

16+ - Post Secondary Formation for Persons with Intellectual Impairments (and Learning Difficulties)

The needs of young people with intellectual impairment are very complex and lifelong. These needs do not stop after this population reaches 16 years of age. As students with intellectual impairment progress through life there is considerable diversity within this group, and opportunities for social inclusion, continuing education, skills training, employment and normal living facilities can only be effectively provided on a basis of a sophisticated assessment of individual needs.

Planned inclusion for this population has been in place for the past twelve years in infant, primary and secondary levels. In fact the NMC commits the state to ensure that ALL students are provided with the best possible educational experiences irrespective of their social realities and abilities (NMC, p.30). Parents have been promised a brighter future and have invested heavily in this ideal only to be told that in fact their son/daughter's education is not going to be valued and that there are no appropriate provisions in place after secondary school. While research has indicated the norms of development, it is a well-established fact that not all students develop at the same rate. Students should be allowed time and be given the necessary support for their personal development (NMC, p.31). Although the Ministry of Education purports to be highly committed in ensuring that schools become diverse and inclusive communities of learners, this falls flat in post-secondary experience. The provision of post-secondary opportunities for the students and their families to make informed choices will contribute significantly to more positive adult outcomes for these students.

In line with the EU Council Directive **2000/78/EC**, the Equal Opportunities (Persons with Disability) Act 2000 and also policy in the European Union emphasise the need of developing a person's employability and acknowledge their development and growth as crucial factors. The International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Development Decade 8/states that particular efforts should be made to include persons with disability in the development process and that effective measures for prevention, rehabilitation and equalisation of opportunities are therefore essential. Positive action to this end would be part of the more general effort to mobilise all human resources for development. Unless education, social services and health agree on a framework for conceptualising these students' needs, the system will continue to offer a fragmented and inappropriate post secondary experience. The following areas are deemed of great importance for this population: the meaning of going to college, the development and meaning of college friendships, the importance of being in a co-educational environment, the negotiation of an academic programme and the enrichment of the lives involved.

Equal Partners took it upon itself to visit and to experience different educational, vocational and supported living settings for persons with intellectual impairment. The Province of Modena in Reggio Emilia was chosen, as it was indicated as being a world leading example in this field. A group of professionals and parents went up to Modena where they were assisted by Dott. Lucia

Onfiani, Coordinator of the Disability Area at the Multicentro Educativo Modena “Sergio Neri” (MEMO) that makes part of the Comune of Modena. Dott. Onfiani not only extended her support to Equal Partners Foundation and the University of Malta, but also to Malta as a country. The foundation of their services rests heavily upon the coordination between education, social services and health and that all their procedures are dictated by law.

Present Post Secondary Situation

Both Government and NGOs are offering less than appropriate programmes for this population. Whilst the government promotes inclusive education and an inclusive society, it is very evident that this is only a slogan and not a policy. Being a real part of a community is a very special skill all of its own. The rights and responsibilities of community members need to be learnt and practiced. Students placed in inclusive school settings are doing exactly this with no continuity after the age of sixteen, where they are being placed into segregated settings or expected to find employment without further preparation. Experience indicates that most students of this age-group are not yet equipped to face the world of work, let alone this population who takes longer to develop their skills. It is general knowledge that many persons with disabilities, and more especially with intellectual impairment are denied employment. So this is unrealistic to be expected out of a 16-year old with intellectual impairment. Further inclusive education is required. During the 2003 European Day for People with Disabilities, Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou stated that “the way people and governments respond to the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities is a yardstick of a society’s progress”. At this moment in time Malta really needs to re-examine its values with regard to the rights and needs of persons with disability.

1 Presently at MCAST there is a unit that provides support to students with learning difficulties and hearing impairment, however one can observe that there is insufficient planning. It is evident that the only programme which could be seen as a pathway to employment is Pathway to Independent Living Course at MCAST, which we have been informed, will not be offered this coming scholastic year. This programme falls short of what these students deserve, for the following reasons:

1. It is run on a three-day week
2. No work placements
3. Segregated group – no inclusion to speak of
4. No individualised programmes
5. No assessment procedures
6. Little collaboration with the other Institutes inside MCAST, supporting professionals, educators, and parents
7. Poor educational environment

The people delivering the programme are aware of these shortcomings and had planned for a full week and work placements, but this has not been approved to date and in fact the course is being discontinued.

