

CASE STUDY



Breaking new ground? An analysis of the use of embedded occupational therapy in a postsecondary education programme for students with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

Background: Despite the growing diversity among students in higher education, nonprogression to postsecondary education persists for many students with intellectual disabilities with low completion rates for those who do progress. Research suggests that occupational therapy (OT) support can be extremely beneficial in assisting students. Less is known however about the impact of OT in higher education. This study aims to examine the use of OT embedded in a postsecondary programme for students with intellectual disabilities.

Methods: This study uses a scoping review of relevant literature and a qualitative analysis of OT working in a higher education programme specifically designed for students with intellectual disabilities in Ireland.

Findings: This paper highlights how the OT support within this programme uses a four-fold collaborative approach supporting students, staff, business partners and wider organisational structures in the university.

Conclusion: The analysis highlights the opportunities for collaboration between OT and curriculum developers, teaching and ancillary staff and students in higher education along with the significant OT input into work placements and internships with business partner mentors. Challenges in educating stakeholders to understand OT in the higher education environment would suggest a substantial need for further research.

KEYWORDS

inclusive postsecondary education, intellectual disability, occupational therapy, universal design for learning

Accessible summaries

- Many students with intellectual disabilities go to university now. Some students find university hard. They need help with university.
- We did research on one programme for students with an intellectual disability. This programme has occupational therapists. The occupational therapists help students.

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- Occupational therapy helps people with problems/challenges in university.
- Our research showed how occupational therapists can work with students with an intellectual disability in university.
- The study also documented how the occupational therapists work with other people to help the students such as lecturers, people who design the programme and business people.

1 | INTRODUCTION

International data indicates that access to postsecondary education has improved significantly over the past 20 years (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). However, despite the progress that has been made, the transition to tertiary education is still harder for young adults with disabilities than it is for other young adults and they continue to encounter significant barriers (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability [AHEAD], 2016), with the percentage of those completing postsecondary education being half the corresponding figure among students without a disability (Watson et al., 2013). It is known that access to higher levels of education offers greater employability and increased earnings and this also can apply to students with an intellectual disability (Hughson et al., 2006; Kleinert et al., 2012; Messenger et al., 2018; Migliore et al., 2009). The barriers encountered by students with intellectual disabilities within postsecondary education often contribute to this low completion rate and institutions looking to provide inclusive education should seek out the ways in which they can facilitate these students to experience mainstream pathways through their education and participate in the richness of campus life (Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

Occupational therapy (OT) has been used in the education sector internationally for decades and is generally valued by educators and policy makers (Bradley et al., 2021; Jirikowic et al., 2013). In the United States OT has been accessible within the schools system since the 1940s (Royeen, 1986), however they have been to the forefront in school based occupational therapy (SBOT) programmes which have been in existence since the mid-1970s when there was a profound change in the way OT was provided in education (Chandler, 2013). In the United States, 22% of school occupational practitioners work in school settings (Frolek Clark & Chandler, 2013). However, while there is much research on primary and postprimary OT support for students with disabilities, research on OT in tertiary education is lacking.

OT has a long history of engaging with the disability sector in Ireland (Dunne et al., 2018). Students with an intellectual disability are generally referred to OT outside of the school environment and, when in university, through disability services. However, this can create barriers of disclosure, and potential exclusion for students with an intellectual disability (Lindsay et al., 2018). Despite positive developments in primary and postprimary settings, in Ireland and internationally, embedded OT within higher education programmes is

lacking for students with intellectual disabilities and there is a distinct lack of research on the use of OT for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education in the Irish context.

The purpose of this study is to give an overview of the use of OT as a key factor in the delivery of a postsecondary education programme for students with an intellectual disability in Ireland. In particular it examines a programme for students with intellectual disabilities which offers OT as an integrated and collaborative support to students, staff, business partners and the wider university environment. It places this analysis in the context of pertinent research on OT in higher education and in particular, it looks at how OT is used on a 2-year accredited course. While the central focus is on the application of OT within a higher education programme, the paper will also examine the history and background of OT in the wider education setting and the provision for students with an intellectual disability in higher education and employment in Ireland and internationally, concluding with recommendations for practice and further research.

2 | METHODS

The aim of this study is to examine the use of OT embedded in a postsecondary programme for students with intellectual disabilities. The specific research question was, 'How does embedded OT provision support a postsecondary programme for students with an intellectual disability?'

