **Fix the "Data Gap":** Improve data linkage between school and post-school systems to understand and support transitions.

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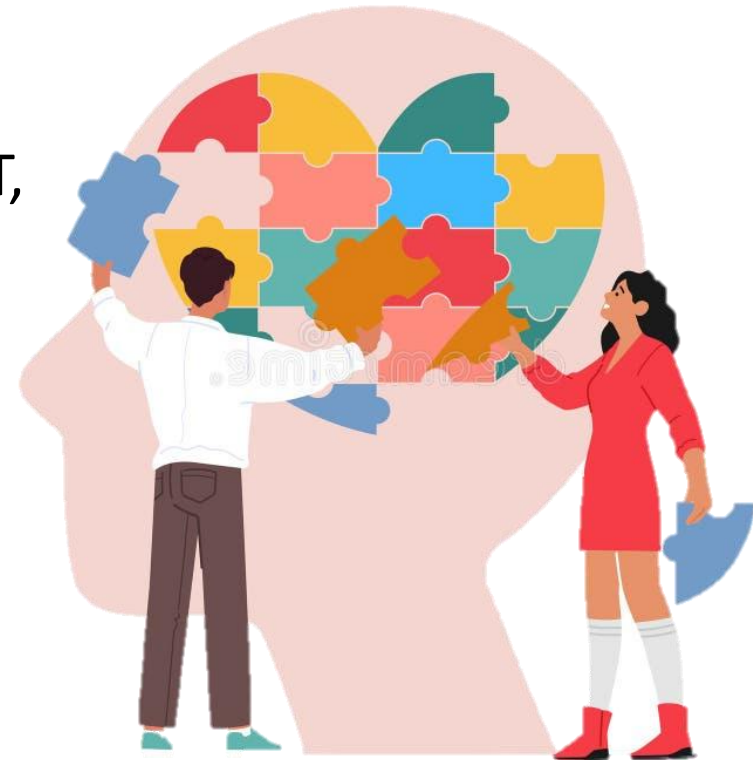
# Grounds for Optimism?

- There is a lot happening in this space!

- More entry routes, more diverse courses, more linkages between different settings and offerings

- Is it enough?

- Is it comprehensive?

  - Does it provide real choice for every student, whatever their disability, wherever they are in the country?

# The Journey Doesn't End at 18

- *"You don't want them just at home...we're not going to be around forever. They need to be set up ... they need long-term support.* **That's always a worry "***(Parent of Special School Leaver).*

- Our research provides the map. These new policies provide the 'tracks'. Now, we must resource them to turn a path of 'cliffs' and 'gaps' into a clear, supported journey for life."

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# Q & A

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