The main aims of the Pathway Course were:

- Provide further education for students with intellectual impairment
- Equip students with independent skills

- Provide vocational training to increase their employability
- Create an inclusive environment where students attending the Pathway Course would feel they belong to the community and be able to share resources during learning and recreation

The Pathway to Independent Living Course started in 2002 and the students attended the course on a five-day week programme. The proposal for the Pathway Programme made by the Inclusive Education Team and the Director of Information and Support Unit was to establish a programme where vocational training (given that the programme was running in the only vocational college in Malta) would be provided.

The proposal had suggested that the students would be given “tasters” of various vocational skills offered by the different Institutes in the form of separate modules. During the second year the students would choose a trade of their own, making the choice with the support of the family, staff and other working groups involved. At this point the course was to be offered on a three-day a week basis and the other two days a week were to be used for vocational training. However this never materialised.

The Pathway Programme featured for a couple of years in the MCAST prospectus and website but it was not even mentioned for the last two years.

To date 34 students have attended the Pathway Course. The age group was 16 to 23, the eldest age represented by the students coming from special schools. It is interesting to note that school-leaving age changes for those students attending special schools. Most of the students attending the Pathway Course had attended mainstream education.

2 Out of frustration the Down Syndrome Association together with the Eden Foundation have embarked on a two-year Transition Programme for six students with Down syndrome. Funding for this programme is largely by the families; perhaps this is why so few students opted for this programme. Bank of Valletta has recently offered to sponsor this programme. We need to bear in mind that between 12 and 14 children with Down syndrome are born in Malta every year.

3 Equal Partners Foundation runs two separate once-weekly evening ‘stepping - out’ programmes offering a variety of activities and environments. Seventeen young people with intellectual impairments between the ages of 11 and 28, split into two distinctive age groups, learn how to use public transport, money, appropriate conduct in different situations, travel abroad, and have fun with peers. The parents together with the Foundation finance these programmes.

4 The other option is years of segregation, first in a special school and then in an adult training centre, which will prove detrimental to the development of these youngsters and to their participation in society. This segregation will result in the creation of further prejudice and a perpetuation of a mentality of exclusion. Inclusive schools “...are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all...” (The Salamanca Statement, p.ix)

Proposed Plan of Action by Equal Partners Foundation

The following is the proposal by Equal Partners to provide a serious and viable post-secondary formation for persons with intellectual impairment. It is based on our experience and practice, and on our observations of centres of excellence in Europe, especially our recent experience in Modena.

The plan we are proposing involves two interrelated phases. Phase 1 has its roots in the last two years of secondary school and serves to support the student towards social and emotional autonomy whilst exposing him/her to a variety of work environments. Phase 2, which takes on from Phase 1, is based in a Vocational Institute of the student's and parents' choice.

Phase 1

- 1 At the end of Form 3 all secondary students with a statement of special educational needs are to be reassessed and an Individual Transition Plan designed and implemented.
- 2 The transition plan for all school leavers with a statement of special educational needs, starting from Form 4, needs to address the following:
 - Assessing skills in relation to community living, work related skills, further training needs, independent living needs
 - Aptitudes for further training, to work placement, to independent living
 - Vocational training
 - Functional academics
 - Communication skills
 - Life survival skills
 - Workplace behaviour
 - Work experience
 - Establish goals
 - Develop and pursue those goals
 - Access resources to realise these goals
- 3 A stepping-out programme is to take place from the school the student attends. Students will also participate in projects such as Scoops and TEAMS within Young Enterprise together with other students from the school.
- 4 Inclusive secondary school placement between the ages 14 to 16. During the first year of the Transition Plan the student will attend on a once weekly basis to a work experience placement and the other four days will be at school. During the second and final year the work experience placement will be upped to twice a week and the student will attend school on the remaining three days. During their work experience placement the students will be accompanied by their facilitator.