Our research question emerged from a radically different approach to developing a postsecondary programmes within a higher education institution and a desire to understand whether employing the knowledge and expertise of an OT professional could make a significant contribution to this programme. In Ireland, postsecondary programmes for students with an intellectual disability generally consisted of rehabilitative type courses designed to support their transition to adult life. However, these programmes had limited engagement with opportunities for real-life employment and as a result many of these young people transitioned into adult day services rather than mainstream employment (De Souza et al., 2023). This situation was exacerbated by the lack of formal guidance provision in special schools (Department of Education, 2019).

We believed what is really required is a focus on the person first, enabling them to develop work aptitudes. (Berg et al., 2016) This a totally new environment in postsecondary for students with lots of

new rules and regulations governing academic life and social interactions. A focus on self-determination assists these students to positively navigate the full experience of university life (Schillaci et al., 2021; Seong et al., 2015).

To address this research question, the following procedures were followed;

1. A literature review was conducted examining;
 - i. The history of OT
 - ii. How OT provision has worked in education settings
 - iii. Education provision for students with an intellectual disability in Ireland
2. An analysis was carried out of OT provision embedded within a higher education programme for students with intellectual disability.

Ethical Approval was granted for this research from the relevant university body.

2.1 | OT and young people with disabilities in Ireland

OT is a person-centred health profession concerned with promoting health and well-being through occupation (World Federation of Occupational Therapy [WFOT], 2012) and offers support to people with physical, physiological and social challenges enabling them to live life to the fullest (Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland, 2022). Occupational therapists work with people and communities and aim to enhance their ability to engage in the occupations they want or need to, or by modifying the occupation or the environment to better support the person's engagement. In essence the primary goal of OT is to enable people to participate in the activities of everyday life (WFOT, 2012).

There has been an uncoordinated and unstructured historical evolution of disability services in Ireland with a heavy reliance on religious orders and voluntary bodies through asylums, residential homes and special schools (Pettigrew et al., 2017; Sweeney & Mitchell, 2009). The result of this evolution was a wide variety of organisations providing healthcare, childcare, education and therapy services to children nationally. The services were mainly based in nongovernment organisations (NGO's) such as Enable Ireland and St. Michael's House (Buchhorn & Lynch, 2010). However, in the early 2000s with the formation of National Disability Authority this healthcare provision was expanded nationally into community and primary care centres (National Disability Authority, 2020). Typically, in these clinic-based services, the work centres on the identification of a specific deficit or diagnosis. Drawing on a medical-model approach there is an emphasis from the outset on the child's difficulties or deficits (Carroll et al., 2013). OT has a long history of engagement within the health sector and disability services in Ireland and internationally, however, there is an increasing emergence of OT support services within the education sector.

3 | EDUCATION PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN IRELAND

The landscape of education for students with special education needs (SEN) has changed dramatically in Ireland over the past two decades with the introduction of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004) which made specific reference to inclusion and children with special education needs, stating that where possible, they should be educated 'in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs' (Government of Ireland, 2004). The result of this was a rapid increase in the numbers of children with SEN attending mainstream schools with numbers rising to 26.9% of the whole school population by 2018 (Cosgrove et al., 2018). The challenges of this rapid growth in students with SEN and what this means for education providers and students has been widely documented (Drew & Cahill, 2020; O'Sioráin & Shevlin, 2021; Rose et al., 2015). Combined with debate around the use of special classes within schools (Banks & McCoy, 2017) and the work of special needs assistants (SNAs) (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], 2018b), the education system continues to evaluate and evolve on how it is best placed to provide mainstream education to students with special educational needs.

3.1 | OT in an education setting—What do we know?

OT embedded and delivered in an education setting is a relatively new concept in Ireland. However, as inclusion in education becomes more mainstream there are emerging practices in Ireland and internationally of occupational therapists working with special needs students in mainstream education settings (Echsel et al., 2019). This sees focus shifting to more inclusive education approaches with the supports provided universally to students and subsequently used where and when they are needed. Traditionally in Ireland, occupational therapists have a history of working with children with special needs, however, they have not typically been employed directly to work in mainstream education (Lynch et al., 2020). This practice is now being challenged internationally and SBOT delivered in the school or education setting is an area of increased international attention. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT), highlighted the role of occupational therapists in primary, secondary or postsecondary education as one that is person-centred, solutions focussed and relevant to the student's education. This relationship operates from an ability rather than disability perspective and looks to encourage and support as well as identify and remove barriers (WFOT, 2016).

