Pathways to Inclusion

Exploring Higher Education Opportunities for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Northern Ireland

Feasibility Report | April 2025

Prof Ken Gibson, Prof Noel Purdy, Kirsty McCrudden, Dr Emilia Symington, Mark Shields

Executive Summary

Inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disabilities has gained considerable momentum internationally over the past two decades as part of a broader international rights-based movement towards greater equity and social inclusion. For instance, Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the UK in July 2009, asserts the right of persons with disabilities to access education "at all levels", including tertiary education, on an equal basis with others, to facilitate the "full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth" and to offer them the opportunity to "participate effectively in a free society". This rights-based imperative has spurred the development of innovative inclusive higher education programmes that break down traditional physical and attitudinal barriers to participation for students with intellectual disabilities. International evidence confirms that such inclusive higher education yields many benefits for the graduates themselves (in terms of fostering greater independence and self-confidence, and reducing dependence on social welfare), but also confirms the positive impact on their employers, the economy and society at large. However, Northern Ireland currently lacks any inclusive higher education programme specifically designed for students with intellectual disabilities. This represents a significant failing in inclusive policy and practice but also presents a significant opportunity for Northern Ireland to address this deficit and learn from international best practice in the developing area of inclusive higher education.

This unique study, funded by the Northern Ireland Office, as a part of the Step-Up Programme, administered by the Department for the Economy (NI), therefore set out to critically examine the feasibility of creating an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland, emulating the model of provision at the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, based in the School of Education at Trinity College, Dublin. This model was chosen because it has already demonstrated remarkable success in recruiting, supporting and equipping its graduates with enhanced life skills, confidence, independence and employment outcomes.

The study adopted a qualitative, mixed-methods approach, combining documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews and expert consultations. Key programme documents from the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (e.g., curriculum outlines, strategies and partnership brochures) and relevant national and international policy and research reports were first critically reviewed. In parallel, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Centre's academic staff, programme administrators and advocates. These interviews provided first-hand insights into the operations, success factors and challenges facing the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, while also gathering staff expertise on how this model might be adapted to the Northern Ireland context. A triangulation strategy was used to integrate findings: information from documents and interviews was cross-validated to ensure a comprehensive and reliable understanding of feasibility. Data were analysed thematically, focusing on core feasibility criteria (relevance, operational requirements, funding, policy compliance and cultural fit). This approach ensured that conclusions drawn are well-supported by multiple evidence sources and contextualised for Northern Ireland.

The key research findings include the following:

- There is a clear moral and legal imperative for an inclusive higher education pathway in Northern Ireland to address the current gap in provision. Such a pathway would address a current longstanding deficit in policy adherence to commitments under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and, crucially, would fulfil the Northern Ireland Executive's own recently published Programme for Government[1] commitment to "ensure that we are developing the learning opportunities and skillsets of our young people in line with Northern Ireland's economic objectives and ambitions, ensuring clear pathways of opportunity for further training, education or employment at post 16 and post 19." (p.39).

- Stranmillis University College is uniquely positioned to lead the development of an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland due to its established expertise in special and inclusive education, its strategic commitment to widening participation, and its extensive partnerships with employers, mainstream and special schools, and government agencies. With a long-standing reputation in teacher education, particularly in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and inclusive pedagogy, Stranmillis has the academic expertise, institutional resources, and senior leadership support required to implement a transformative higher education model for students with intellectual disabilities.

- The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities represents a well-established, financially sustainable and quality assured model of inclusive higher education practice. The Centre is an integral part of the university, is committed to the academic, social and personal development of its students, and provides tailored individual support through inclusive pedagogy, assistive technologies and on-site occupational therapy support. The Centre's two-year course leading to the Certificate in Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice is subject to the same level of benchmarking and quality assurance as any other course at the university. Another key feature of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities is the facilitation of supported work placements where students participate in a structured internship with one of the programme's business partners, typically one day per week in the final semester. This "bridge to employment" is considered an essential element of the curriculum, providing students with real-world experience in a mainstream work environment.

- The report includes a detailed analysis of the financial feasibility of establishing an inclusive higher education programme based at Stranmillis University College, Belfast. The analysis concludes that the successful implementation of such a programme is contingent upon a sustained and dedicated government funding commitment. It is recommended that the Northern Ireland Executive adopts the blueprint of the Republic of Ireland's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 4 Phase 2) policy, through which the Irish government has committed over €11 million to fund inclusive higher education programmes across 11 institutions, projected to support at least 150 students with intellectual disabilities annually. The report concludes with a comprehensive implementation strategy and accompanying risk assessment for a three-year pilot, comprising an initial year of planning,

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recruitment and validation, followed by the enrolment of the first cohort of students through a two-year cycle to graduation.

- It is concluded that any costs incurred in the establishment of the programme will be more than offset by the numerous benefits to the students themselves in terms of skills development, confidence, independence and employability, as well as concomitant benefits to employers, the economy and society at large through the students gaining accredited qualifications and meaningful employment.

The evidence from this study clearly demonstrates that implementing an inclusive programme for higher education in Northern Ireland, emulating the success of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, is incontestably feasible, with no insurmountable challenges identified. While a number of risks and challenges are identified, such as securing stable funding and ensuring employer participation, it is argued that these can be mitigated through careful planning, government investment and a phased approach.

In conclusion, this feasibility study strongly supports moving forward with implementation, recommending a pilot programme as the next step toward establishing a permanent, scalable pathway to higher education and employment for people with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland.

Easy Read Summary

Over the last 20 years, there has been growing support around the world for higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. This is part of a larger movement to ensure equal rights and inclusion for all people. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which the UK joined in 2009, says that people with disabilities have the right to access education at all levels. This includes university, to help them reach their full potential, feel dignified, and be part of society. This has led to new, inclusive university programmes that break down barriers for students with intellectual disabilities.

Evidence shows that inclusive higher education helps students by making them more independent, confident, and less reliant on social welfare. It also benefits employers, the economy, and society. However, Northern Ireland currently doesn't have a higher education programme specifically for students with intellectual disabilities. This is a big gap in policy, but also an opportunity to create a programme and learn from successful models in other places.

A special study, funded by the Northern Ireland Office, looked into whether a similar programme could be created in Northern Ireland. The study used the successful programme at Trinity College Dublin, called the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, as a model. This programme has been successful in helping students gain life skills, confidence, and employment.

The study used several methods to gather information, including reviewing documents and interviewing experts from the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities. This approach helped the team understand what would work in Northern Ireland. The study found several important points:

- **Need for Inclusive Education**: There is a strong moral and legal reason to create an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland. It would help meet the commitments made by Northern Ireland's government to provide better opportunities for education and employment for young people.

- **Stranmillis University College is Well-Positioned**: Stranmillis University College is a good place to lead this new programme because of its experience in inclusive education, strong partnerships with schools and employers, and support from its leadership. The college already has the resources needed to develop a successful programme.

- **The Example of Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities is Successful**: Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities is well-established and has an excellent reputation. It includes tailored support for students, such as inclusive teaching methods, assistive technologies, and occupational therapy. The programme also includes work placements that help students gain real-world experience and helps them to find jobs.

- **Financial Feasibility**: The study looked at the costs of starting an inclusive higher education programme at Stranmillis University College. It found that government funding would be essential for success. The study suggests that Northern Ireland could follow the example of the Republic of Ireland, where the government has committed funding to support inclusive higher education programmes.

- **Benefits of the Programme**: While there will be costs, the benefits for students, employers, and society will far outweigh them. Students will develop important skills, gain confidence, and increase their chances of getting a job. Employers and the economy will also benefit from having a more inclusive workforce.

The study concluded that creating an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland, based on the successful Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, is definitely possible. While there are some challenges, such as securing funding and employer support, these can be addressed with careful planning and government investment.

In conclusion, the study recommends moving forward with a pilot programme to establish a pathway to higher education and employment for people with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland.

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PART 1: Inclusive Higher Education and the TCPID model

1. Introduction

This feasibility study examines the potential development of a post-19 inclusive education programme for learners with an intellectual disability, emulating the success of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) at Trinity College, Dublin. It evaluates how an inclusive education programme for people with intellectual disabilities could be established, considering curriculum adaptation, funding requirements, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with local policy and legal frameworks. The scope encompasses a review of the existing TCPID model at Trinity College Dublin, comparison with international inclusive higher education initiatives, and an analysis of Northern Ireland's context, including current gaps in provision and capacity for change. The primary objectives are to determine the viability of establishing such a programme in Northern Ireland and to outline strategic steps for implementation if deemed feasible. A key component of this feasibility study is the institutional leadership of Stranmillis University College, which is committed to spearheading this initiative due to its long-standing experience and expertise in special and inclusive education, its alignment with the Department for the Economy's widening participation goals, and its highly respected and long-standing strategic positioning within Northern Ireland's higher education landscape.

1.1 Why Stranmillis University College is Leading This Initiative

Stranmillis University College is uniquely positioned to lead the development of an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland due to its established expertise in special and inclusive education, its strategic commitment to widening participation, and its extensive partnerships with employers, schools, and government agencies. With a long-standing reputation in teacher education, particularly in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and inclusive pedagogy, Stranmillis has the academic expertise, institutional resources, and leadership backing required to implement a transformative higher education model for students with intellectual disabilities.

Its mission to expand educational access and promote social inclusion directly aligns with the urgent need to address the systemic exclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities from Northern Ireland's higher education sector.[2] Senior leadership at Stranmillis has demonstrated a strong commitment to resourcing and driving initiatives, ensuring that programmes are designed, implemented and sustained to a high standard. Additionally, Stranmillis' strong community networks provide an essential bridge between education and employment, reinforcing the programme's emphasis on graduate employability and long-term economic inclusion. Critically, as no other higher education institution in Northern Ireland currently offers an equivalent programme specifically for those with intellectual disabilities, this presents a unique opportunity for Stranmillis to establish itself as a leader in inclusive higher education, setting a precedent for the wider Northern Ireland and wider UK higher education landscape in terms of advancing educational equity.

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[2] Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning (2016) *Inquiry into post-special educational need (SEN) provision in education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland.* Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly.

It is also important to note that the relationship between Stranmillis University College and Trinity College Dublin is both mature and profound, spanning at least 15 years. This tried and tested relationship was established through the pioneering cross-border work of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS)[3] established in the wake of and in the spirit of the Belfast ('Good Friday') Agreement and co-funded by both governments north and south since 2003. The strong partnership has been built on the foundation of joint award-winning SCoTENS research projects, collaborative publications (journal articles and book chapters), doctoral examination and guest lectures involving the Director of Research and Scholarship at Stranmillis University College and the Director of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities. The collaboration in this current project therefore represents the latest in an important and well-established partnership. By harnessing its academic, strategic and employer engagement strengths and building on its existing strong relationship with Trinity College's School of Education, Stranmillis is best placed to design, pilot, and sustain a first-of-its-kind higher education pathway that offers genuine educational and employment opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities.

1.2 Inclusive Higher Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Inclusive higher education for students with intellectual disabilities has gained momentum internationally over the past two decades as part of a broader movement towards lifelong learning and social inclusion. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[4] (ratified by the UK in July 2009) asserts the right of persons with disabilities to access education "at all levels", including tertiary education, on an equal basis with others (House of Commons Library, 2024).[5] This human rights imperative has spurred the development of specialised post-secondary programmes that enable students with intellectual disabilities to attend college, often in modified or supported learning environments.

International research consistently demonstrates that such educational inclusion yields significant benefits and that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who attend post-secondary programmes have higher employment rates and incomes than those who do not. They also gain social networks, communication, and self-advocacy skills through campus life participation, contributing to greater independence and quality of life (Everyone Can Work, 2016).[6]

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[3] Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) see https://scotens.org/
[4] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) (2006) *Article 24 - Education*, available at: https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/article-24-education
[5] House of Commons Library (2022) *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7367/
[6] Everyone Can Work (2016) *The role of university education in employment and other outcomes for people with intellectual disability*, available at: https://www.everyonecanwork.org.au/resources/evidence/13-the-role-of-university-education-in-employment-and-other-outcomes-for-people-with-intellectual-disability/

1.3 International Comparisons

In countries like the United States, inclusive higher education has become an established (though still emerging) part of the educational landscape. Over 310 Higher Education Institutions in the US now offer programmes for students with intellectual disabilities, a small fraction of the total number of colleges, but one that is growing (PACER Center, 2023).[7] These range from dedicated certificate courses (often 2-4 years in length) to initiatives allowing students to audit regular university classes with appropriate support. Federal legislation (e.g. the Higher Education Opportunity Act 2008)[8] and funding initiatives (such as the Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities, TPSID, grants) have catalysed this growth.[9] Similarly, in Australia, programmes like Uni 2 Beyond at the University of Sydney have gained recognition for enabling students with intellectual disabilities to immerse in university life and take classes as auditing students, supported by mentors, an initiative that won a national education award for its innovative approach to inclusion.[10]

These international developments illustrate a clear trend: Higher Education Institutions are increasingly seen as appropriate and beneficial settings for learners with intellectual disabilities, provided that the curriculum and support are suitably adapted.

1.4 Inclusive Programmes in Higher Education in the UK

By contrast, Northern Ireland (and the UK more broadly) is falling behind in this respect. At present, no university or university college in Northern Ireland offers an inclusive higher education programme specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, and access for this cohort in the UK remains extremely limited (Carpenter, 2023).[11] Carpenter's (2023) analysis notes that universities in the UK are largely "inaccessible" to students with intellectual disabilities, aside from a few "alternative non-matriculating programmes" that exist on an ad hoc basis. This represents a significant gap when viewed against the backdrop of the UNCRPD commitments and the positive outcomes seen internationally.

Carpenter concludes that this is a civil rights issue and notes that the view that people with intellectual disabilities lack the capacity to participate satisfactorily in higher education is being increasingly challenged, including by some within the UK. Carpenter adds however that sourcing funding for such programmes in a climate of financial austerity is inevitably "a complex and daunting problem" (p.116). Another major stumbling block to progress in fully embracing students with intellectual disabilities is the fear that the university will be seen to be "dumbing down" their high standards and jeopardising their reputation for intellectual rigour. Citing the example of TCPID, Carpenter notes that "the more secure the academic institution is in its status as being highly

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[7] PACER Center (2023) *College options for students with disabilities.* Available at: https://www.pacer.org/transition/learning-center/postsecondary/college-options.asp

[8] United States Congress (2008) *Higher Education Opportunity Act (Public Law 110-315, 14 August 2008).* Available at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-110publ315/pdf/PLAW-110publ315.pdf

[9] U.S. Department of Education (2025) *Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities*, Office of Postsecondary Education, available at: https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants-special-populations/grants-students-disabilities/transition-and-postsecondary-programs-for-students-with-intellectual-disabilities/

[10] Centre for Disability Studies (CDS) (2025) *Uni 2 Beyond,* available at: https://cds.org.au/education-training/u2b/

[11] Carpenter, S., (2023) *The Future of Inclusive Programs in Higher Education in the UK for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Theory, Praxis, and Paradigms, Current Issues Bulletin*, Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York.

regarded, the less threatening it is to introduce inclusive programs and options" (p.117). Carpenter adds that the movement needs to gather support from the grass-roots right up to government / ministerial level, but central to any debate has to be the voice of people with learning disabilities themselves, aligning with the motto for inclusive research: "Nothing about us, without us."