The secondary school will play a central role in the delivering of the programme and will coordinate and monitor the student's participation and progress and will liaise with all the outside support networks. The school together with the student and the parents will decide on the educational path the student will take up in post secondary education, resulting in the completion and certification of the above Foundation Course in Social & Practical Skills.

The culmination of these two years exploring would be suitable course selection, and application to and acceptance of the above certification, without having to sit for the formal aptitude tests which are currently in place.

Phase 2

- 5 MCAST / ITS / Higher Secondary and/or any other appropriate post secondary experience. Whilst we are aware and in favour of the move by the Upper Secondary School to remove the existing entry requirements of 2 SEC passes for their Revision Course, we feel that with further exploration this course can be easily extended to include and support the learning needs of this population. We are suggesting two years training in a particular field with the aim of employability and independent/supported living. Examine all the Foundation Courses being offered and study ways that these young people can access them. At the same time these youngsters will continue their programme towards autonomy and self-determination.
- 6 The course will be designed and run over a 5-day week linked with 1 day a week work placement.
- 7 The following sectors are suggested for work placements – offices, tourism, catering, leisure industry, caring, health, hair care and beauty, artisan, religious sectors, agriculture, garden centres, waste management services, cleaning industry, retailing, and factories.
- 8 Summer work placements to be attended by all students after the first year of post secondary, which will be assessed to form part of their completion certificate and profile.
- 9 The investment in the concept of providing a tutor, who is an older student who will follow the student with an educational statement both inside and outside the post-secondary experience against remuneration.
- 10 Follow-through assessments – need to focus on the young person’s abilities and the difficulties encountered by the individual.
- 11 The development of a programme to support the access to the different pathways for students with moderate to severe disabilities, whilst enabling them to participate in college activities. The programme will also be responsible for the monitoring of the students’ progress, the finding of work experience placements, and the recruitment and training needs of student tutors. Within each Institute there should be a coordinating team of people who are specialised in teaching students with diverse abilities. This team will work hand in hand with the modules instructors and liaise with outside support such as NGOs.
- 12 Variety of open programmes such as social cooperatives, sheltered workshops, etc. to cater for a variety of needs – for some students there will be the need of a personal assistant in order for them to attend and to access these programmes. Educators who will design, implement and monitor the activities will run these programmes.
- 13 The Institute of Community Services to be explored towards the possibility of having persons undergoing training in this Institute to support and care for those students having

- profound and multiple disabilities. These open programmes are always to be within an inclusive setting of the students' or parents' choice.
- 14 The formal education system to adopt a system of assessment geared towards providing certification based on objective criteria pertaining to the attainments of individual students with intellectual impairment.
 - 15 The students' post-secondary stipend will be offset against their pension

Further to Phase 2

- 16 Employment linked to the young person's profile.
- 17 Lifelong learning to continue even in employment, young adults to be given the chance to enhance and expand their capabilities e.g. literacy, numeric skills, computer knowledge and community and life skills.

Proposed Pilot Study

1. Selection of students – (a) Students having completed the Pathway Programme 2006-2007 (Approx. 8 students)
(b) Students having finished Form 5 (Scholastic Year 2006-7)
2. Profiling of students
3. Selection of Institutes
4. Selection of work/care placement
5. Transition programmes for all students with intellectual impairments starting from Form 4 to document the achievements and attainments, which will be recorded on the students' school leaving certificate.

Training

1. The training of personnel in all fields in MCAST, ITS, Higher Secondary, and Health.
2. The training for and the implementation of student tutors.
3. The training for and the implementation of peer preparation programmes across all Institutes.

Conclusion

As Equal Partners Foundation we would like to emphasise that parents of students with intellectual impairment need to work together nationally to promote the rights of their children. As an organisation that promotes and fosters partnerships with parents we do and will formally support them in this very unjust situation. We are also willing to help with any training needs and designing and implementation of the above.