Currently in Ireland, occupational therapists are mainly employed by voluntary agencies and the Department of Health and Children but work across a wide variety of service settings that include early intervention programmes in special services, special classes in local schools, community children's therapy clinics, and children's hospitals

and residential units. In comparison to countries such as the United States, South Africa, Canada and New Zealand, occupational therapists are not employed by the Department of Education and Science or the Department of Social Services directly. Instead, therapists are assigned by the health sector to provide services to schools in their geographical area (O'Donoghue et al., 2021).

OT assessments are requested by the Department of Education to decide what educational assistance such as resource hours (one-to-one tuition), the provision of a special needs assistant to attend to care needs during the school day, a reader or scribe in state exams, or extra exam time when completing state exams is required. Occupational therapists are also consulted in environmental access assessments, recommending equipment for postural support in schools and recommending adapted furniture/equipment (Buchhorn & Lynch, 2010). This method is strongly based on diagnoses and runs counter to the current narrative around implementing an inclusive system where supports are embedded in the school and there is increased autonomy and discretion on behalf of the school principals as to how supports are allocated (National Council for Special Education et al., 2021).

Recent developments in Ireland include the pilot of a School Inclusion Model (SIM) commenced in 2018. This model provides tailored in-school therapeutic supports, such as speech and language and OT along with additional psychological and behavioural support and therapy services with the aim of achieving better educational outcomes for children and its implementation marks a new departure in resource provision (National Council for Special Education [NCSE], [2018a](#)). The provision of an in-school therapy service is a fundamental and integral part of the School Inclusion Model and the system was introduced as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) had carried out a consultation on whether Ireland should move to an inclusive education system (NCSE, [2019b](#)). Key elements of this model are frontloading of Special Needs Assistants in mainstream classes, increased training and professional development and increased support from the National Educational Psychological Service. As part of this pilot occupational therapists deliver supports to students within the school setting breaking the historical link with the need for assessment and diagnosis (NCSE, [2019a](#)). The initiative has been extended until the end of the 2021/2022 academic year and expanded into two new Community Health Organisation areas with some 80 additional speech and language and occupational therapist recruited to facilitate this (Department of Education and Skills, [2021](#)). At the time of writing the SIM undergoing an independent evaluation with the Economic and Social Research Institute of Ireland (Irish Government News Service, Merrion Street, [2020](#)).

3.2 | OT for students with intellectual disabilities in a higher education setting

The use of OT within a postsecondary setting for students with intellectual disabilities is a relatively recent development in Ireland

with little research available on its use or efficacy. The transition from secondary to postsecondary education is a time of multiple changes in occupation, performance and expectations and there can be many challenges in navigating the hidden curriculum of general university life (Berg et al., 2016; Carpenter, 2021). OT working from a strengths-based ability perspective aims to provide students with intellectual disabilities with the skills, practices and adaptive behaviours to engage in a meaningful way with university life and enjoy the self-determination and opportunities that their nondisabled peers take for granted. Some research has indicated that adaptive behaviour skills can be key indicators of postsecondary education programmes (Torres et al., 2023) and subsequent employment success for young people with an intellectual disability and that OT may be a critical service for these students (Berg et al., 2016; Leonard et al., 2016).

Currently in most universities in Ireland as in the case of primary and secondary education, individual students may be referred through disability services to work with an occupational therapist around an identified issue or need. This will require the student to register with disability services and also disclosure on the part of the student (Quinn et al., 2014). However in an international context OT as a wraparound service to students with intellectual disabilities is acknowledged as a useful tool for students while navigating their postsecondary education to develop the necessary skills to not only attend but flourish in their postsecondary programmes (Berg et al., 2016; Carpenter, 2023; Torres et al., 2023).

3.3 | OT support in a higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities—An example

This programme for students with an intellectual disability is in existence since 2016 and is a level 5 certificate aligned to the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (Quality & Qualifications Ireland [QQI], 2021). It is based within the School of Education of a Higher Education Institute in Ireland (Figure 1).

