

Guidelines for supporting work experience for students with special educational needs and disabilities

For special schools and mainstream post-primary schools



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Welcome to the Guidelines!

Purpose

These guidelines are intended to support schools in providing work experience opportunities to students with special educational needs. This booklet should also be a support to students, their parents and to hosts of work experience in understanding the purpose, remit and learning opportunities that it can provide.



Table of Contents

- [Background & Context](#)
- [Work Experience within the context of curricula](#)
- [Curricula](#)
- [Recruiting Host Settings](#)
- [Practical Supports](#)
- [Practical Suggestions](#)
- [Best Practice](#)

Appendices

- [Appendix 1 - Profiling Sample](#)
- [Appendix 2 - One Page Profile](#)
- [Appendix 3 - Task Sheet for Host Setting](#)
- [Appendix 4 - Visual Supports](#)
- [Appendix 5 - Task Schedule](#)
- [Appendix 6 - Break Time](#)
- [Appendix 7 - Fire Drill Procedures](#)
- [Appendix 8 - Work Experience Progress Recording](#)
- [Appendix 9 - Student Reflection Template](#)
- [Appendix 10 - Student Showcase Sample Letter](#)
- [Appendix 11 - Policy & Practice Considerations](#)

Helpful Links



Background & Context

Research from the European Disability Forum (2023) demonstrates that the Republic of Ireland has the lowest rate of disability employment in the European Union at 32.6%. Additional Irish research demonstrates that only 14.7% of people with intellectual disabilities were in employment (Kelly & Maître, 2021).

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006), Ireland has been tasked with increasing employment rates of people with disabilities from 22.3% in 2016 to 33% by 2026. Working towards these targets, Irish policies and action plans such as the Comprehensive Employment Strategy (CES) (2015–2024), Make Work Pay Report (2019) and the Pathways to Work 2021–2025 Strategy were aimed at improving access and retention rates in Irish employment sector for people with disabilities.

The strategy indicates that:

“young people who do not make a successful transition from education to employment or further education are shown to suffer long-term scarring with a high risk of entrenched long-term unemployment” (p.62).



Background & Context

However, the strategies often failed to provide specific actions to support young people with disabilities, in particular, people with intellectual disabilities to access employment. Despite the range of strategies and initiatives in place, Irish literature suggests that persistent barriers to employment prevail (Scanlon et al., 2020) with the National Disability Authority (2025) suggesting that based on the failed implementation of the CES 2015–2024, there is no evidence to suggest that other policies will be successful.

Additionally, Irish research demonstrates that students in special schools are not transitioning into employment upon leaving school, with principals of 30 special schools indicating that of the 340 students that graduated special schools in 2021 and 2022, only 5 transitioned to employment (Connolly, 2025).

While high parental aspirations (McCall, 2015; Fullarton & Duquette, 2015) family background and the complexity of the special educational need or disability (SEND) (McCoy et al., 2025) play an important role in shaping post school aspirations, we must explore the role that curricula can play in fostering a high aspiration of employment during student's time in compulsory education.

However, research in Irish special schools shows that students are often not aware of employment options available to them and that there can be low parental aspiration for their child to be employed (Connolly, 2025).



Work Experience within the context of curricula

Work experience is a valuable opportunity for students to gain an insight into the world of work. While it may be well established in some schools through the specific senior cycle modules (e.g. QQI Level 3, LCA), it may not be widely accessible to students accessing other levels of curricula. In a survey of principals of Irish special schools, just over one third of the responding 29 principals indicated that work experience is an established transition preparation practice in their school (Connolly, 2025).

In order to support schools in facilitating work experience for all senior cycle students irrespective of the curricula accessed, this booklet is designed to highlight the valuable learning opportunities that can be provided by work experience and identify potential links to curricula within which it may not currently be embedded.