1.5 Gap in NI's Higher Education and Employment Pathways

The absence of a specifically tailored higher education programme in Northern Ireland has knock-on effects on life trajectories for people with intellectual disabilities. Many do not have the opportunity to continue structured learning or to experience the personal growth that comes with higher education participation. This educational gap is closely linked to subsequent employment outcomes. Longitudinal data, published in 2024 but based on 2021 employment figures, highlights Northern Ireland's persistent disability employment gap, with an overall employment rate of 38.3% for disabled people compared to 85.9% for non-disabled individuals (NISRA, 2024). NISRA also noted that higher education significantly reduces the disability employment gap. For disabled people with degree-level qualifications, the gap was 33.8 percentage points, whereas for those with no qualifications, it widened to 50.0 percentage points.[12]

1.6 Rationale for Adapting the TCPID Model to NI

The introduction of an inclusive higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland modelled on the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities in Northern Ireland aims to address this gap. The rationale is multi-faceted:

Rights and Inclusion

This approach affirms the right of people with intellectual disabilities to access all levels of education, aligning Northern Ireland with international human rights standards. It challenges the assumption that higher education is only for those who follow conventional academic pathways and instead promotes a more inclusive vision of campus life, one already embraced in Ireland, where over €11 million has been invested to expand higher education courses specifically for students with intellectual disabilities.[13] Northern Ireland can follow, ensuring equal access to higher education through inclusive, well-supported programmes.

Empowering Individuals

By providing a high-quality curriculum in an inclusive setting, such a programme empowers students with intellectual disabilities to develop academically, socially, and personally. TCPID's core mission is to remove barriers and enable students to reach

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[12] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2024) *Disability employment gap in Northern Ireland 2021*. Available at: https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/vitalStatistics/Disability-employment-gap-2021.html

[13] Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024, *Minister Harris announces introduction of transformational higher education courses for students with an intellectual disability*. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/dee21-minister-harris-announces-introduction-of-transformational-higher-education-courses-for-students-with-an-intellectual-disability/

their potential as "independent adults" and contributors to society.[14] Adapting this model in Northern Ireland would similarly aim to give participants a sense of belonging, higher self-esteem, and the chance to pursue further goals, whether to access employment or to gain personal enrichment, that may otherwise be unattainable.

Improving Employment Outcomes

A key driving motive is the belief, supported by evidence, that inclusive higher education can significantly improve employment prospects for people with intellectual disabilities. TCPID was founded on the principle that providing education in a university context, combined with targeted career development, would help break the cycle of unemployment and welfare dependency that many in this group face. Indeed, as noted, graduates of such programmes are far more likely to obtain paid jobs than their peers who do not have the benefit of post-secondary education.[15] Policymakers in Northern Ireland have previously set strategic goals to increase disability employment rates: evidence from the success of the TCPID model confirms that enabling access to higher education is a powerful means to that end.[16]

Addressing an Identified Need

Families, educators, and advocacy organisations in Northern Ireland have long highlighted the lack of tertiary options for school leavers with disabilities. Each year, students with special educational needs (SEN) in Northern Ireland complete school, often at the age of 19 if in special schools, and face very limited choices thereafter. Pupils with SEN are eligible to remain in school until the end of the school year during which they turn 19.[17]

Advocacy groups, including the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, have called for an extension of statutory support beyond the age of 19 to improve access to further and higher education.[18] Adapting the TCPID model would help to address this current deficit by creating a structured programme that these students could aspire to and enrol in, rather than abruptly ending their educational journey. It would also complement existing further education and training provisions by offering a distinct pathway focused on an inclusive learning programme alongside work preparation and placement, that results in a qualification and meaningful employment.

Leveraging Existing Models – Partnerships

The TCPID programme provides a proven template, including curriculum, teaching methods, a partnership approach, and support structures, that can be adapted to the context of Northern Ireland. This reduces the uncertainty of starting a programme from scratch. Trinity College Dublin and other institutions have amassed experience (and

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[14] Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities, *About TCPID*, Trinity College Dublin. Available at: https://www.tcd.ie/tcpid/about/

[15] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2024) *Disability employment gap in Northern Ireland 2021*. Available at: https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/vitalStatistics/Disability-employment-gap-2021.html

[16] Department for Employment and Learning (2015) *Employment for People with Disabilities: Consultation on a Strategy for Improving the Job Prospects and Working Careers of People with Disabilities in Northern Ireland*. Available at: https://niopa.qub.ac.uk/bitstream/NIOPA/914/1/employment-strategy-for-people-with-disabilities.pdf

[17] National Autistic Society (2025) *Transitions in Northern Ireland: Leaving School*. Available at: https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/transitions/northern-ireland/leaving-school

[18] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2024) *Special Educational Needs and Disability*. Available at: https://www.equalityni.org/sen

research data) on what works and what pitfalls to avoid, which could be invaluable through a partnership or consultancy arrangement. The feasibility of adaptation is strengthened by this potential for knowledge transfer.

Policy Alignment and Momentum

Implementing an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland aligns with calls for overarching policy reforms to ensure early planning and structured support for students with special educational needs (SEN) as they transition into further and higher education. The Advancing Equality for Children with Special Educational Needs Policy Position Paper (ECNI, 2024, 4.35–4.38)[19] emphasises the urgent need for clear transition pathways, additional services, and statutory protections for young people with SEN.

This is further reflected in the new SEN Delivery Plan for 2025-2030[20], launched by the Minister of Education on 13 January 2025. Entitled *Truly Equal, Valuably Different*, the Delivery Plan is focused predominantly on compulsory education, however the importance of collaboration in relation to providing clear pathways of opportunity to-wards post-compulsory education, training and employment is clearly stated:

> *"Collaboration across the Education Sector including all sectoral representatives, Executive Departments, Local Government, the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Private Sector will underpin delivery of this SEN Reform Agenda. Cross Departmental collaboration is key, particularly with the Departments of Health, Economy, Communities and Justice, to ensure access to the appropriate data to inform planning of the schools' estate, address workforce requirements and enhance support and interventions, as well as ensuring clear pathways of opportunity to move into adulthood, further training, education or employment for school leavers with SEN at post 16 and post 18/19. (p.2)*

Additionally, the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2024-2027 (*Doing What Matters Most*)[21] sets out nine key priorities, among which features "Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs". In particular, the Programme for Government notes the importance of cross-departmental collaboration in achieving this objective and notes further that such collaboration and access to appropriate data "will also ensure that we are developing the learning opportunities and skillsets of our young people in line with Northern Ireland's economic objectives and ambitions, ensuring clear pathways of opportunity for further training, education or employment at post 16 and post 19." (p.39).

Global Trends in Inclusive Higher Education

Globally, and in Ireland, there is growing momentum for inclusive education. As of 2024, the Irish Government has committed over €11 million to expanding higher education courses for students with disabilities across eleven institutions. By emulating the TCPID model, Northern Ireland has the opportunity not only to progress alongside

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[19] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, (2024) *Advancing Equality for Children with Special Educational Needs: Policy Position Paper*, June 2024.
[20] Department of Education NI (2025) *SEN Reform Agenda.* https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/sen-reform-agenda
[21] NI Executive (2025) Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'. https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most

these advancements south of the border but also to establish itself as a leader within the UK, where such initiatives remain rare.

Barriers Identified by the Equality Commission NI

Despite these international strides, systemic barriers continue to hinder access to higher education for students with SEN in Northern Ireland. The ECNI report (2024) highlights the following key challenges:

- Lack of structured transition planning (paragraph 4.35) – Policy reforms are needed to ensure early planning for SEN students as they move through education.

- Limited post-school opportunities (paragraph 4.36) – Young people with SEN require support to pursue higher education and employment, with additional services identified as necessary.

- Absence of statutory support beyond age 19 (paragraph 4.37) – Policymakers should consider extending legal obligations to ensure continuity of support.

- Risk of exclusion due to age limitations (paragraph 4.38) – Current policies risk leaving young people without educational or support pathways, exacerbating existing inequalities.

Additionally, the Independent Review of Special Education Needs Services and Processes (2023)[22] criticises the lack of sufficient data on the number of SEN students in the Northern Irish system, leading to delays and challenges in securing appropriate placements (ECNI, 2024).[23]

1.7 Conclusion

A Case for Reform: Towards Inclusive Higher Education in Northern Ireland

By adopting an inclusive higher education model inspired by the TCPID approach, Northern Ireland can:

- Address long-standing inequalities by implementing structured pathways for students with special educational needs.

- Bridge existing policy gaps by introducing statutory obligations that encourage further and higher education institutions to proactively support students with intellectual disabilities.

- Align Northern Ireland with international best practice, establishing the region as a leader in inclusive higher education within the United Kingdom.

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[22] Department for Education (Northern Ireland), *Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes: Final Report*, March 2023. Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/SEN%20Review%20Report%20For%20Publication%2023%20May%202023.pdf
[23] Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, (2024) *Advancing Equality for Children with Special Educational Needs: Policy Position Paper*, June 2024.

This reform would respond effectively to global and Irish policy developments, directly addressing critical gaps in transition planning and institutional accountability as highlighted by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

The establishment of an inclusive higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland therefore represents a significant and timely opportunity to address existing disparities in educational access and employment pathways. The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) model provides a validated, internationally recognised framework that is consistent with human rights commitments, evidence-based practice, and regional policy objectives promoting disability inclusion.

Stranmillis University College is uniquely positioned to drive this initiative forward, given its specialist expertise in inclusive education, strategic leadership, and robust collaborations with government agencies, educational partners, and employers. Implementing this adapted TCPID model would ensure that students with intellectual disabilities have genuine opportunities to engage fully in higher education, enabling substantial academic, social and professional growth. Such an investment aligns strategically with Northern Ireland's broader goals of enhancing employment rates, empowering individuals, and fostering social inclusion. Given the growing international momentum, including the Irish Government's substantial financial commitment to similar programmes, Northern Ireland now has an exceptional opportunity to position itself as a leader in the advancement of educational equity for people with intellectual disabilities.

2. Methodology

This feasibility study employed a qualitative, exploratory design, drawing on multiple data sources to examine the potential implementation of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) model in Northern Ireland. The overall approach combined extensive document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and expert consultations. While guided by established qualitative research frameworks (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018), the study's methods were necessarily flexible and integrative, reflecting the practical realities of creating a new higher education model where no equivalent centres currently exist in the region.

2.1 Rationale for a Flexible, Integrative Approach

The feasibility of replicating TCPID in Northern Ireland presented a unique methodological challenge. Traditional evaluative or comparative frameworks were of limited utility, given that no comparable centres operate locally. Consequently, the study design evolved in response to new insights as they emerged, emphasising an iterative and adaptive approach:

- *Emergent Inquiry* - Because no established examples of an inclusive higher education centre existed in Northern Ireland, the research plan developed over time. Semi-structured interviews with TCPID staff, business partners, and potential NI-based stakeholders revealed implementation barriers and opportunities that were not fully evident at the outset.

- *Iterative Document Review* - The scarcity of directly comparable models meant re-engaging repeatedly with relevant policy and funding documents. As fresh themes arose, such as the importance of embedded occupational therapy, the research team returned to the existing legislative and organisational frameworks to assess how these features could be integrated in Northern Ireland.

- *Stakeholder-Centred Focus* - With no precedent to underpin a "one-size-fits-all" framework, stakeholder insights formed the primary data source. An open-ended interview style, combined with ongoing consultations, captured practical knowledge about day-to-day operations at TCPID and about local feasibility concerns.

- *Continuous Refinement* - Rather than adhering rigidly to a pre-defined blueprint, data collection and preliminary analysis overlapped. This cyclical process ensured the final recommendations were grounded in real-world constraints, spanning funding, governance, and operational considerations. By incorporating these adaptive elements, the study could fully capture the complexities of establishing a first-of-its-kind centre in Northern Ireland. The flexible, iterative approach, driven by repeated document analysis and continuous stakeholder engagement, underscored the novelty of the proposed model while enhancing the robustness of the feasibility findings.

2.2 Document Analysis

The research team reviewed a comprehensive range of internal and external documents related to the TCPID programme and the Northern Ireland context. Internal TCPID documents (provided by Trinity College Dublin's TCPID) included curriculum outlines, programme handbooks, staff presentations, partnership brochures, and monitoring reports, which together detail the course structure, content, support services, and operational model. External documents reviewed encompassed Northern Ireland policy and legislative frameworks (e.g., strategies on higher education access, disability inclusion, employability initiatives), funding model reports, and comparative research on inclusive higher education internationally. This document analysis provided an essential context and fact-base, for instance, understanding TCPID's accreditation of a Level 5 certificate for its current programme, its funding sources, and documented outcomes, as well as the policy environment and needs in Northern Ireland. By comparing TCPID documentation with Northern Ireland's educational and legislative landscape, the study identified alignment or gaps that would need addressing for local implementation.

A comprehensive review of both internal and external documentation formed the initial evidential base for the feasibility assessment. Materials from TCPID (curriculum outlines, handbooks, staff presentations, partnership brochures, and monitoring reports) provided in-depth information on the model's operational structure and accreditation. Meanwhile, a broad range of Northern Ireland policy and legislative documents were examined to gauge alignment with local frameworks.

Because the report references multiple policy sources in different sections, no single list consolidates them all. However, the main Northern Ireland-specific policy documents include:

- Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning (2016) – *Inquiry into post-special educational need (SEN) provision in education, employment and training for those with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland*[24]

- House of Commons Library (2022) – *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UK Implementation*[25]

- Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2024) *Advancing Equality for Children with Special Educational Needs – Policy Position Paper*[26]

- Department of Education/IPSOS (Northern Ireland) (2023) – *Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Services and Processes*[27]

- Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfE NI) (2023) – *Northern Ireland business; activity, size, location and ownership*[28]

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[24] https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/employment-and-learning/reports/inquiry-into-post-special-educational-need-sen-provision-in-education-employment-and-training-for-those-with-learning-disabilities-in-northern-ireland2.pdf
[25] https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7367/CBP-7367.pdf
[26] https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/SEN-PositionPaper-Full-ECNI2024.pdf
[27] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-special-educational-needs-services-and-processes
[28] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-business-activity-size-location-and-ownership-2023

- Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfE NI) (2025) *Skills Barometer 2023-2033*[29]

- NI Direct (2025) – *Skills in Demand*[30]

- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2024) – *Disability employment gap in Northern Ireland 2021*[31]

Where the report also references wider or international policy materials (e.g., UNCRPD, Irish government initiatives, UK Shared Prosperity Fund), these are noted throughout but not centralised in one list. Consequently, the feasibility study synthesises relevant legislative and strategic insights from multiple policy documents to assess how an inclusive higher education model could be adapted to Northern Ireland's context.