Comprising of a 2-year course with an intake of 10 students each year, the students are required to take modules totalling 120 credits

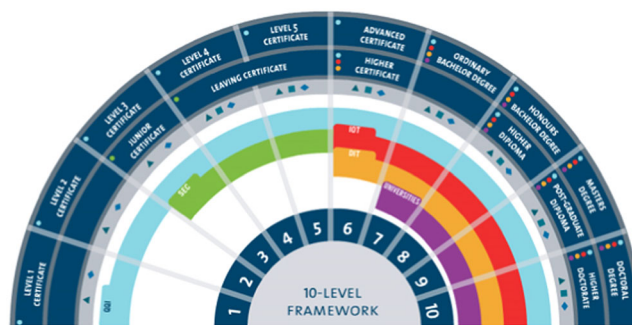


FIGURE 1 National framework of qualifications, Ireland 2022.
Source: Quality and qualifications Ireland.

(where one credit is equal to 20–25 h of student work) which are taught over four academic terms of 12 weeks over a 2-year period.

Each semester students partake in nine of modules. First year students attend 3 days per week in semester one increasing to 4 days per week in semester two. Second year students attend 4 days per week increasing to 5 days in semester two. Students are assessed annually with each year accounting for 50% of the course grade. Assessments are based on universal design for learning principles and consist of participation, homework, exams, presentations, skills based assessments and portfolios/journals.

A unique feature of this programme and the department is the relationship with 'Business Partners' who provide opportunities for meaningful work placement and 6-month internships for students and graduates. Another unique feature of the programme and the department is the provision of OT as an integral and embedded part of the programme.

OT support has traditionally been located in disability services within the university. This support service was set up in response to the growing number of students requiring practical support to manage the demands of university life. However, in the initial planning for a programme for students with an intellectual disability it was identified by the head of disability services and the current director of programme that an embedded OT element was crucial for the viability and success of the course. Currently this embedded OT support in a higher education setting for students with intellectual disabilities is only found in Ireland.

OT support in this programme is guided by models of practice in working collaboratively with students; these are the Person-Environment-Occupation Model (Law et al., 1996).

3.4 | OT in practice for students with intellectual disabilities in higher education

The OT support within this programme has a four-fold role; delivering key modules on the curriculum along with person-centred individual support for students, business partner mentoring and wider support for and collaboration with staff and the university at large.

Focussing on the development and wellbeing of the students, the OT support encourages self-determination and looks to identify and remove barriers or empower students to overcome these barriers. This work seeks to make transitions to the workplace a positive and self-empowering experience for the graduates. OT also educates and supports the business partners and mentors within these organisations to provide an optimal environment for students on work placement or graduates taking part in an internship. As part of this multifaceted role, occupational therapy support on the programme works on a pre-emptive and collaborative basis, with students, other staff members and the wider university and business community. While the university provides varied supports to support student participation and integration, such as the 'peer to peer' or 'student to student' mentor role with a view to promoting informal advice and friendships. Occupational therapy as a professional role adheres to a

code of practice with the associated structures and boundaries in place. However, although it is a professional role, its structure within the programme allows for the students to build a rapport with the occupational therapist allowing for growth and learning on both sides across the duration of the university experience (Figure 2).

3.5 | OT and curriculum delivery

An integral element of this embedded OT model is the delivery of three modules over the 2-year programme by the OT team. Consisting of personal and self-development, preparing for transition and work placement, the core principles of person, environment and occupation (Law et al., 1996) have informed the development of the OT modules. These modules aim to empower students with the capacity for self-determination and the confidence to assert control over their own lives, fostering the potential for positive, self-directed outcomes (Table 1).

The OT led modules are developed using the principles of universal design for learning. universal design for learning acknowledges the diversity among students and is an educational approach that reduces obstacles while optimising the learning experience for all students. It empowers students by offering choices that fuel their interests and give them a sense of autonomy (CAST, 2010). Multiple means of engagement, representation and expression inform the modules of this programme and how they are delivered (Quirke & McCarthy, 2020). The curriculum is delivered in multiple formats