Aligning with Government policy drive to increase employment rates for people with disabilities, the NCCA Senior Cycle Programme Statement (2024) outlines that:

“Senior cycle should establish firm foundations for students to transition to further, adult and higher education, apprenticeships, traineeships and employment, and participate meaningfully in society, the economy and adult life.” (p.3)

And:

“The goal of the senior cycle programmes is to prepare students for life beyond school, enabling them to be lifelong learners and to live more independently.” (p.4)



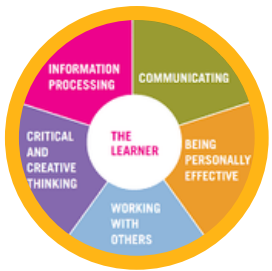
Curricula

The Senior Cycle Programme Statement (2024) provides schools with a solid foundation upon which to establish their own work experience practices that are suitable for their cohort of learners, supported by members of their school and wider community.



Junior Cycle

- Level 2 Learning Programmes – Preparing for Work & Living in the Community
- Level 1 Learning Programme – PLU4 – Being part of a community



Senior Cycle

- Senior Cycle Level 1 & Level 2 Programme Statement (2024)
- Transition Year Programme Statement (2025)
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) Statement (2022)
- QQI – NFQ Level 3 – Work Experience Module
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) – Vocational Preparation & Guidance Module



Curricula

Senior Cycle Level 1 & Level 2 Programme Statement:

A dedicated module for work experience is not currently available at senior cycle L1L2, unlike in QQI, LCVP, Transition Year and LCA programmes. However, work related learning can support the exploration of the key competencies of senior cycle:

- Thinking and problem solving
 - Being creative
 - Communicating
 - Working with others
- Participating in society
 - Cultivating wellbeing
- Managing learning and self

p.9



Building on the foundation of PLUs of Preparing for Work and Being Part of a Community at Junior Cycle L1L2, the Senior Cycle L1L2 Programme Statement outlines that:

“Work experience is an important aspect of senior cycle education as it supports many students on their progression pathways after senior cycle. Work experience is encouraged for students but is most beneficial when it is appropriate and meaningful for the student’s needs, interests and ambitions.” (p.14)

The following sections outline some good practice principles upon which schools can begin to establish their work experience practices.



Recruiting Host Settings

Host settings play a vital role in the successful establishment of work experience. While students must source their own work experience in modules such as those in TY and LCA, for students not accessing those programmes, it may be beneficial to have partnerships created with a range of host settings.

Contributing schools recommended the following in successfully recruiting host settings:

- Making in-person visits to suitable host settings is most effective, compared to phone calls, letters or emails.
- Approach larger settings that may be in a position to take on multiple students e.g. large retailers such as supermarkets.
- Approaching settings within one central base such as a shopping centre may support logistics of staffing, supervision and transport
- Where a host can take a limited number of students at one time, consider staggering placements and establish longer term partnerships. For example, the host may take three students for six weeks, followed by a new group of three students for the following six weeks.
- Consider approaching businesses that already have inclusive employment practices established and already employ adults with disabilities.
- Survey parents and members of the school community (SNA's, bus escorts, BOM members) to identify small businesses that may be interested in partnering with your school.
- Hold a "recruitment-fair" where local business can visit your school and students can showcase their skills and abilities.



Practical Supports

Practical ways in which hosts can support students are:

- Outline a list of tasks that may be suitable for potential students (Appendix 1)
- Identify a lead point of contact to liaise with school staff. Sometimes this may be someone whose role is human resources. It will be equally important to identify a key worker who the student will be able to liaise with during the hours of their work experience.
- Identify times of the day/week that may be quieter in the setting. It may be best to avoid times that are particularly fast paced/loud/overwhelming. For example, for a service station, it may be a lunchtime rush at the deli counter, the morning coffee rush, days where there are more deliveries than usual. Identifying quieter times may help the school and the student with scheduling.
- Hosts are encouraged to be flexible in supporting students in accessing suitable working hours.

Within the context of the TYPs (2025), placements of between two to four weeks are recommended. However, special schools/classes may find it more beneficial to establish work experience on a one day per week basis. For some students, this may be a full working day, for other students, work experience may be in more manageable time periods, for example, one hour per week.



Practical suggestions

Insurance

For many students, their 24-hour school insurance will provide sufficient cover for undertaking work experience provided it is an activity carried out with the full authority and knowledge of the Board of Management. Schools should check with their insurer with regard to cover for their students.