2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the document review, the study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from TCPID. In total, several interviews were carried out. These included TCPID leadership and staff, and key professionals involved in the programme's operations. The interviews provided qualitative insights into governance, mentorship structures, employer engagement, and student outcomes.

Interview Participants and Key Areas of Focus

The following table summarises the key interviews, participants, relevant sections of this report, and core data collected.

Date & Time	Interview Participants	Relevant Report Sections	Key Data Collected
Tuesday 4th February, 10:30 AM	Dr Owen Barden (Academic Lead), Prof. Conor Mc Guckin (Director, TCPID), Jenny Banks (Research and Policy Coordinator)	Research, Curriculum & Qualifications, Feasibility Assessment	Governance and academic oversight of TCPID; quality assurance and validation processes; institutional relationship with Trinity College Dublin; lessons for NI adaptation.

[29] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-barometer-2023-2033
[30] https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/skills-demand
[31] https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/vitalStatistics/Disability-employment-gap-2021.html

Tuesday 4th February, 12:30 PM	Angela Mazzocco (Teaching & Learning Assistant)	Student Profile & Admissions, Mentorship & Accessibility, Implementation Strategy	Student profile (disability levels, selection criteria); student support structures, mentorship, and accessibility provisions; student progress monitoring and assessment mechanisms.
Tuesday 4th February, 2:00 PM	Marie Devitt (Business Partnerships Manager)	Employer Partnerships, Training & Capacity Building, Adaptation Insights	Business and employer engagement strategies; employer perspectives on skills development and placement outcomes; success stories and challenges in employer collaboration.
Tuesday 4th February, 3:00 PM	Des Aston (Outreach Officer)	Student Profile & Admissions, Adaptation Insights, Validation & Student Recruitment	Recruitment strategies and engagement with students and families; growth trends in applications and admissions; selection criteria and outreach impact.
Wednesday 5th February, 11:30 AM	Hugo MacNeill OBE (TCPID Ambassador, Alumni Office)	Feasibility Assessment, Validation & Student Recruitment, Conclusions & Recommendations	Career outcomes of TCPID graduates; alumni engagement with businesses and mentoring roles; challenges faced by alumni in securing employment.
Wednesday 5th February, 2:00 PM	Barbara Ringwood (Senior Occupational Therapist)	Mentorship & Student Support, Implementation Strategy, Adaptation Insights	Role of occupational therapy (OT) in student support; accessibility provisions and inclusive teaching adaptations; recommendations for implementation in Northern Ireland.
Wednesday 5th February, 3:30 PM	TCPID Project Meeting	Implementation Strategy, Conclusions & Recommendations	Feasibility concerns and risks; key recommendations for adapting the programme for Northern Ireland; next steps in programme development.

The interviews were guided by a flexible protocol covering themes such as programme design and curriculum, student support and mentorship, governance and quality assurance, employer engagement strategies, funding and resources, and perceived

challenges for replication in Northern Ireland. This open-ended yet structured approach enabled interviewees to provide in-depth insights and expert perspectives. A distinguishing feature of this study is its integrative and flexible methodological approach. Rather than relying solely on direct quotations, interview findings have been systematically incorporated throughout the report, shaping its overall structure, analysis, and recommendations. This approach ensures that stakeholder insights are embedded holistically into the assessment of feasibility, sustainability, and operational adaptation, rather than being constrained to isolated excerpts.

In addition to eliciting targeted information on the operational, financial, and strategic dimensions of the TCPID model, the study maintained a high degree of analytical flexibility, allowing for emergent themes and cross-cutting issues to be identified. The findings have informed every aspect of the report, from governance considerations to implementation challenges, ensuring that conclusions are firmly grounded in stakeholder expertise. For example, TCPID staff highlighted the critical role of embedded student supports, "an embedded occupational therapist is essential to enable students to thrive" emphasising key operational features that would need to be replicated. Employer/partner testimonials in TCPID literature provided insights into how TCPID graduates integrate into workplaces and what structural supports would be required for successful employer participation in Northern Ireland. By embedding interview findings across the document rather than isolating them in a dedicated section, this study enhances the validity and applicability of its conclusions, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives are not merely referenced but actively shape the strategic direction of the feasibility assessment.

2.4 Data Analysis and Coding

Rationale and Scope

Owing to the breadth of qualitative data, transcripts, field notes, relevant policy passages, NVivo was used primarily for data organisation and thematic development. While drawing on Bryman (2016), Creswell (2014), and Yin (2018) for conceptual guidance, NVivo's core features were employed, (basic coding, node organisation) rather than advanced analytic functions.

Coding Process

- Data Preparation - Field notes, and relevant excerpts from policy or TCPID documentation were uploaded into NVivo.

- Initial Familiarisation - Each transcript was read in full to identify recurring ideas or potential codes.

- Open/Descriptive Coding - Text segments relating to feasibility considerations, local contextual factors, or operational details were tagged with descriptive labels. This approach enhanced the clarity and retrievability of each thematic strand.

- Iterative Refinement - Codes were regrouped or merged as new patterns emerged. Although no formal intercoder reliability test was conducted, the research team resolved discrepancies through ongoing discussion.

- Theme Development - Related codes were clustered into higher-level themes, "Funding," "Employer Partnerships," "Student Support," etc., which served as the basis for the feasibility conclusions and recommendations.

- Triangulation and Validation - Findings from the interviews were compared against the documentary evidence (both TCPID materials and NI policy documents) to validate or question emerging insights, consistent with Yin's (2018) emphasis on using multiple data sources to validate findings and enhance the credibility of case study research. The study also follows an iterative refinement approach, ensuring emergent insights from stakeholders and policy documents are incorporated systematically

- Limitations of NVivo Use - While NVivo aided systematic coding, it did not replace researcher judgement. The team used it in a basic capacity, focusing on descriptive and thematic coding rather than advanced computational queries.

2.5 Methodological Reflections

- Multiple Data Sources - Document analysis and semi-structured interviews enabled both macro-level policy insights and micro-level, context-specific details, critical for assessing feasibility in an area where no existing model is available locally.

- Flexible, Emergent Design - Given the dearth of parallel centres in NI, the methods evolved iteratively, ensuring emergent topics (e.g., embedded OT staffing) were probed in sufficient depth.

- Systematic Organisation - Although NVivo was employed in a "basic" manner, it facilitated transparent data handling and made it easier to cross-reference stakeholder testimonies with policy directives or TCPID documentation.

- Context and Transferability - While the conclusions and recommendations are tailored to Northern Ireland's frameworks, the central lessons about inclusive higher education may be transferable to other regions seeking to replicate the TCPID model.

2.6 Ethics

Full ethical permission to carry out the research study was granted by the Research and Scholarship Committee of Stranmillis University College, Belfast on 23rd January 2025.

2.7 Limitations

Due to limitations of time it was not possible to speak directly to current and past students of TCPID, however the research team was able to analyse the available commentary by students on the centre's extensive website. The research team was also able to attend the graduation ceremony at Trinity College on 5th February 2025 where the sense of achievement and pride were very evident to see on the faces of the graduates, their families and tutors/centre staff.

3. TCPID Programme Overview

The information in sections 4 and 5 is based on staff interviews conducted at TCPID, official programme documents, and publicly available materials, including brochures, leaflets, and online resources. Additionally, internal and external documents provided by TCPID, such as staff presentations and programme overviews, have been used to ensure an accurate and comprehensive representation of the course structure, curriculum, and support framework. These sources collectively form the basis for understanding how the programme operates and how it could be adapted for implementation in Northern Ireland.

3.1 Curriculum and Qualifications

This section provides an overview of the TCPID programme, including its curriculum, structure, student profile, and support framework, as a basis for understanding the model under consideration for adaptation in Northern Ireland. The current TCPID programme, leading to the *Certificate in Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP)* is a two-year, full-time course housed within Trinity College, Dublin's School of Education. It is designed specifically for students with intellectual disabilities and is accredited as a Level 5 certificate on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).[32] The Stranmillis Project Team recognise the need to determine a suitable qualification which would equip learners with a broad base of knowledge and skills, usually with a practical focus, enabling them to work independently or under general supervision. Holders of Level 5 certificates in the Republic of Ireland are generally prepared to enter employment at an entry level or progress to further education. The positioning of the TCPID course is intentional: it offers a meaningful academic qualification for those who would not conventionally access university while remaining realistic about the level of study (aligning with students' learning needs) and maintaining a strong emphasis on practical applicability and employability.[33]

3.2 Curriculum and Learning Outcomes

The ASIAP curriculum is holistic, encompassing five key subject areas, each subdivided into specific modules (topics). These subject areas span both academic disciplines and life skills, reflecting the "Arts and Science" breadth in the title, alongside "Applied Practice". In the earlier iteration of the programme, the Certificate in Contemporary Living (CCL) (2006–2016), modules included literacy, mathematics, technology, personal development, social studies, arts, and career education. The revised ASIAP programme (introduced in 2016) retains the same ethos while updating its content to better prepare students for modern society and workplaces. The programme is structured to provide students with meaningful learning opportunities that align with

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[32] Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), *National Framework of Qualifications*, available at: https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications

[33] Trinity College Dublin, *Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP) Programme*, available at: https://www.tcd.ie/tcpid/courses/asiap/

their needs while maintaining a strong emphasis on practical application and career readiness.[34]

Table 1: List of Modules in the ASIAP Programme (2025)

Theme	Module	Year
Learning Theories and Self-development	Learning Theory & Practice	Y1
	Personal & Self-development	Y1
	Preparing for Transition	Y2
	Work Placement	Y2
Exploring Arts and Language	Exploring Art – Renaissance to Modern	Y1
	Expressive Arts	Y1
	Film Studies	Y1
	Poetry	Y1
	Language & Society	Y2
Applied Science, Technology and Maths	Application of Numbers	Y1
	Applied Health Body Systems	Y1
	Emergency & Disaster Management	Y1
	Information Technology	Y1
	STEM & Society	Y2
Advocacy, Rights and Culture	Human Rights	Y1
	Disability Rights	Y2
Business and Marketing	Introduction to Business	Y1
	Entrepreneurship & Disability	Y2
	Marketing	Y2

The modules outlined in Table 1 illustrate how the ASIAP programme curriculum integrates academic learning, vocational preparation, personal development, and skill-

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[34] Trinity College Dublin, *TCPID Brochure: Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP) Programme*, available at: https://www.tcd.ie/tcpid/courses/asiap/tcpid_brochure.pdf

building into a cohesive educational experience. Each thematic area and its associated modules are designed to align with the broader developmental aims of the programme.

The following sections provide a detailed overview of the key curriculum components demonstrating how these elements collectively support students' holistic growth, academic progression, and preparation for employment and independent living.

Academic Development

Students at the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities engage with adapted content in the arts and sciences, which may include subjects such as basic computing, health science, and creative arts, delivered in an accessible manner. The goal is to develop a broad base of knowledge (consistent with NFQ Level 5 descriptors) and to stimulate critical thinking at an appropriate level. For instance, students might explore current events, fundamental scientific concepts, or cultural topics, thereby enhancing their general knowledge and cognitive skills.

Practical and Vocational Skills

A strong emphasis is placed on skill-building for both the workplace and daily life. This includes communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving exercises, as well as more specific employment skills, such as professional etiquette, time management, and using public transport for commuting. One of the five subjects is explicitly focused on employment. The "Inclusive Applied Practice" component of the certificate signifies that students apply their learning in practical contexts, particularly through work placements.

Personal and Social Development

The curriculum incorporates modules aimed at personal growth, covering topics such as self-advocacy, confidence-building, health and well-being, and social skills development. The intended learning outcomes include greater independence, self-awareness, and the ability to navigate the wider community (a key programme goal). Students are encouraged to express their viewpoints, participate in discussions, and think critically about topics, including disability rights and inclusion. This fosters a sense of identity and agency as they transition into adulthood.

Literacy and Numeracy

This programme reinforces functional literacy and numeracy for work contexts. For example, students may learn to manage personal finances, read and create reports or presentations, and use digital tools, with all content adjusted to individual learning levels.

Enrichment and Electives

Historically, TCPID has included elective choices (the earlier CCL programme allowed students to select two electives out of ten modules). This tradition is likely to continue, enabling students to pursue areas of personal interest, such as drama, sports, or art, or to further develop specific skills. Electives serve to enrich the learning experience and ensure that students remain engaged with topics they are passionate about.

3.3 Programme Structure

The programme runs over two academic years, following the standard university schedule of two semesters per year. During semesters, students attend on-campus classes (TCPID students are full-time members of the university).

Quality Over Quantity

Class sizes are small, each cohort admits a maximum of 10 students per year, meaning that at any given time, there are at most 20 students (Year 1 and Year 2 combined) in the programme. This low student-to-teacher ratio is essential for providing the individual attention and support that each student may require. Teaching methods are interactive and inclusive, incorporating a mix of lectures, tutorials, group activities, and projects that encourage students to take initiative (with guidance). This reflects the TCPID approach of promoting 'horizontal' (enhancing quality of provision) rather than 'vertical' growth (expanding numbers of students).