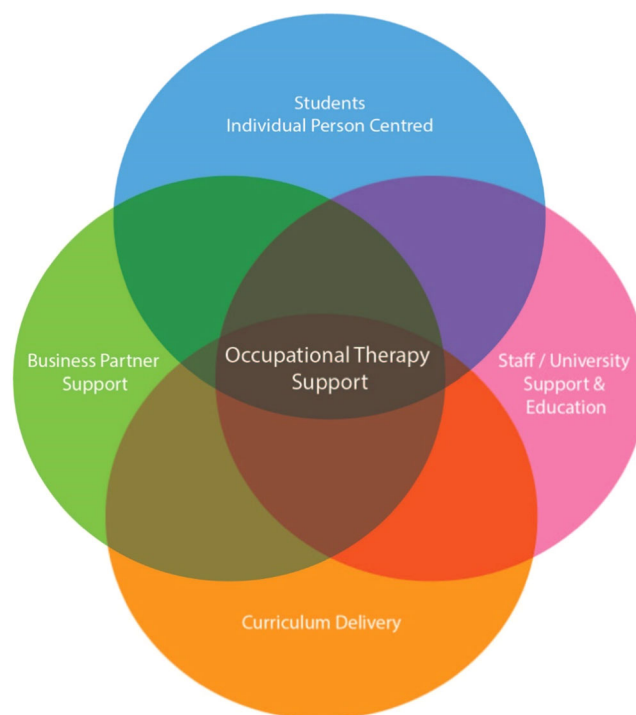


FIGURE 2 Four-fold approach to occupational therapy in a higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities.

TABLE 1 Examples of student centred occupational therapy support.

Jane's story	Jane came to university because she wanted to be like her sister who also attended the same university. Initially Jane found it difficult to navigate her way around the university as her classes were in different buildings and she did not like to walk through crowds. This was picked up by the occupational therapist who spoke to Jane about her difficulties. Jane discussed with the occupational therapist how she struggles with orientation along with passing through crowds as it can overwhelm her. Jane, like all her classmates, was offered the opportunity to work along with the occupational therapist to address these challenges. The occupational therapist, through assessment and observation identified that it was the challenge of managing the crowds on the main campus that needed to be worked on first as it was causing Jane a lot of anxiety. Also, there would be no need to work on orientation until the management of the crowd was considered. Jane and the occupational therapist tried two different approaches to address the crowds, one was to arrive to the class earlier in the day and sit outside on the table and chair where she could do some work, or to take an alternative route to the class which required going outside the campus and in through another door. Jane decided to take the second option as she did not want to add the pressure of needing to get to the room before the crowds to her day. With a few practice walks across several weeks, Jane came to understand the route so that she was able to do it comfortably. She also chose to use the route in and out of the university every day as it helped to reduce her anxiety and conserve her energy.
David's story	David had completed his first year in his course and was now in second year. David's lecturers highlighted to the occupational therapist that there was a gradual decline in his attendance. When the occupational therapist met with David, he disclosed that he was struggling to manage his anxiety related to an upcoming presentation assessment and that he feared public speaking. Through further assessment with the occupational therapist, it soon came to light that David's anxiety was not primarily related to public speaking. His anxiety stemmed from the uncertainty in knowing what questions his classmates or lecturers might ask him at the end of the presentation along with a lack of confidence with knowing how to prepare for the presentation. Occupational therapy worked with David on his habits and routines related to learning and supported him to practise presenting what he had learnt. It also allowed him to practise being comfortable with uncertainty by asking him different questions related to his topic. This work supported David to understand the process to building knowledge in a way that suited him. When David was practising his presentation, the Occupational Therapist observed that David needed to move around to support his concentration. They worked together in practicing this movement and provided David with something to hold in his hand to further assist. David completed his presentation and went on to complete two further presentations reflecting with the Occupational Therapist on any changes that may need to be made each time. David has since presented for his internship and has adopted some movement strategies of his own to aid his focus.

working to the UDL principles using text, visual aids such as graphics and animation along with oral delivery. Students are encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge using a variety of methods such as written, oral presentations, artwork or PowerPoint in person or within a virtual learning environment, allowing students the choice to adapt how they engage with the material using integrated assistive technology software or added software.

Collins (2014) argued that the underlying aims of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in developing 'expert learners' mirrors the approach OT aims to achieve with its clients, such as the ability to solve problems or resolve performance issues. In placing the person at the centre of the process, OT recognises the diversity that can exist across student groups and the range of adjustments that can be made within the environment to support engagement in education and engagement in the broader university life (Collins, 2014). Equally OT can support educators to continually adapt and reflect on UDL practice by bringing the understanding of the person factors (strengths and barriers), that may enable participation in the classroom.