Transport

Depending on the location of the school, some schools may find it practical to partner with businesses that are within walking distance of the school setting. For others, this may not be feasible and where possible, schools could explore public transport routes. Some school policies may provide for other arrangements such as the use of a School Bus or other modes of transport.



Good Practice

- Adequate classroom-based preparation in advance of the work experience would support the student to gain maximum benefit from the work experience
- Align tasks with students' areas of interest and skill set – engaging with students and their families on profiling strengths and areas for development can be a beneficial resource in setting up work experience that is aligned with students interests and abilities. See Appendices for examples.
- Agree with the host setting a set of clear task expectations – clear beginning, middle and end of task – provide visual supports where possible – consider the use of picture jigs and work samples
- Clear communication procedures between the school setting and the host – identify a key person for communication re student absences, someone to deal with queries as they arise, etc.
- Clear behavioural expectations – norms for eating breaks, toilet breaks, point of contact
- Identify a specific space the student can access for sensory regulation and designated break time space
- Ensure adequate reflection time after each session at work experience to support the students processing (See Appendix 9)
- Share procedures for fire drills and other emergency procedures (See Appendix 7).



Appendices



Appendix 1

Profiling Sample

Using software such as WidgitOnline.com, students can create visual representation of the skills they have acquired. Independently or with support, a word can be typed into the software and a range of images will be provided for selection of the most suitable. In this way, students can select the image that best represents their understanding of the skill.

Take a look at Image 1 which one student in a special school created to capture her skills.



Prompt questions:

- What jobs can you do?
- What do you like to do at home?
- What food/drink do you like to eat/make?

These skills can then be presented to form the basis of a CV to share with a potential host setting.

Appendix 1

Profiling Sample



Name: _____



Jobs



I can



do:

|



Wipe table



Hoover



Laundry



Tidy



Up

Collect



Eggs



Feed

dog



Jobs



I



would



like

to



get better



at:



Empty Dishwasher



Make

Tea

Appendix 2

One Page Profile

In order to best support the student during the work experience, here are some key pieces of information they wanted to share with you.

My name is _____

I communicate by/through

My preferred working environment is

I work best when given a task that is

These are my skills that I have refined

These are some skills that I am still developing

On this work experience, my goal is to/my goals are

Some accommodations I may need are

Appendix 3

Task Sheet for Host Setting

In order to get a better understanding of the type of tasks that the student might engage in, and so we can ensure the tasks align with students' goals, please provide a brief outline of them below:

Indication of possible tasks

Back of house tasks:

Customer-facing tasks:

Examples might include:

Back of house tasks:

- Stock take
- Cleaning e.g. sweeping floor, dusting shelves, mopping floors, wiping surfaces
- Date rotation of stock on shelves
- Unloading cargo

Customer facing roles:

- Responding to customer queries
- Operating the till
- Carrying items to customer car
- Bagging groceries

Appendix 4

Visual Supports

Visual Support for Restocking Crisps



Seed Packets



Tomato



Sunflower



Green Bean



Sweet Basil



Sweet Pepper



Carrot

Appendix 4

Visual Supports



Chips



Burger

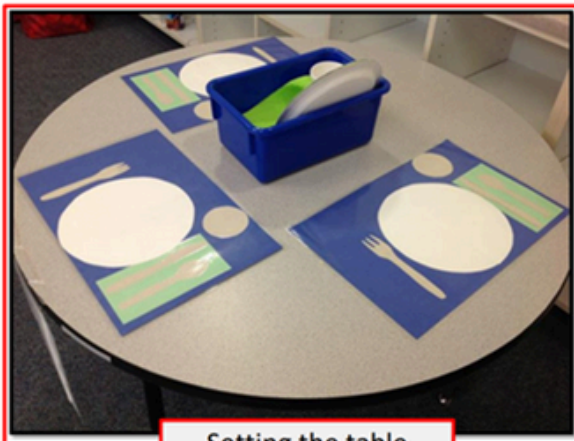


Drink



1 Straw

Functional Skills for Daily Living



Setting the table



Sorting cutlery



Christina Hannify, 2024

Appendix 5

Visual Supports – Task Schedules

Window/Mirror cleaning 		
1		Get a cloth
2		Get window cleaner
3		Spray in each square
4		Clean each square
5		Dry each square
6		Tidy up

Appendix 5

Visual Supports – Task Schedules

Mopping floor 		
1		Get mop and bucket
2		Bring bucket to tap
3		Fill with water to the line
4		Add one cap of cleaning fluid
5		Squeeze Mop
6		Mop floor

Appendix 6

Break Time

If I need help or have a question, I can ask

My break time is at



I take my break in the _____.