Assessment and Quality Assurance

Assessment in the TCPID course is tailored to the needs of students. Rather than relying on high-stakes examinations, students are evaluated through presentations (including oral and poster presentations), portfolio work, and practical assignments. Each module has clear learning objectives, and assessment tasks are aligned with these objectives to ensure that students can demonstrate their learning in a meaningful way. An external examiner reviews these assessments annually, providing quality assurance and ensuring alignment with third-level academic standards. This rigorous yet accessible approach to assessment helps validate the certificate as a credible qualification.[35] The approach to quality assurance is deliberately rigorous and exacting, requiring the TCPID programme to meet the same level and exactitudes as any other (undergraduate or postgraduate) programme offered at Trinity College, Dublin. As the Centre Director explained,

> *"We have never wanted the Centre to be treated differently from any other part of the university and have never wanted our students to be treated differently out of a sense of charity. We want to deliver high-quality courses to our students just as we would expect for all Trinity students, benchmarked nationally and internationally and serving as an example for others to follow."*

Work Placements: A Bridge to Employment

A hallmark of the programme structure is the incorporation of work placements. In the final semester of Year 2, students participate in a structured work placement (internship) with one of the programme's business partners, typically one day per week throughout the semester. This "bridge to employment" is considered an essential element of the curriculum, providing students with real-world experience in a mainstream work environment, while still being supported within the educational framework. The placement allows students to apply skills learned in class, such as communication,

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[35] Trinity College Dublin, *TCPID Presentation: Arts, Science and Inclusive Applied Practice (ASIAP)*, October 2024.

following routines, and problem-solving, while also developing new workplace competencies. Additionally, the internships serve as a practical trial for both students and employers, often leading to extended internships or job offers after graduation.[36]

3.4 Student Support, Accessibility, and Mentorship

A defining strength of the TCPID model is its comprehensive support framework, designed to ensure that students thrive. As the Centre Director explained, "*Our students must be able to have the same experiences and be able to access the same facilities as all other Trinity students. They are an integral part of Trinity, and we do not see them as separate to or different from other students.*"

Notwithstanding this commitment to inclusion and equity, the programme recognises that enrolling students with intellectual disabilities in higher education without appropriate adjustments would create unnecessary barriers to success. To promote inclusion and achievement, it implements a range of tailored support strategies.

Key elements include:

Embedded Occupational Therapy (OT) Support

Uniquely for a higher education programme, TCPID has an Occupational Therapist (OT) embedded within its core staff. The OT plays a vital role in assessing and supporting students' individual needs in areas such as daily functioning, learning strategies, and well-being. Unlike the traditional model, where a university's disability support services may provide occasional OT input, TCPID has integrated OT as a core component, considering it **"crucial for the viability and success of the course."**

The OT helps students develop key skills and adaptive behaviours, enabling them to engage fully in university life. This includes:

- Organisational skills (using structured methods for tracking classes and assignments)
- Social skills (supporting effective interaction on campus)
- Stress management techniques (helping students navigate academic and social pressures)
- Travel training (for those unfamiliar with independent commuting)

In all TCPID staff interviews, staff emphasised that this embedded OT role is essential to ensuring the programme meets the holistic needs of students and enables them to thrive in both academic and real-world settings. The OT support is strengths-based and ability-focused, meaning that it builds on students' existing capabilities while removing barriers to participation. For instance, if a student experiences anxiety about navigating the campus, the OT may employ gradual exposure techniques and coping strategies to increase confidence until the campus feels familiar.

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[36] Trinity College Dublin, *Business Partnerships with Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities* (Internal document, provided by TCPID, 2024).

This support extends to workplace preparation, helping students develop job-related skills and resilience for their internships. By addressing the person-environment-occupation fit, applying the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model of occupational therapy, the OT ensures that:

- The environment (classroom, campus, and workplace) is adapted to students' needs
- Students are increasing their ability to manage the demands of these environments

This holistic approach significantly enhances independence over time.

Inclusive Classroom Practices

TCPID lecturers employ inclusive teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles and cognitive levels. This includes:

- Multi-modal instruction (visual aids, adapted handouts, experiential learning)
- Reinforcement of key concepts (through repetition and added practice sessions)
- A pace that ensures full comprehension

Assistive technologies are utilised as needed, such as:

- Text-to-speech software
- Accessible e-learning platforms

All materials are provided in plain language or an easy-to-read format whenever possible. Assessments are also adapted, with no high stakes timed examinations. Instead, students are assessed through:

- Oral and poster presentations
- Portfolio work
- Practical assignments

This universal design for learning (UDL)[37] approach ensures that the curriculum is accessible by default and that students can demonstrate their knowledge in meaningful ways.

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[37] AHEAD (2025) *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*. Available at: https://www.ahead.ie/udl

Accessibility Features

Physically, all classes are held in accessible facilities. During internships, workplace accommodations are arranged in collaboration with employers. These may include:

- Providing a job mentor for initial support

- Educating co-workers about inclusive communication methods

- Adjusting certain job tasks or providing visual task guides

These adjustments are guided by TCPID staff recommendations, ensuring that students are fully supported in workplace settings.

Emotional and Social Well-being

TCPID fosters a supportive, family-like atmosphere, with staff trained to be attuned to students' emotional needs. Many students may experience anxiety upon entering university, and staff provide:

- Reassurance and coaching in self-advocacy

- Encouragement to develop friendships and peer support networks

The cohort model (where students take all classes together) enables them to form strong peer relationships, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. One of TCPID's goals is to "inspire students to support other students", reinforcing a culture of collaboration and encouragement. The small cohort size and continuous staff involvement mean that any personal difficulties (e.g., health issues, family challenges, etc.) can be addressed flexibly. Where necessary, staff can adjust workload expectations or liaise with family members or support services. TCPID students also have access to Trinity's broader student support services, ensuring they receive the same level of support as any other student.

Academic and Job Mentoring

Each TCPID student benefits from personalised mentorship throughout the programme. Academic staff provide:

- Tailored guidance on coursework and assignments (often in one-to-one or small-group settings)

- Support in building confidence and preparing for employment

TCPID recognises that mentorship is essential, not only for academic success but also for:

- Developing self-confidence

- Fostering professional skills

- Ensuring students are prepared for the workplace

On the programme side, staff also act as mentors. They maintain close contact with each student, monitor their progress, and serves as a key point of contact for both academic and personal support. Regular check-in meetings allow for early intervention, ensuring that any challenges, whether academic difficulties or career-related concerns, are addressed promptly. This approach mirrors TCPID's professional mentorship strategies, which supports students in transitioning smoothly into work placements and professional environments. By integrating academic and job mentoring, TCPID fosters both educational success and career readiness, equipping students with the skills and confidence to thrive in further education and employment.

3.5 Key Considerations for Replication in Northern Ireland

Any attempt to emulate TCPID in Northern Ireland must incorporate similar support structures. Essential components include:

- Dedicated staff (such as an Occupational Therapist)

- Small class sizes (to ensure individualised attention)

- Mentorship programmes (to guide students academically and professionally)

- Business Partnership Liaison Officer (to ensure effective placement partnerships are created and maintained)

- Dedicated research (to ensure a strong evidence base for effective practice) supported by external funding e.g., Shared Island Unit funding, Horizon etc.

These elements are integral to ensuring positive student outcomes.

TCPID's experience demonstrates that when students receive tailored support, their abilities, not their disabilities, become the focus. A key principle of TCPID is to focus on each student's strengths while ensuring they receive the necessary support to fully engage in their education. This approach is designed to remove barriers that have traditionally excluded individuals with intellectual disabilities from higher education.

3.6 Conclusion

The TCPID programme stands as a pioneering model of inclusive higher education, demonstrating how structured support, a tailored curriculum and a strong emphasis on practical application can create meaningful opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. By integrating academic development, vocational training, personal

and social growth, and embedded occupational therapy, TCPID fosters an environment where students can thrive academically, professionally and personally.

A key strength of the programme lies in its holistic approach, ensuring that students not only gain a recognised qualification but also develop essential skills for independent living and employment. Small class sizes, interactive teaching methods, accessible assessments, and structured work placements all contribute to a learning experience that is both rigorous and adaptable to individual needs. The emphasis on real-world applicability through internships and workplace engagement further solidifies TCPID's role in bridging the gap between education and sustainable employment. The comprehensive student support framework, including mentorship, inclusive teaching strategies, and embedded occupational therapy, reinforces TCPID's commitment to removing barriers to higher education. The integration of OT as a core component is particularly significant, setting TCPID apart from conventional disability support models and ensuring that students receive ongoing, specialised assistance that enhances both their educational and personal development.

For Northern Ireland and Stranmillis University College in particular, the TCPID model provides a compelling case for adaptation and further development, which is founded on an existing well-established relationship and mature partnership between Stranmillis University and Trinity College Dublin. Its success illustrates that, with the right structures in place and with genuine commitment at all levels (including people with intellectual disabilities themselves), students with intellectual disabilities can access, participate in, and excel within higher education.

Any effort to adapt this programme must prioritise its key pillars: a robust support system, an inclusive and applied curriculum, and strong employer engagement. By adopting these principles, Northern Ireland, led by Stranmillis University College, has the opportunity to establish a transformative, evidence-based higher education pathway that not only meets international best practices but also directly addresses the current gaps in access and employability for students with intellectual disabilities. The success of TCPID serves as a proof of concept, a demonstration that inclusive higher education is both possible and highly beneficial, not just for students but for wider society. By ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities can participate fully in university life, higher education institutions move closer to fulfilling their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion in its truest sense.

4. Mentorship and Student Support

A cornerstone of the TCPID model is its strong engagement with businesses and employers, which serves multiple purposes: securing practical training opportunities for students, opening pathways to employment, and enlisting financial and advocacy support for the programme. This section examines how TCPID forges and sustains these partnerships, the benefits reported by employers, and the opportunities and challenges that a similar approach might face in Northern Ireland.

4.1 The TCPID Partnership Framework

From its inception, TCPID recognised that bridging the gap between education and employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities requires active collaboration with the business sector. In response, it developed the "TCPID Business Partners" programme. Under this framework, companies join as partners or patrons, committing to support TCPID in various ways. The partnership is typically formalised through a memorandum of understanding and often involves a financial contribution (a sponsorship or donation), as well as offering work placements or other support. As of 2025, TCPID has a core network of over 50 corporate and philanthropic partners, spanning multinational corporations (in technology, finance, professional services, and retail) and public sector organisations. Growth has been steady, with new partners joining each year. Impressively, over 93% of partners renew their involvement annually, reflecting a high level of satisfaction and commitment. This exceptional retention rate highlights TCPID's success in delivering value to partners and maintaining strong relationships.

Tiers of Engagement

Companies engage with TCPID at different levels. Some are deeply involved, offering multiple placements and financial sponsorship, while others participate on a more limited basis, such as providing short-term work experience, workshops, or contributing to specific projects. The programme delineates clear stages for partnership: initial engagement (typically through networking or a programme ambassador), a pilot internship to trial participation, and sustained partnership where companies commit to long-term engagement.

The Role of the TCPID Ambassador

A key figure in this process is Hugo MacNeill OBE, a TCPID ambassador credited with introducing companies at senior management levels to bring them on board. As a former Irish rugby international, British and Irish Lion, Manging Director for Goldman Sachs, former chair of the British Irish Association, and most recently recipient of the award of an Honorary Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), MacNeill's contribution in terms of raising the profile of the Centre and 'opening doors' to corporate partners cannot be overestimated.

Gaining such early buy-in from executives (CEO/Director level) ensures that any new partnership is established with strong institutional support. Following this, TCPID staff

work closely with designated contacts (often within HR or Corporate Social Responsibility teams) to tailor the engagement to the company's needs.

4.2 What TCPID Provides to Business Partners

Interns and Graduates as Employees

The most tangible benefit for partners is access to a pool of enthusiastic interns and graduates who bring diversity and fresh talent into the workplace. TCPID carefully matches students to roles that align with their skills and interests, and pre-placement mentoring prepares students to contribute effectively in their roles. Many partners have hosted interns who later became full-time employees. Over one-quarter of internships have converted into permanent roles, demonstrating that the programme effectively sources candidates who meet real business needs. TCPID also provides ongoing support, including regular check-ins to ensure smooth integration and problem-solving assistance should challenges arise. Longer internships tend to yield better outcomes, as graduates have more time to adjust and prove their capabilities.

TCPID serves as an advisor to companies, helping them develop inclusive workplace practices. It provides training workshops and resources on topics such as understanding intellectual disabilities, implementing reasonable adjustments, fostering an inclusive workplace culture, and mentor training for staff assigned to support TCPID interns. Mentors have reported that they greatly valued this training. By equipping mentors and teams with knowledge, TCPID ensures that interns integrate smoothly into the workplace and companies build internal capacity for managing diversity. This training often leads to long-term organisational change, with many partners adapting HR policies or launching wider disability inclusion initiatives.

For many businesses, being a TCPID partner aligns with their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) goals. TCPID provides partners with public recognition, including featuring their logos in TCPID publications, highlighting partners on social media, and inviting them to high-profile events, such as the annual Business Partners meeting and student exhibitions. This allows companies to showcase their commitment to inclusion and celebrate the success of their TCPID interns.

However, it is apparent that the benefits of being a TCPID partner extend far beyond CSR or EDI goals. Many partners have stated that hosting TCPID interns has enhanced company culture and increased awareness of disability inclusion within teams. Indeed, the Centre Director explained that "Many of the companies we work with have told us that they are not interested in meaningless placements, corporate social responsibility or EDI box-ticking. They see the real benefit of having our students on placement with them and they value that enormously."

TCPID also fosters a sense of community among its partners by linking experienced partners with new ones to share best practices and hosting networking opportunities where companies can exchange experiences. This has led to the development of a network of champions for inclusion across industries.

4.3 Work Placements and Employment Opportunities

The primary contribution of partner companies is offering internship placements for TCPID students and graduates. These paid internships typically last three to six months, with some extended graduate internships running for nine to twelve months. Interns are placed in meaningful roles, such as office support in a bank or assisting marketing and facilities teams in technology firms. Most work part-time (one to two days per week) to balance coursework and stamina. Some companies also provide short-term work experience or project-based placements for first-year students, offering them early exposure to professional environments. Whenever possible, successful interns transition into paid employment, either through extended contracts or permanent roles. Approximately 40% of internships lead to permanent job offers. Even when an internship does not result in a job offer, graduates gain valuable experience and professional references for their CVs, significantly enhancing their future employability prospects.

4.4 Financial Support and Sponsorship

Many partner companies provide financial contributions, including annual sponsorship fees, philanthropic donations, and in-kind support (e.g., sponsoring events). This financial support is essential for TCPID, ensuring that the programme remains sustainable and accessible. Funders, such as The Ireland Funds, have provided targeted grants to expand specific areas of the programme. Partners assign workplace mentors or buddies to guide interns through their placements, support their integration into the workplace, and provide structured feedback to ensure ongoing development. While mentoring requires a time commitment, it is highly valued by both interns and TCPID staff. Companies are encouraged to position mentoring as a leadership opportunity, helping staff develop coaching and communication skills.

Although some mentors initially report uncertainty, they often find the experience deeply rewarding, observing significant growth in the intern's skills and confidence. Companies that embed mentoring within their culture not only foster more inclusive workplaces but also develop more adaptable work practices, such as modified work processes and roles to accommodate different abilities. Following COVID-19, many partners have innovated new ways for interns and mentors to collaborate remotely or in hybrid settings, ensuring continued support and engagement. Many partner companies champion inclusive employment beyond their direct involvement with TCPID. They share success stories internally and externally, speak at industry forums, raising awareness of the benefits of inclusive hiring, and encourage other businesses to partner with TCPID. At the annual partner meeting, companies share their experiences and insights, inspiring peers to adopt best practices in disability inclusion.