The modules delivered as part of the OT led work, focus on student growth and development adopting approaches such as Hammell's Occupation, Capability and Wellbeing Occupational Therapy Framework (OCWOTF), which centres on capabilities, occupations and wellbeing (Hammell, 2023). The module in the first year titled Personal & Self-development, works with the student to identify what is important to them as they begin their postsecondary student journey with emphasis on understanding themselves, their capabilities and the

current demands and expectations of university life. The second-year module, titled preparing for transition dovetails with complementary themes, Introducing the world of work, working with others and identifying the existing or required skills to engage meaningfully in professional environments. The work placement module enables students to engage in work experience with one of the business partners associated with the programme. Students can apply the theory and skills from the previous OT modules in a real-world environment.

Several 'Independent Study' sessions form part of the student timetable to offer the students an opportunity to complete their university work in a supported environment. These sessions also provide the occupational therapist an opportunity to work alongside the students should they wish, to support them in identifying any difficulties they may have and where a change may need to be made. Often this change can be made at the environmental level, requiring content to be adapted or communication to be improved.

Collaboration between the OT team and the academic team is a large part of this curriculum focus. Occupational therapists contribute to curriculum development and programmatic reviews engaging with academics on maximising timings, assessments and cross assessments between modules—offering alternatives or highlighting requirements for students with additional needs. Once again the OT view complements and aligns with the universal design for learning approach, offering students choice and autonomy in how information is presented to them, how they engage with learning and how they demonstrate what they have learned.

3.6 | Person-centred support for students

Over the last few decades there has been an ongoing transformation of services for people with intellectual disabilities, progressively moving from a system-centred approach to a person-centred approach working with the individual, rather than enforcing one size fits all structure (Kaehne & Beyer, 2014).

Each student is assigned an occupational therapist who will work with them on an individual basis using a person-centred approach. The occupational therapist uses an adapted version of the university student profile which is a person-centred OT self-report assessment developed for use with students since 2011. This assessment is currently undergoing a review with a new title called the student occupational performance profile (Lombard et al., 2023; Nolan, 2011). The assessment enables both the student and the occupational therapist to discuss all aspects of student life and aids in identifying areas of strength and challenges for each student. Each student continues to have access to an occupational therapist for the duration of their university experience and work placement allowing for a trusting relationship to develop. The OT process involves both the student and occupational therapist working collaboratively to identify goals that the student wants to work on. As each student is an individual the goals can vary in meaning for the students with examples being; wanting to make friends with their classmates, becoming more organised in their management of their course work, wanting give a presentation to a room full of people or to get better at speaking up for themselves in the university context with fellow students and staff. Often the goals sit outside of the course focusing more within the broader student life, for example, wanting to be able to use and access the library, wanting to make friends outside of the immediate class group and wanting to join a society. When looking at the goals mentioned some of them would appear to be relatively straightforward however it is the underlying factors that the occupational therapist can work on such as, building confidence to approach new people, supporting the understanding of knowing how to use the university services and practicing this. It also recognises that the strategies that may support some people to stay organised don't support others or, identifying that the change needs to happen outside of the person in the environment. Often the barriers to participation can be removed by bringing awareness to the barriers within the environment and supporting a change in attitudes outside of the student. As the student and university changes so too can the goals. This allows for change to take place across the duration of the students journey in university and to support the student into the working environment.

3.7 | OT support for business partner mentors

As part of the programme all students engage in 8 weeks work experience during the second year of the programme and upon completion of the programme are given the option to engage in an internship with one of the business partner companies affiliated with

the centre. Work placement has enabled the students to engage with meaningful workplace experiences in a variety of companies and across a range of disciplines. A key element of OT support has been the preparation of both the students and of the business partners in advance of commencement and the support and advice available during the student's work placement or the graduate's internship. A pathways coordinator works closely with the OT team at all stages of this process.