My break is for 15 minutes.



When my break is finished, I tidy up and return to work.

Appendix 7

Fire Drill Procedures

Fire alarm routine

	listen
	walk outside
	Assembly Point
	stop and wait
	Your fire warden will tell you when it is safe to go inside
	return to work

Appendix 8 – Work Experience Progress Recording

Date	Daily Goal	Task	Assessment Mastery/Emerging/ Yet to be Achieved (M,E,Y)
14/04	Follow a simple three step written instruction	Using the task sheet (First, next, then) for wiping counters	
21/04	Follow instructions using a picture jig	Follow picture of cutlery set up for lunch serving (one knife, fork and spoon in a pre-folded napkin)	
21/.04	Communicate needs to a familiar adult	Identify the point of contact and ask one question	
28/04	Categorise according to class/features	Sort stock into stock for fridge (perishables) and shelves	

Appendix 8 – Work Experience Progress Recording

Date	Daily Goal	Task	Assessment Mastery/Emerging/ Yet to be Achieved (M,E,Y)

Appendix 9

Student Reflection Template

Date:

Student Name:

Today I attended:

These are the tasks that I did:

Something new I learned/achieved today is:

Next time, I want to....

This is how I felt today after work experience...

Appendix 10

Student Showcase

Sample Letter

Dear _____,

We are writing to you from _____ school which is situated in your community. Our school caters for students with _____.

Our students have developed a range of skills that we feel would be very beneficial to your business and we would love to have the opportunity to showcase them at our upcoming Student Showcase/Recruitment Fair.

We would love to develop a partnership with your business for potential work experiences for our students as they prepare to transition to adult life. We understand that you may have questions about how best to support individuals with disabilities in your workplace, and we would be happy to address those concerns at our Student Showcase.

Date:

Time:

Venue:

Yours sincerely,

Appendix 11

Policy & Practice Considerations

Has our school considered what curricula we offer in senior cycle?	
Have we considered within our current senior cycle programmes, where work experience might support our students in achieving the key skills of senior cycle?	
In aiming for inclusion of all students in work experience, have we considered what age/stage of development our students should start work experience?	
Have we considered what preparatory work can support our students before they engage in work experience?	
Have we completed a risk assessment?	
Do we have a policy on work experience?	
Have parents been consulted on a work experience policy?	
Have students been consulted on a work experience policy?	
Have we engaged in student profiling to match work experience to their own development of post-school goals?	
Have we established links with a diverse range of host settings?	
Have we identified transport options for work experience, including the use of staff cars where this aligns with school policy?	
Have we considered supervision arrangements and staff ratios while students are on work experience?	
Have we included in our policy, the staff duties while on supervision of work experience? - Does this include an outline of the level of interaction expected between host setting, staff and student? - Does it outline the level of prompting/assistance/modelling that may be provided to the student by the supervising staff member?	
Have we considered protocols for safe transport and storage of medications while the student is on work experience?	
Have we considered our position if a host setting offers payment to our students?	
Have we considered the protocol if either the host setting or school wish to terminate the work experience partnership?	

Helpful Links

[STIAL Website](#)

[WALK PEER](#)

NCCA:

[Transition Year Programme Statement \(2025\)](#)

[Senior Cycle Programme Statement \(2024\)](#)

[Key Competencies of Senior Cycle](#)

[Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme \(LCVP\) \(2022\)](#)

[Leaving Certificate Applied – Vocational Preparation & Guidance Module](#)

Government policies:

[Pathways to Work \(2021-2025\)](#)

[Make Work Pay Report \(2019\)](#)

[The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030](#)

Notes:

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