4.5 Conclusion

The TCPID model demonstrates that higher education and employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities can be effectively integrated through structured mentorship, business partnerships, and long-term employer engagement. The programme's

success in bridging education and employment has resulted in high employer retention, meaningful work placements, and increased graduate employment rates, illustrating the potential for a similar approach in Northern Ireland, led by Stranmillis University College.

Currently, Northern Ireland has the widest disability employment gap in the UK, with individuals with intellectual disabilities facing limited opportunities for higher education and sustainable employment (NISRA, 2024). The absence of a structured model such as TCPID means that many talented individuals remain excluded from professional environments, despite their ability to contribute meaningfully to the workforce. By adapting the TCPID model, Stranmillis University College could address this gap and establish itself (and Northern Ireland more generally) as a leader in inclusive higher education and employment.

Implementing such a model would address existing employment barriers by ensuring that graduates gain practical skills, professional experience, and direct access to employment, ultimately reducing reliance on long-term welfare support. It would also strengthen business and economic growth by providing companies in Northern Ireland with access to a diverse talent pool while enabling them to meet corporate social responsibility (CSR) and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) goals. The sustainability of long-term business engagement would be secured through a tiered partnership model, allowing companies to engage at different levels and ensuring flexible and scalable growth. A Northern Irish framework based on this model would create a network of industry partners committed to inclusive employment. Additionally, the region would be positioned at the forefront of inclusive higher education in the UK by developing a national model of best practice. The TCPID approach is internationally recognised, and a Northern Irish adaptation would set a new benchmark for accessibility and workplace inclusion.

To adapt the TCPID model successfully, Northern Ireland must establish a clear framework, led by Stranmillis University College and supported by the Department for the Economy, that integrates higher education, industry partnerships, and long-term student support. This will require a dedicated higher education pathway with integrated mentorship and structured work placements, as well as active collaboration with employers to ensure that workplace training and transition support are embedded in the model. Government and policy support will be essential, including funding mechanisms, employer incentives, and structured policy alignment with disability inclusion frameworks. By investing in an inclusive higher education-to-employment model, Northern Ireland can not only reduce its disability employment gap but also create a more equitable and economically vibrant society. A TCPID-inspired approach would ensure that all individuals, regardless of intellectual disability, could develop their potential, secure meaningful employment, and contribute to the wider economy.

5. Employer Engagement in Northern Ireland

Developing a similar employer network in Northern Ireland will be crucial to the programme's success. Companies that see positive outcomes should be encouraged to promote their involvement through business networks such as chambers of commerce or sector-specific groups, helping to drive broader support for inclusive employment.

5.1 Impact and Feedback from Employers

The partnership model benefits both students and employers, making it a mutually beneficial initiative. Many participating companies report that hosting TCPID students and graduates has had a positive impact on their workforce and culture. Employees develop leadership, communication, and empathy skills through mentoring or working alongside individuals with intellectual disabilities. This experience enhances morale and strengthens teamwork, with staff taking pride in being part of an inclusive organisation. Beyond cultural benefits, employers also gain productive and reliable team members, as many TCPID graduates have become long-term employees who perform exceptionally well in their roles. Some employers may initially underestimate the interns' capabilities. However, once in post, these individuals often exceeded expectations when provided with the right support. See link to video below:[38]
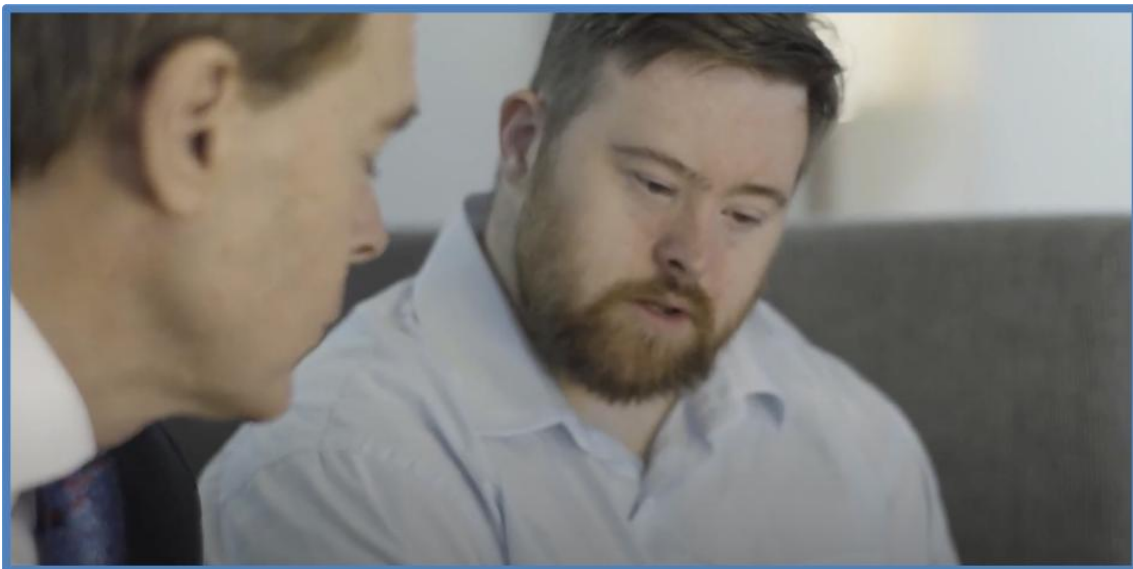
Additionally, participation in the programme helps companies meet diversity targets and demonstrate a commitment to social inclusion, an increasingly important consideration for stakeholders, including clients and investors.

5.2 Challenges and Adaptations

Some mentors initially felt uncertain about how best to support an intern. The adjustment period often involved refining tasks to align with the intern's abilities or providing

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[38] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZJiqXA5FGs

additional training. Changing work environments, such as the shift to remote work, also introduced new challenges in integrating interns effectively. TCPID responded by enhancing mentor training and providing guidance on remote inclusion. Importantly, companies that faced initial challenges remained committed, demonstrating that with the right support and communication, these issues were manageable. TCPID's reflective research with mentors led to improvements in support, including clearer guidance on identifying meaningful tasks for interns and the development of structured mentoring frameworks.

5.3 Northern Ireland-specific Considerations

Translating the business engagement model to Northern Ireland would be a crucial component of the programme's success. NI has a diverse economy, with both similarities and differences to Dublin. Belfast, and Northern Ireland more broadly, hosts many of the same multinational companies and sectors that TCPID partners with, including professional services firms, IT companies, financial services, and the public sector. Some companies that are TCPID partners in Dublin, such as large consultancies, banks, and technology firms, also have offices in Belfast. These organisations could serve as natural initial choices for partnership, leveraging their existing experience with the Dublin programme. Their understanding of inclusive internships could facilitate the introduction of the model in Northern Ireland. Additionally, public sector bodies in Northern Ireland, including government departments and agencies, may be particularly open to participating, given their equality duties and inclusive hiring practices. These organisations could provide internships in office-based roles, ensuring a range of opportunities for students.

5.4 Possible Challenges

Northern Ireland has a high proportion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which could pose a challenge in terms of employer engagement.[39] SMEs often have fewer resources to dedicate to internships and may be less familiar with formal internship programmes. However, the TCPID model could be adjusted to accommodate SMEs, for example, by grouping support, creating part-time placements, or offering shorter workplace visits where a long-term placement may not be feasible. A key aspect of the feasibility analysis in Northern Ireland will involve identifying industry sectors that are most likely to engage with the programme. Some sectors, such as manufacturing and logistics, may offer roles in structured work environments that could be well-suited to certain graduates. Establishing a network of champion employers in Northern Ireland will be essential. Early adopters, particularly from multinational companies or public bodies, could serve as role models, demonstrating success and attracting local businesses to participate.

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[39] Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfE NI) (2023) *Northern Ireland business; activity, size, location and ownership, 2023*. Available at: https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-business-activity-size-location-and-ownership-2023

5.5 Opportunities

Northern Ireland offers several opportunities to integrate this model into existing employer networks focused on diversity and inclusion. Business in the Community NI runs initiatives on inclusive hiring, while the NI Chamber of Commerce could facilitate introductions to prospective employer partners. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) encourages businesses to improve disability inclusion, and its endorsement of such a programme could incentivise companies to participate as a demonstrable action towards closing the disability employment gap. NI employers are also increasingly motivated by workforce development needs. With low unemployment and skills shortages in STEM sectors, food and agriculture, and business and financial services companies are actively seeking loyal and capable employees.[40] Positioning graduates of the programme as an untapped talent pool could attract significant interest.

5.6 Overcoming Barriers and Misconceptions

One of the potential challenges in NI will be addressing misconceptions about the capabilities of people with intellectual disabilities. As noted earlier, the primary barrier is often attitudinal or environmental, rather than a lack of ability. Early awareness campaigns and the sharing of success stories, particularly those from TCPID's existing business partners, will be essential in countering these misconceptions. Another challenge will be ensuring adequate support for employers, particularly those new to this area. A Northern Ireland programme would need to provide mentor training at the same level as TCPID, and potentially even more intensively in the early stages, until a strong track record is established. Business and employer engagement is a linchpin of the TCPID model's impact. It transforms academic progress into tangible employment outcomes and, in doing so, reshapes employer perceptions of inclusive hiring. TCPID's experience demonstrates that with a well-structured partnership approach involving clear mutual benefits, strong support systems, and continuous relationship management, employers become enthusiastic collaborators in the mission of inclusion. For Northern Ireland, adopting this proven model is not only feasible but essential to replicate TCPID's success.

5.7 Conclusion

The TCPID model has demonstrated that meaningful employer engagement is not only possible but essential for bridging the gap between education and employment for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Its structured approach, built on long-term partnerships, targeted mentorship, and ongoing employer support, has successfully created sustainable employment pathways and reshaped business perceptions of inclusive hiring. For Northern Ireland, where the disability employment gap remains the widest in the UK, adapting this model presents a unique opportunity to drive systemic change. A successful employer engagement strategy in Northern Ireland will require both the recruitment of industry champions and a coordinated effort to integrate inclusive hiring into the region's existing business networks. Multinational corporations with

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[40] NI Direct (2025) *Skills in Demand.* Available at: https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/skills-demand

experience of TCPID in Dublin provide a natural starting point, offering a foundation of understanding that can be leveraged to build credibility and momentum. Equally, engagement with the public sector will be critical, ensuring that government departments and agencies lead by example in fostering inclusive employment practices. While challenges such as SME engagement and misconceptions about intellectual disabilities must be addressed, they are not insurmountable. TCPID's experience has shown that employers who initially hesitate often become strong advocates once they witness the impact of their participation. Structured mentor training, workplace adaptations, and a clear framework for ongoing support will be key to ensuring that Northern Irish businesses can confidently embrace this model.

Beyond the direct benefits to businesses and employees, embedding an inclusive employment strategy within Northern Ireland's higher education landscape would position the region as a leader in disability inclusion. By aligning with international best practices and actively working to close the employment gap, Northern Ireland has the opportunity to demonstrate a progressive, forward-thinking approach that benefits individuals, businesses, and society as a whole. The evidence from TCPID is clear: with the right structure, sustained employer engagement, and policy support, inclusive higher education-to-employment models work. Implementing this approach in Northern Ireland is not just a possibility, it is a necessity. The next stage of this report will assess how this can be achieved in practice, ensuring that Northern Ireland capitalises on this opportunity to create a future where individuals with intellectual disabilities can fully participate in both higher education and the workforce.

PART 2: Feasibility in N. Ireland

6. Feasibility Assessment

Implementing the TCPID programme model in Northern Ireland requires careful consideration of several dimensions of feasibility: financial viability, technical and operational capacity, policy alignment, and legal/regulatory compliance. In this section, we assess each of these areas in turn, drawing on data and comparisons to highlight potential challenges and facilitating factors. We also conduct a comparative risk assessment and examine sustainability factors. Each aspect is assessed in relation to feasibility, with critical factors identified.

6.1 Financial Feasibility

How can the programme be funded and sustained?

One of the primary considerations for implementation is funding. An inclusive higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities inherently requires resources beyond those of a typical course. Smaller class sizes, specialist staff (such as an embedded occupational therapist), and dedicated support services mean that costs per student are inevitably higher than for other programmes. There are multiple potential funding avenues: public sector funding (government), private sector contributions (employers, philanthropic donors), and possibly student fees or charitable grants.

1. Public Funding

In the Republic of Ireland, recent policy has committed substantial government funding to expand inclusive higher education – over €11 million has been allocated to support new courses across 11 institutions, projected to support at least 150 students initially. This equates to approximately €1 million per institution (or around €6,600 per student per year if 150 students are enrolled annually), although allocations may vary. In Northern Ireland, no equivalent dedicated funding stream currently exists for this purpose. However, the Department for the Economy (which oversees higher education) and the Department for Communities (which handles disability and employment programmes) could potentially coordinate funding for a pilot initiative. The policy justification is strong, as such a programme contributes to multiple government objectives, including educational access, employability, and equality.

If a pilot scheme in Northern Ireland were framed under an "Access to Higher Education" initiative or incorporated into a disability inclusion strategy, it could potentially attract funding similar to how Ireland's National Access Plan provided PATH Strand 4 Phase 2 (A call for proposals for course provision for Students with Intellectual Disabilities**)** grants for comparable initiatives.[41]

It is very clearly the preferred option that the Northern Ireland Executive follows the example of the Irish government in developing and expanding its inclusive higher ed-

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[41] Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2022) *Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH).* Available at: https://hea.ie/policy/access-policy/path/

ucation provision, including the funding of a programme at Stranmillis University College for students with intellectual disabilities. As such Ireland's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) policy commitment is a blueprint to follow.

Alternative temporary and short-term funding sources could be explored through specific programmes (for example, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund or other UK-wide initiatives designed to support disadvantaged groups, if eligibility criteria align).[42] For long-term sustainability, embedding funding into core higher education budgets or incorporating it into the Disabled Students' Allowance scheme (though DSA typically covers individual student supports rather than programme-wide costs) may be necessary.[43] Advocacy and a clear demonstration of benefits will be required to unlock financial support. The cost of a small-scale pilot, accommodating 8-10 students annually, may be relatively modest within the context of government budgets, particularly if supplemented by additional contributions from private or philanthropic sources.