During the on-boarding process an occupational therapist meets with the business partners and carries out a work environmental assessment which considers all aspects of the environment including the space, the sociocultural aspects of the environment, any risk that may need to be considered, location and much more. Working collaboratively with the business partners the occupational therapist will offer advice on whether roles are suitable or whether they need to be adapted, based on the strengths of the students and the skills profile conducted during the students work in the OT modules and one-to-one meetings. They conduct a work role assessment, examine the position, compare with the student's ability and provide advice on what accommodations may be needed. The occupational therapist advocates for the student in the physical and organisational environment highlighting potential barriers and offering solutions or alternatives.

Each business partner nominates a mentor within the company to work with the student. The occupational therapist works closely with the business partner mentor to assist and advise. As part of this an OT led mentor training programme is offered to the Mentors developed with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) in Ireland and based on the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) model (AHEAD, 2022). All mentors are required to complete this online training in advance of a student or graduate joining the organisation. Regular feedback is encouraged, and the resultant information is used to improve the centre's support to both students and business partners.

3.8 | Education and support for staff and wider university

Within the School of Education or wider university environment OT provides advice support and guidance on working with students with intellectual disabilities. Dissemination of information and highlighting of inclusive practices and inclusion on campus and beyond forms part of this fourth arm of the embedded OT model.

Scheduled lecturer meetings during term time provide an opportunity for the occupational therapists to provide context and information on individual students to the lecturing team through their person-centred work with individuals. This collaboration between teaching staff and OT provides teaching staff with an opportunity to work through any blocks or challenges they are encountering in class and bring back new perspectives to their engagement with the students. It also provides the OT team with feedback from teaching staff on issues that are coming up which can be further assessed by

the OTs. The result is a more focussed and informed lecturing and OT team working toward an improved programme for the students.

Advice on best use the physical space in the classroom or lecture hall, how to retain the attention of the class and work on understanding in class behaviours is given as part of the OT team and lecturer relationship. The education of teaching staff is a priority for the OT team acknowledging the effect of a positive classroom experience on overall university life for students.

OT also advocates and occasionally accompanies students when engaging with services on campus, assisting students to navigate the landscape of student services such as disability services, IT, library services, security and catering. As OT is an allied health professional role, they have good knowledge and understanding of the other health services on offer within the university such as, counselling and medical services, and may support students to contact and use make use of these services, and in some cases accompanying students on visits to these services.

4 | SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of educational policy and practice in Ireland and internationally. However, a shared understanding of what constitutes inclusive education has remained elusive (Banks, 2023). The debate on inclusive education has begun to embrace many types of diversity and questions have been raised about current systems of educational provision (Ainscow, 2023). Children and young people who have an intellectual disability have tended to remain on the margins of educational mainstream policy and practice (Carpenter, 2023). As a result, this population has not been considered for greater levels of educational inclusion until comparatively recently (Shevlin, 2023). Inclusion in mainstream schooling remains the first step and it is very evident that mainstream postsecondary educational opportunities for this population has been considerably lacking (Aston et al., 2021).

The lack of progression of students with intellectual disabilities to higher education and completing postsecondary education highlights issues with the current educational environments and their capacity to include students with intellectual disabilities. Both within the curriculum and the physical and organisational campus of university, students with intellectual disabilities are met with barriers and universities looking to be more inclusive should seek out ways to facilitate students with intellectual disabilities allowing them to experience the normal pathways through their university life.

This analysis of an embedded OT support within a post-secondary programme for students with intellectual disabilities examined the structure of a collaborative and ability-based model aiming to successfully contribute to the academic, social and employment prospects of students with intellectual disabilities within higher education. Examining the application of OT in postsecondary education and in particular for students with intellectual disabilities, this example highlighted the synergies between the OT model and universal design for learning, which

could be of benefit to the whole university community working within the social model of disability, proactive rather than reactive, providing universal rather than targeted supports. The analysis reveals that the OT support provided employs a four-pronged approach to assist with students, teaching staff and curriculum, business partners and larger university organisational structures.

While this analysis provides valuable insights into the early stages of this emerging area of practice, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitation associated with the small scale of the programme. Despite this, there is enough evidence of success and an identified need for policy makers and practitioners to further examine the use of embedded OT support for students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary programmes. Furthermore, a thorough investigation of this intervention from an external viewpoint could provide a more complete comprehension of its effectiveness and implications. This may involve a comparing of postsecondary programmes with and without an integrated OT element to assess their efficacy. Such a comparison could offer valuable insights, potentially guiding the consideration of this model for emerging programmes catering to students with intellectual disabilities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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