2. Private Sector and Philanthropy

As seen with TCPID, private partners can significantly bolster funding. Many companies in Northern Ireland engage in philanthropy or operate corporate foundations. Northern Ireland also benefits from UK-wide and international charitable foundations that may fund disability or education projects. For instance, The Ireland Funds[44], which has previously funded TCPID internships, and UK trusts such as the National Lottery Community Fund could be considered as potential part-funders.[45] Additionally, universities could launch an appeal to alumni or local benefactors to support an 'Inclusive Education Scholarship Fund'. Philanthropic funding opportunities appear promising for initial support, particularly if the programme is positioned as a pioneering and high-impact social initiative in Northern Ireland. Many funders are attracted to innovative projects that promote inclusion.

However, such funding sources are typically time-limited, often lasting three years. Encouraging employer contributions, whether through formal partnership fees or donations, is also viable in Northern Ireland, though likely on a smaller scale than that seen among large corporate sponsors in Dublin. Nevertheless, even modest contributions from a consortium of employers could help cover specific costs. For instance, pooled funding from participating businesses could support a coordinator post or a materials budget.

Having outlined the range of potential funding avenues, including public sector investment, private sector partnerships, and philanthropic support, it is essential to quantify the financial resources required to establish and sustain this programme. The following section provides a financial breakdown, clearly setting out anticipated staffing structures, infrastructural requirements, operational expenditure, and student support provisions. This costing analysis is based upon current salary benchmarks for comparable roles within Northern Ireland's higher education sector, as well as comparisons

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[42] UK Government (2023) *UK Shared Prosperity Fund Prospectus*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus#introduction
[43] Student Finance Northern Ireland (2025) *Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA)*. Available at: https://www.studentfinanceni.co.uk/types-of-finance/postgraduate/tuition-fee-and-extra-help-student/extra-help/disabled-students-allowance/what-is-it/
[44] **The Ireland Funds** (2025) *The Ireland Funds*. Available at: https://irelandfunds.org/
[45] **The National Lottery Community Fund** (2025) *The National Lottery Community Fund*. Available at: https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/

drawn from TCPID. Such a comprehensive approach ensures transparency regarding cost assumptions, facilitates informed decision-making among stakeholders, and clearly demonstrates the scale of financial commitment required for successful programme implementation.

Financial Costing and Resource Requirements

Implementing the TCPID model for inclusive higher education in Northern Ireland requires detailed financial planning, incorporating specific staffing roles, operational expenses, infrastructure costs, and student support mechanisms. Below is a detailed, structured breakdown:

Staffing Costs – University and College Employers Agency Pay Scale

Role/Position	FTE	Salary per annum (£)	Employer National Insurance Contribution	Employer Pension Contribution	Total (£)
Director of Inclusion and Education	1.0	£68,529	£9,529	£19,942	£98,000
Programme Coordinator (Academic Lead)	1.0	£57,422	£7,863	£16,710	£81,995
Lecturers (using a number of existing or p/t lecturing staff according to expertise)	2.0	£99,118	£13,368	£28,844	£141,330
Research Fellow	1.0	£40,497	£5,325	£7,694	£53,516
Senior Occupational Therapist	1.0	£45,413	£6,062	£8,628	£60,103
Occupational Therapist	1.0	£40,497	£5,325	£7,694	£53,516
Business Partnerships Manager	1.0	£49,559	£6,684	£9,416	£65,659
Pathways Coordinator	1.0	£40,497	£5,325	£7,694	£53,516
Research and Policy Coordinator	1.0	£40,497	£5,325	£7,694	£53,516
Teaching & Learning Assistants (SNAs)	2.0	£53,844	£6,582	£10,238	£70,664
Outreach Officer	1.0	£35,116	£4,517	£6,672	£46,305
Office Manager	1.0	£40,497	£5,325	£7,694	£53,516
Administrative Assistant	1.0	£26,942	£3,291	£5,119	£35,352
Professor (Academic Advisor)	0.5	£34,264	£4,765	£9,971	£49,000
Subtotal (Staffing Salaries)		£672,692	£89,286	£154,010	£915,988

Infrastructure & Initial Set-Up Costs (One-Time Expenses)

Item Description	Estimated Cost (£)
Classroom Renovations (Accessibility adaptations)	£0
Resource Room Setup (Specialised equipment)	£3,000
IT & Assistive Technology	£35,000
General Office Setup (Furniture, PCs, office supplies)	£25,000
Curriculum & Material Development	£0
Subtotal (Infrastructure)	£63,000

Annual Operational Expenses

Expense Category	Annual Cost (£)
Staff Training & Professional Development	£5,000
Marketing & Outreach	£5,000
Administrative Expenses	£2,000
Conferences & Events	£3,000
Insurance, Safeguarding & Compliance	£0
Contingency Fund (approximately 10%)	£1,500
Subtotal (Operational)	£16,500

Annual Student Support Expenses

Support Type	Annual Cost (£)
Student Bursaries & Financial Aid	£0
Travel Allowance	£0
Assistive Technology	£2,000
Accessible Learning Materials	£2,000
Counselling & Emotional Support	£0
Subtotal (Student Support)	£4,000

Total Comprehensive Cost Overview

Cost Category	Year 1 (Start-Up) (£)	Subsequent Annual Costs (£)
Staffing (Including Contributions)	£915,988	£915,988
Infrastructure & Initial Set-Up	£63,000	£0
Annual Operational Expenses	£16,500	£16,500
Annual Student Support	£4,000	£4,000
Total Costs	£995,888	£936,488

Sources and Methodology

The cost estimates presented above are based on an analysis of comparable roles and salary scales within the higher education sector in Northern Ireland. Salary benchmarks were obtained from publicly available resources such as higher education institutional pay scales, UK government standard rates for employer contributions (National Insurance and pensions), and recent job advertisements for similar roles. Infrastructure and operational expenses were derived through consultation with Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) and adjusted for the Northern Irish context. Student support estimates are based on standard allowances and costs reported by disability support organisations and higher education institutions.

The Case for Long-Term Government Investment

The successful implementation of an inclusive higher education programme for students with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland is contingent upon a sustained and dedicated government funding commitment. Unlike short-term pilot schemes or externally dependent funding models, this programme requires a secure, long-term financial investment embedded within core higher education budgets. The Republic of Ireland's allocation of €11 million to comparable initiatives underscores the strategic importance of state-funded provision in this area. This report has demonstrated that the financial requirements of the programme, covering specialist staffing, tailored student support, and essential operational costs, cannot be met without explicit government intervention. The absence of a dedicated funding stream in Northern Ireland presents a critical policy gap that must be addressed to ensure equitable access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities.

The long-term benefits of this investment extend beyond the higher education sector. Empirical evidence outlined in the report, indicates that inclusive education programmes contribute to higher employment rates, reduced reliance on social care, and enhanced social and economic participation among graduates. These outcomes align directly with government priorities in education, employment, and disability inclusion, reinforcing the case for sustained public funding. Therefore, we strongly recommend a commitment to a structured, recurrent funding model for this programme, ensuring financial stability year on year. This should be established as a permanent allocation within higher education budgets, rather than as a discretionary or time-limited initiative. Without such a commitment, Northern Ireland risks failing to meet its obligations under inclusive education policy frameworks, perpetuating barriers to higher education qualifications for students with intellectual disabilities.

6.2 Technical and Operational Feasibility

Does Northern Ireland have the institutional capacity, expertise, and infrastructure to run the programme?

Technical feasibility in this context refers to the practical ability to deliver the curriculum and support services. Essentially, can an institution in Northern Ireland replicate Trinity's model, provided it has the necessary resources? The analysis indicates that this is feasible, albeit with some necessary preparation.

1. Institutional Capacity

The proposed host institution in Northern Ireland, based on the context, is Stranmillis University College, a College of Queen's University Belfast specialising in education. Stranmillis University College is well-positioned, as it has expertise in inclusive education and teacher education, along with a mission that aligns with widening participation. It also has established links to special education, delivering content in relation to Special Educational Needs (SEN) and inclusion across all of its undergraduate programmes (including teacher education) and offering CPD and Master's level taught modules in aspects of SEN such as addressing literacy difficulties. Stranmillis also has a track record in research in SEN and inclusion, with academic staff researching and publishing in SEN-related areas such as literacy difficulties, sensory processing difficulties, disablist bullying and post-19 legislation and provision.

Such an institution would need to allocate physical space, including classrooms and office facilities, as well as administrative support for the programme. These requirements are manageable, as a class of 6 students and a small team of staff can typically be accommodated on most campuses without the need for any additional construction. Library and IT facilities at universities in Northern Ireland are generally accessible and could be extended to these students. A key technical consideration is ensuring that learning materials are available in accessible formats, such as Easy Read. However, modern universities typically have disability support services that can assist with material conversion.

Another logistical consideration is transport, as Northern Ireland's public transport system would need to be accessible for students. In Belfast, public transport is available, though it is not as extensive as in Dublin. Some students from rural areas may require individualised solutions, such as travel training or coordination with bus services. From an operational perspective, the host institution will need to schedule classes. While they could run in parallel with other courses, a distinct timetable, such as morning or early afternoon sessions, may better accommodate students' needs by avoiding peak travel times.

2. Expertise (Staffing)

Delivering the programme will require recruiting or assigning staff with the appropriate expertise. At a minimum, the programme would require a Programme/Centre Director, the part-time contribution of several lecturers or tutors with experience in supporting students with intellectual disabilities, and an Occupational Therapist or specialist support tutor. This level of expertise is available in Northern Ireland and there are numerous special educators, learning disability specialists, and therapists within the region.

Some professionals may require orientation to the higher education context, but the necessary skill set is already present. Collaborating with Trinity College's TCPID team during the initial setup could significantly enhance technical readiness. A structured

knowledge transfer process could be established, whereby Trinity staff support Northern Irish staff through training, curriculum and materials sharing, and mentorship during the first year. Such a partnership model is commonly used in the replication of educational programmes.

Technical expertise can be readily acquired, particularly as TCPID has comprehensively documented its curriculum and key learnings, some of which are referenced in this report. Furthermore, universities in Northern Ireland, such as Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College, Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, have faculties of education and psychology with experts in intellectual disability who could provide guidance or even be seconded to the programme. If required, recruitment efforts could extend to the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain to attract staff with relevant experience in similar initiatives.

3. Accreditation and Curriculum Adaptation

At an operational level, a Northern Irish institution would need to accredit the certificate within its own qualification framework. This is discussed in Section 11 (Validation); however, from a feasibility perspective, designing a two-year certificate at an appropriate level is technically straightforward and is something that the project team are aware of.

The key innovation in this case is embedding the programme within a higher education context and developing a bespoke curriculum. The curriculum content from TCPID can serve as a template, with necessary adaptations for the Northern Irish context. This may include integrating NI-specific services, local history and social studies modules, and substituting references to Irish law with UK or Northern Ireland legislation. However, the curriculum is broadly transferable. As Trinity's programme has undergone rigorous external examination and quality assurance, its robustness is well established. The Northern Irish team may incorporate additional modules where relevant, such as a module on community engagement in Northern Ireland or personal development, drawing on local initiatives. These adaptations do not present any significant or insurmountable challenges, as they fall within the standard scope of curriculum development. For instance, the Director of Teaching and Learning at Stranmillis University College is highly skilled and experienced in developing new programmes and seeking validation from appropriate validation bodies including Queen's University, Belfast.

4. Legal and Policy Compliance

From an operational perspective, the programme must adhere to education regulations and equality legislation. Northern Ireland's Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO) 2005 prohibits higher education institutions from discriminating against disabled students and mandates 'reasonable adjustments' in teaching and assessment. This programme inherently represents a positive provision for students with SEN/D, meaning compliance should not present any issues. Indeed, it serves as a model of proactive inclusion.

It is essential to ensure that all safeguarding procedures are in place, particularly as some students may be vulnerable adults requiring appropriate staff training and background checks. Additionally, health and safety considerations during internships must be effectively managed, including conducting risk assessments for each placement in collaboration with employers. These requirements are standard procedures rather than significant barriers to implementation. The technical feasibility of the programme is largely positive. Northern Ireland possesses the necessary institutional infrastructure, including colleges and universities, as well as the required human resources, such as educators and support professionals. Additionally, there is scope for collaboration, potentially with Trinity College and other relevant partners, to facilitate implementation. The primary requirements are careful logistical planning and the recruitment of a suitably qualified team. No insurmountable technical barriers have been identified.

6.3 Regulatory Feasibility

What Are the Regulatory and Institutional Requirements?

Legally, there are no restrictions preventing a university in Northern Ireland from offering a non-degree certificate programme to students with intellectual disabilities. Universities have significant autonomy in creating certificates or non-standard courses, particularly when these align with their academic mission and receive approval from the governing body, senate or academic council. The key legal considerations include:

Accreditation of Qualification

Ensuring that the certificate is formally accredited is essential to ensure its recognition and value. There is established precedent for universities offering certificates at levels below undergraduate study, particularly for continuing education or access programmes. Provided that the learning outcomes and assessment processes are clearly documented, accreditation should be a procedural matter rather than a barrier. Collaboration with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or the relevant Northern Ireland qualifications authority may be necessary. While the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) primarily oversees school-level qualifications, engagement may be required for sub-higher education levels. The certificate would need to be aligned with either the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) or the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) at the appropriate level. Qualification mapping is discussed in Section 11, but legally, this remains a feasible process. Comparable models exist in other jurisdictions, and Northern Ireland should be able to implement a similar approach.

Student Status and Benefits

A key legal and administrative consideration is how students enrolled in this programme would be classified in relation to eligibility for benefits and funding. In the Republic of Ireland, students at TCPID are typically able to retain their disability allowance while studying, as the programme is designated as part-time and vocational in nature. In Northern Ireland, certain disability benefits may have restrictions regarding participation in full-time education. It will be essential to engage with the Department

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for Communities and, if necessary, the Social Security Agency to confirm that participation in this programme does not impact students' disability benefits or social care support. Typically, if a programme is part-time and/or classified as rehabilitative or vocational training, benefits can continue.[46] This does not present a legal barrier but requires clear guidance to ensure prospective students are not discouraged by concerns about losing financial support. The programme may need to be formally designated as an approved activity under benefit regulations. If necessary, this could be negotiated with relevant authorities or addressed through specific provisions.

Safeguarding and Capacity

It is essential that legal safeguards under capacity legislation are fully observed.

This is particularly relevant for students under:

- Guardianship or similar legal arrangements

- Ensuring that appropriate consents are obtained for their participation

A robust safeguarding policy must also be in place, consistent with standard safeguarding measures for vulnerable adults in educational settings. Northern Ireland has established safeguarding legislation, which the host institution will be required to follow. This is a standard requirement, and an institution such as Stranmillis University College already has safeguarding protocols in place, given its experience in training teachers who work with young people.

6.4 Risk Assessment

In evaluating feasibility, it is useful to identify potential risks that could hinder implementation and assess their severity. In evaluating feasibility, it is useful to identify potential risks that could hinder implementation and assess their severity.

Risk 1: Failure to secure sustained funding

- Impact: High – without funding, the programme cannot run.

- Likelihood: Medium – initial funding might be secured for a pilot but sustaining it long-term is uncertain if government budgets are tight or political will wanes.

- Mitigation:

  o Ensure long-term budget commitment by government departments in line with Programme for Government priority commitments

  o Diversify funding sources

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[46] Employment Support Information, *nidirect.gov.uk*, https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/employment-support-information.

- Secure baseline public funding complemented by private sponsorship

- Demonstrate quick wins (e.g., employment outcomes in the pilot)

- Starting on a small scale ensures that the required budget remains modest at first

Risk 2: Failure to recruit students

- Impact: Medium – if not enough eligible students apply, the programme could struggle to justify itself.

- Likelihood: Low – demand is expected to be strong, given the current gap in provision.

- Mitigation:

  - Engage proactively with special schools, colleges, and disability organisations (such as Mencap NI and Inspire)

  - Use case studies from TCPID to illustrate the benefits of participation

  - Ensure effective outreach to encourage families to consider higher education as a viable option

Risk 3: Failure to secure business partners

- Impact: Medium – if employer engagement is weak, the programme's ability to deliver tangible placement and employment outcomes could be compromised.

- Likelihood: Medium – NI employers have less experience with inclusive internships compared to Dublin's TCPID network.

- Mitigation:

  - Appoint a high-profile ambassador and business liaison officer (as is the case at TCPID)

  - Leverage existing corporate social responsibility networks

  - Provide extensive employer support to simplify the process of hosting an intern

  - Engage the NI Civil Service to set an example with high-profile placements

Risk 4: Failure to secure academic buy-in and integration

- Impact: Low-Medium – some faculty members may resist the idea of an intellectual disability programme.

- Likelihood: Low – universities are increasingly committed to widening participation.

- Mitigation:

  o Secure top-level leadership support early (e.g., College Principal, Governing Body, Vice-Chancellor)

  o Highlight the success of Trinity College Dublin's TCPID

  o Showcase the academic credibility of the programme

  o Outline the wide benefits to the HEI of providing inclusive programmes

Risk 5: Failure to ensure quality and consistency

- Impact: Medium – maintaining a high-quality programme is essential for its reputation and long-term success.

- Likelihood: Manageable – if the pilot is well-resourced and kept small-scale initially, quality can be maintained.

- Mitigation:

  o Implement a robust quality assurance framework in line with all other courses offered at the HEI (e.g. module evaluations, student voice, external examiner reports, employer feedback etc.)

  o Maintain staff-student ratios and OT provision to ensure appropriate support

Secure external advisory input (e.g., from Trinity College or other inclusive education experts)

6.5 Sustainability Analysis

We assess whether the programme can be sustained beyond its initial implementation. A sustainable programme requires stable funding, a continuous inflow of students, a pipeline of engaged employers, and integration into the educational and policy landscape to ensure that it becomes a permanent fixture rather than a short-term project.

- *Financial sustainability* may involve transitioning from pilot funding to recurring funding lines. For example, after a three-year pilot demonstrating positive outcomes, the Department for the Economy could integrate the programme into regular higher education funding provisions, similar to how foundation degrees and

access courses are supported. Additionally, there may be scope for students to access existing funding streams. In Northern Ireland, there may be opportunities to incorporate the programme within a recognised funding formula, similar to access courses. Demonstrating a clear cost-benefit case will be crucial. If outcomes show a significant percentage of graduates securing employment and reducing reliance on social benefits, this evidence can strengthen public funding appeals and help secure long-term investment.

- *Operational sustainability* requires appointing and (if necessary) upskilling new staff and expanding the team as needed, ensuring that the programme is not personality dependent. If a key staff member leaves, the programme should continue seamlessly, with others stepping in. Succession planning and thorough knowledge documentation will be essential to maintaining consistency and continuity.

- *Partnership sustainability* involves keeping employers engaged year after year. TCPID has achieved a high retention rate through strong relationship management, and the Northern Ireland programme should follow a similar approach. This includes consistent communication, public recognition of employer contributions, and fostering a sense of shared purpose. Gradually broadening the employer base will also be crucial to avoiding over-reliance on a small number of partners.

- *Scalability* is a key consideration in long-term feasibility. If the pilot proves successful, expansion will be an important next step. The Republic of Ireland provides a useful precedent, where, following TCPID's success, the government is now funding its expansion to 11 institutions, supporting 150+ students in the first year.

6.6. Funding Models

A sustainable funding model is critical for the successful implementation of the TCPID programme in Northern Ireland. This section explores potential funding sources and structures, including public sector investment, private employer partnerships, and philanthropic contributions. It outlines how each model, or a combination thereof, could be leveraged, referencing comparable schemes that fund inclusive education or supported employment in NI and the wider UK.

1. Public Sector Funding

The ideal funding model would see the government (e.g., Department for the Economy, Department for Communities, Department of Education, HSC Trusts etc.) as the primary funder, recognising the programme as a public good that advances social inclusion and workforce development. Several potential public sector funding avenues exist:

Department for the Economy (DfE) – Higher Education Division

- As the programme is housed in a higher education institution, DfE could allocate funding similarly to other HE initiatives.

- DfE already provides block grants to universities and funding for widening participation, making the programme a strong candidate for such a stream.

- A potential funding model could mirror ROI's PATH 4 funding, which supported the development of inclusive HE programmes.

- Another approach could be for students in the programme to be included in funded student numbers, even though they are undertaking a certificate rather than a degree.

Department for Communities (DfC) – Disability Employment Services

- DfC, responsible for disability employment, could provide funding for the internship component or an employment officer.

- Existing schemes such as Workable NI and Access to Work already fund supported employment. This programme could align with such services.

- DfC may benefit from long-term savings, as graduates gaining employment reduce welfare dependency (a spend-to-save approach).

- The programme could be integrated into DfC's broader economic inactivity reduction strategy.

Department of Education (DE) – Transitions from School

- While participants are beyond school age, DE could fund outreach and transition planning in the final year of compulsory schooling to prepare students for the programme.

- Any further education budget flexibility could be explored to contribute towards transitional support.

Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts

- Some participants may already receive personal budgets or social care funding for day activities or training.

- A potential model could redirect a portion of this funding towards the education programme as part of their developmental support plan.

- This would require negotiation but is conceptually feasible under self-directed support frameworks.

Northern Ireland Executive – Cross-Departmental Funding

- Ideally, a cross-departmental funding pot would be created, acknowledging the programme's multi-faceted benefits (education, employment, health, and social well-being).

- A comparable model is ROI's €11m cross-departmental fund, backed by the Departments of Further & Higher Education and Children/Disability.

- NI could replicate this on a smaller scale, securing joint support from DfE, DfC, and The Executive Office

2. Private Sector and Employer Partnerships

Private sector engagement can provide direct financial contributions and in-kind support. Several models exist:

- Partnership Sponsorship Fees

- Companies could contribute annual sponsorships in return for:

    o Recognition as an inclusive employer partner.

    o Access to interns and potential hires.

    o Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) benefits.

If, for instance, 10 business partners contributed £5,000 each, this would generate £50,000 annually, enough to fund a key staff role or specific programme activities. TCPID's 93% renewal rate among business partners suggests that ongoing value creation secures long-term private funding.

Internship Salary Contributions

Initially, internships may be unpaid or stipend-based, but partner employers could be encouraged to:

- Pay a training wage.

- Cover transport and lunch costs.

- Offer a full paid internship (best practice in inclusion).

- If each employer contributed a minimum wage equivalent, this could offset costs for mentor training or job coaching support.

- To avoid deterring employers, an initial programme-funded model could gradually shift to co-funding by employers as they see internship value.

Employer-Provided Resources

Companies could donate in-kind resources, such as:

- Technology firms providing laptops or assistive software.

- Consultancies offering pro bono training workshops (CV writing, interview prep, workplace skills).

- Transport providers offering discounted or free travel passes.

- Corporate-sponsored events (e.g., an employer-funded graduation ceremony) could also reduce institutional costs.

3. Philanthropic and Non-Profit Funding

Charitable Foundations

Northern Ireland has access to UK-wide and local charitable trusts that fund education, disability, and employability projects. For example, the National Lottery Community Fund frequently supports initiatives that "bring people together and improve life," which aligns well with this programme's objectives. A targeted grant could be sought from them or from other sources such as the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, or The Ireland Funds. Notably, The Ireland Funds' Flagship Grant previously enabled TCPID to extend internships. Northern Ireland could pursue similar funding, potentially applying by highlighting a cross-community dimension, such as the programme's inclusive approach to all communities.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Grants

Some large companies have charitable arms, such as banks like Ulster Bank or tech firms like Allstate NI, which may offer CSR grants for community projects. These could be a valuable source of funding for capacity-building initiatives, such as curriculum development or the purchase of assistive technologies. While these contributions may be relatively modest, often a few thousand pounds at a time, they can *accumulate to provide substantial support over time.*

Individual Philanthropy

There may be individuals or families in Northern Ireland, or those with connections to the region, who are passionate about disability inclusion. Engaging them through the university/ university college's fundraising office could lead to philanthropic gifts, such as an endowment or an annual donation to sponsor a student's place or fund a staff position. Showcasing personal success stories and demonstrating the programme's impact will be key to inspiring such contributions.

<u>4. Government Funded Model – Recommended</u>

A government-funded model represents the preferred and most sustainable approach, ensuring long-term stability and accessibility. Core government funding should encompass essential costs, including staff salaries and institutional overheads, thereby ensuring the programme remains free to students. This approach guarantees reliability and continuity, mitigating the risks associated with fluctuating external funding sources. While supplementary private and philanthropic contributions may enhance programme offerings, they should not form the foundation of its financial structure. Rather, these funds could be allocated to enrichment activities, internships, and discretionary student needs, such as field trips or conference opportunities. This strategy ensures that core operations are safeguarded against economic volatility in private and philanthropic giving.

Phased Funding Approach

- Pilot Phase (Years 1–3): In the initial years, it is proposed the Department for the Economy funds the programme as a pilot venture, allowing for start-up costs to be covered, but also giving time for rigorous evaluation of the outcomes of the programme, highlighting benefits to students and to the university/university college, but also estimating the social return on investment in terms of promoting the employability of programme graduates, positive contribution to the economy and society, and reducing dependence on benefits.

- Integration into Government Funding (Years 4–5): As the programme matures and evidences its positive outcomes, public funding should be consolidated. The objective should be to secure a stable government budget allocation, potentially within higher education funding or disability employment initiatives, to ensure the programme's long-term sustainability.

- Employer Contributions (Years 3+): While employer contributions may initially be voluntary, a structured model should be introduced gradually. By Year 3, organisations benefitting from hosting interns could be expected to make a financial contribution, reinforcing the programme's sustainability while maintaining its foundation in government funding.

- Strategic Philanthropy: Even with secure government funding, maintaining relationships with philanthropic partners can provide additional flexibility for targeted projects. Such funding could support programme expansion, regional outreach, or innovative initiatives, such as the development of a social enterprise for alumni.

  By embedding the programme within a government funding framework, financial sustainability and continuity can be assured, ensuring that students receive uninterrupted support while allowing for strategic enhancements through supplementary funding streams.

<u>5. Ensuring Value for Money</u>

To maintain funder commitment, the programme must consistently demonstrate its value.

- For Public Funders: Emphasise long-term savings by showing that while two years of education incurs a cost, the resulting employment outcomes reduce long-term benefit dependency, yielding a net economic gain.

- For Employers: Highlight benefits such as reduced recruitment costs when hiring interns they have trained, improved staff morale, and increased workplace diversity.

- For Philanthropists: Share compelling personal success stories, as well as broader community benefits, such as increased awareness of inclusion on university campuses.

Financial Accountability and Transparency

Building trust with funders requires clear budgeting and reporting. Publishing an annual financial and impact report, modelled on Think College's Annual Report, could reassure stakeholders that funding is being used effectively and encourage continued or new investment.

Contingency Planning

Despite best efforts, there is always the risk of funding shortfalls. The programme should have contingency measures in place:

- If government funding is delayed, student intake may need to be temporarily reduced to lower costs.

- If a philanthropic grant expires, securing overlapping grants to maintain financial stability will be essential.

6.7 Conclusion

This feasibility assessment has demonstrated that the implementation of the TCPID model in Northern Ireland is both viable and necessary. The analysis of financial, technical, legal, and sustainability factors indicates that while challenges exist, none are insurmountable.

Key findings include:

- Financial Feasibility: A range of potential funding sources have been identified, prioritising the benefits of sustained government investment, but also analysing the benefits of employer partnerships and philanthropic contributions. Long-term sustainability will depend on securing recurrent government funding. The

success of similar programmes internationally demonstrates that government investment is the most effective means of ensuring stability and scalability.

- Technical and Operational Feasibility: Northern Ireland has the institutional capacity and expertise to deliver the programme. Universities/ university colleges and further education institutions have existing resources and support structures that can be adapted. Collaboration with TCPID and local disability organisations can facilitate the necessary knowledge transfer and programme development.

- Legal and Policy Feasibility: There are no legal barriers to establishing the programme, and it aligns with existing education and equality legislation. The initiative is consistent with wider government priorities on social inclusion, employability, and access to higher education.

- Sustainability and Scalability: Long-term viability requires a clear funding strategy, employer engagement, and integration within existing educational frameworks. The pilot phase will provide an opportunity to refine delivery and demonstrate impact. A phased expansion from its establishment at Stranmillis University College across additional sites may be considered if the initial implementation is successful, following the precedent of the recent expansion underway in the Republic of Ireland following the success of the TCPID model.

- Risk Management: Potential risks, including challenges in securing funding, employer participation, and student recruitment, have been identified. These risks can be mitigated through strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and phased implementation.

Next Steps and Policy Recommendations

For this programme to be successfully implemented and sustained, it is essential that:

1. Government Commitment: The Northern Ireland Executive must provide a stable funding mechanism, ensuring the programme is integrated into higher education and employment strategies rather than relying on short-term grants.

2. Institutional Preparedness: Higher education institutions must be prepared to deliver the programme effectively, ensuring staff expertise, appropriate facilities, and robust student support mechanisms. It has been demonstrated that Stranmillis University College has this institutional readiness.

3. Employer Engagement: A structured approach to engaging employers must be developed, ensuring that internship and employment opportunities are available to students and that businesses recognise the benefits of participation.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation: A clear quality assurance framework for ensuring high quality teaching and learning, and delivering tangible impact must be es-

tablished, measuring employment outcomes, student progression, and institutional effectiveness. This data will be essential in securing long-term funding and ensuring continuous improvement.

This programme presents a significant opportunity for Northern Ireland to advance inclusive education, increase workforce participation among people with intellectual disabilities, and strengthen employer engagement in disability inclusion. The evidence demonstrates that implementation is feasible, provided that key stakeholders commit to a structured, long-term approach. The next phase should focus on translating this feasibility analysis into a concrete implementation strategy, ensuring the programme is effectively embedded within Northern Ireland's higher education and employment landscape.

7. Implementation Strategy

This implementation strategy has been developed through a rigorous evidence-based approach, drawing on international best practice, policy analysis, economic data, and direct stakeholder engagement including regular online meeting and a site visit to the Centre over two days (4-5 February 2025).

The model is primarily informed by the proven success of the Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID) in Dublin, as well as comparable international initiatives such as UI REACH (United States) and Uni 2 Beyond (Australia). These programmes have demonstrated that structured, inclusive higher education pathways significantly improve employment outcomes, independence, and social inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In addition to benchmarking against successful models, this plan is grounded in a detailed feasibility analysis of the Northern Irish context. It considers the structural, economic, and policy conditions necessary for sustainable implementation, aligning with government priorities, disability inclusion frameworks, and workforce development needs. Consultations with higher education institutions, employers, policymakers, and disability advocacy groups have further refined the approach, ensuring that it is both practical and scalable.

By integrating lessons from TCPID, key institutional, financial, and employer engagement strategies have been adapted to suit the Northern Irish higher education and employment landscape. The following roadmap outlines a phased, structured approach, beginning with a small-scale pilot, before scaling up based on measured impact, employer participation, and financial sustainability.

7.1 Lessons from TCPID

Building on the feasibility findings and the experience of TCPID, this section outlines a structured strategy for implementing the programme in Northern Ireland. It sets out a phased rollout, adaptation of institutional frameworks and curriculum, and steps for engaging employers and building capacity among stakeholders. Essentially, this serves as a roadmap from concept to reality. Before detailing the implementation phases, it is essential to highlight key lessons from TCPID that will shape the approach in Northern Ireland.

Lesson 1: High-Level Buy-In is Crucial

TCPID benefited from strong leadership advocacy, with senior figures at Trinity College Dublin championing the programme and securing institutional and corporate support. For Northern Ireland, it is vital to gain early endorsement from the leadership of Stranmillis University College (e.g., the Principal of Stranmillis and/or the Vice-Chancellor of QUB) and, ideally, identify a well-respected, high-profile ambassador. This could be a business leader, academic, or public/sporting figure who is passionate about inclusion and can drive engagement among funders, policymakers, and employers. Their role would be to enhance credibility and attract investment, replicating the significant contribution made to TCPID by Hugo MacNeill OBE.

Lesson 2: Collaboration and Advisory Support

TCPID's success demonstrates that cross-sector collaboration (education, business, disability advocacy) is critical. Establishing an informal expert reference group for the Northern Ireland programme will ensure strategic guidance and stakeholder engagement. Rather than a regular, formal meeting, members of the expert reference group could be drawn upon on an *ad hoc* basis to provide focused, expert advice as and when particular issues or questions arise.

This expert reference group should include:

- Representatives from Trinity's TCPID team (as mentors)

- Local educators and disability inclusion experts

- Employer representatives

- Government policymakers

- People with intellectual disabilities and family advocates

A multi-stakeholder approach enhances programme legitimacy, fosters stronger partnerships, and ensures that the curriculum and student experience remain relevant.

Lesson 3: Student-Centred Design

The programme must remain student-focused at every stage, mirroring TCPID's commitment to person-centred planning. Decisions on curriculum, timetabling, and support services should be guided by input from those with direct experience. Where possible, consultation with prospective students, disability organisations, and families should inform key implementation steps. A preliminary 'taster' workshop could be conducted, allowing young people with intellectual disabilities to engage with sample modules and provide feedback. This would ensure the programme aligns with real student needs and aspirations before full implementation.

Lesson 4: Start Small and Demonstrate Success

TCPID began with small cohorts and continues to limit intake to 10 students per year.

For Northern Ireland, a small-scale pilot (e.g., maximum of 6 students in the first intake) would allow:

- Close monitoring and adaptation in the early stages

- Personalised support to maximise student success

- The creation of compelling case studies to justify expansion

Establishing a high-quality pilot is preferable to launching at scale before all processes are fully tested.

Lesson 5: Holistic and Adaptive Curriculum

The curriculum must be comprehensive, covering academic, vocational, and life skills. However, built-in flexibility is essential. Trinity has revised its modules over time, and Northern Ireland should adopt a similarly adaptive approach. Regular student and employer feedback should inform ongoing refinement of course content and teaching methods to enhance engagement and employability outcomes.

Lesson 6: Embedding Employment from the Outset

One of TCPID's core strengths is the seamless integration of career development throughout the programme:

- Year 1: Career exploration, employer talks, and workplace visits
- Year 2: Structured internships with employer partners

For Northern Ireland, early exposure to employers is key. Even in the first term, students should have opportunities to engage with businesses through:

- Employer-led workshops

- Workplace visits

- Professional skills coaching

Embedding career elements from day one ensures students develop aspirations, industry awareness, and employability skills early in their studies.

Phased Rollout Plan

Building on these insights, the next section proposes a structured phased implementation plan to ensure systematic rollout and long-term sustainability.

7.2 Phase 1: Planning, Marketing and Recruitment

- Timeline: Year 0 – Year 1

- Duration: Approximately 12 months, encompassing the initial planning phase and the first academic year of the pilot programme.
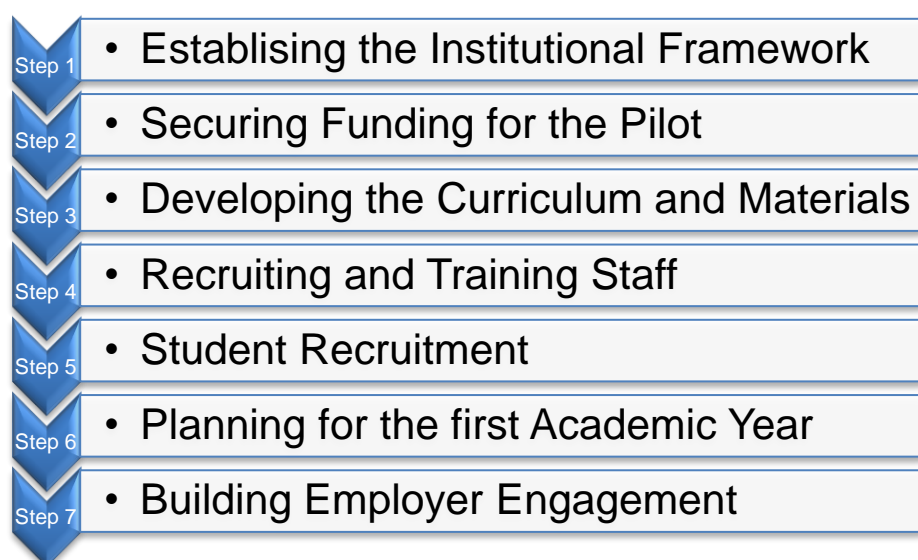

Step 1 • Establising the Institutional Framework

Step 2 • Securing Funding for the Pilot

Step 3 • Developing the Curriculum and Materials

Step 4 • Recruiting and Training Staff

Step 5 • Student Recruitment

Step 6 • Planning for the first Academic Year

Step 7 • Building Employer Engagement

Figure 1: Phase 1: Planning, Marketing and Recruitment

Step 1: Establishing the Institutional Framework

In this initial phase, formal agreements and structures must be put in place. The host institution, Stranmillis University College would need to approve the creation of the certificate programme. This requires submitting a detailed proposal to the Academic Council at Queen's University, Belfast, outlining the programme's aims, structure, and how it aligns with institutional priorities. At the same time, an Expert Reference Group (see above) should be formed, allowing expert guidance to be sought as and when required from key stakeholders, including representatives from Trinity College Dublin's TCPID team, local educators, employers, government officials, and disability advocacy groups.

Identifying a Programme Director would be a further priority. The accreditation process must begin immediately, ensuring the curriculum is mapped to the QCF/FHEQ framework and validated either internally or by an external awarding body. Engaging with the NI Qualifications Authority early would streamline this process. By the end of this phase, the programme should exist on paper with formal institutional approval and a clear pathway for awarding a recognised qualification.

Step 2: Securing Funding for the Pilot

Funding must be secured for at least the first three years. A business case document, drawing on feasibility data and the success of TCPID, should be developed to engage potential funders. Approaching the Department for the Economy ahead of Year 1 for a direct grant, seeking seed funding from charitable trusts or philanthropic organisations, and exploring corporate sponsorship options would form a multi-stream funding strategy. Given funding cycles, initial investment may be sourced from a combination of short-term grants and commitments from government bodies pending programme evaluation. At the very least, the core staff salaries and essential student support services must be covered to ensure a viable pilot intake.

Step 3: Developing the Curriculum and Materials

Building on TCPID's model, the curriculum should be designed and tailored to the Northern Ireland context while retaining key elements such as career development, life skills, and academic engagement. Modules could include personal development, vocational skills, academic seminars, and independent living. The curriculum could also incorporate content specific to Northern Ireland, such as local government and citizenship studies. A structured approach to student support must also be developed. The experience of TCPID shows that an Occupational Therapist would be necessary to provide essential assistance, alongside a framework for targeted support sessions, such as travel training and social skills development. Establishing links with Northern Ireland disability support services in advance would facilitate a smoother transition for students.

Step 4: Recruiting and Training Staff

A small core team should be recruited as soon as possible during the first year. This would include a Programme/Centre Director, p/t lecturers with experience in inclusive education, and an Occupational Therapist or Inclusion Support Officer. Training would be crucial. Trinity's TCPID team could provide workshops on inclusive teaching strategies (if necessary), while a dedicated staff handbook should outline best practices in communication techniques and student engagement. If feasible, staff could visit TCPID to observe their operations first-hand, ensuring the best aspects of their model are effectively adapted.

Step 5: Student Recruitment

Outreach efforts and marketing should also begin as soon as possible during the first academic year. This would involve working with schools, FE colleges and disability organisations to promote the programme. Information sessions should be held for both students and their families, supported by easy-read promotional materials. A structured selection process would involve application forms focusing on student backgrounds and aspirations, alongside interviews and group workshops to assess fit. A pilot intake of six students (to begin at the start of Year 2) would allow for close monitoring and adjustments to the programme. Given the likely demand, a waiting list could be maintained, and unsuccessful applicants could be engaged in future outreach activities.

Step 6: Planning for the first Academic Year

During this initial year, the detailed programme should be planned, drawing on the TCPID example, and designed to operate on a structured schedule, likely three days per week for academic work, with additional days dedicated to community-based learning and skills development. While the first year may not yet include formal internships, groundwork should be laid for employer engagement (see below). Guest talks, workplace visits, and career exploration activities could be planned during this initial year. Simultaneously, discussions with prospective employer partners should be initiated to prepare them for taking on interns in the following phase.

Step 7: Building Employer Engagement

Employer partnerships should be cultivated throughout the first year. Using connections from the Expert Reference Group and/or an identified ambassador, discussions should begin with companies willing to offer internships. To ensure companies are well-prepared, early mentor training should be introduced, following the successful TCPID model. Materials from Trinity's mentor training could be adapted to the NI context, helping workplace mentors understand how to support interns with intellectual disabilities effectively. By the end of the first year, a small cohort of employers should be identified to offer internships in subsequent academic years.

7.3 Phase 2: The First Cohort of Students

- Timeline: Year 2 – Year 3
- Duration: This phase encompasses the intake of the first cohort of students and the completion of the first full cycle through to graduation.

Step 1	• Institutional Integration
Step 2	• Policy Engagement
Step 3	• Employer Network Growth

Figure 2: Phase 2: The First Cohort of Students
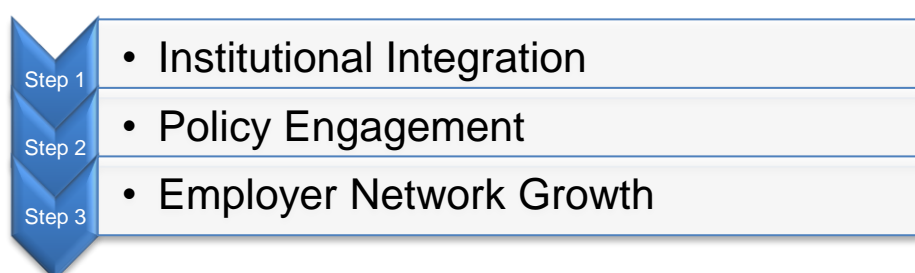
Institutional Integration

The first cohort students will be enrolled at the start of the second year of funding. In Years 2 or 3, efforts should be made to embed the programme firmly within the institution. This could involve securing a dedicated budget line in the university's financial planning, transitioning staff from temporary pilot contracts to longer-term positions,

and ensuring the programme is fully integrated into the university's administrative processes. Students should be formally recognised within the university system, ensuring they have access to student records, ID cards, library accounts, and other standard services if this is not already in place. The programme should be seen as a permanent and integral part of the institution rather than a separate project. Success stories from the first students should be used to enhance the institution's reputation, perhaps through local press coverage or internal communications, to build support and pride in the initiative.

Policy Engagement

This phase should be used to engage policymakers in discussions about long-term support. By the end of Year 3, data on success rates (e.g., graduate numbers, employment outcomes) should be compiled into a report. Officials from the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities should be invited to observe the programme in action.

The aim is to secure sustainable funding and potential expansion. Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and/or Executive Ministers should be invited to visit – this would help build political capital. Engagement with the Higher Education Authority or similar bodies in Ireland should also be pursued to explore potential cross-border collaboration. This could include joint learning opportunities or shared funding applications (e.g. Shared Island funding).

Employer Network Growth

After the first internships, a debriefing session should be held with partner companies. If outcomes were positive, employers should be encouraged to advocate for the programme among their peers. An "Employer Appreciation and Networking" event could be hosted, bringing together existing and potential employer partners, similar to TCPID's Business Partner meetings. This event would reinforce existing partnerships (perhaps encouraging some companies to take on another intern or extend employment offers) while also attracting new employers to participate. Mentor feedback and intern success stories from Phase 2 should be leveraged as marketing material to engage additional companies for the next cycle.

7.4 Phase 3: Scaling Up and Mainstreaming

- Timeline: Year 4 onwards

- Duration: This phase is continuous and evolves based on the programme's proven effectiveness and strategic expansion decisions.

- By this stage, the programme should have a stable model and demonstrated outcomes. Phase 3 will focus on scaling or replication:
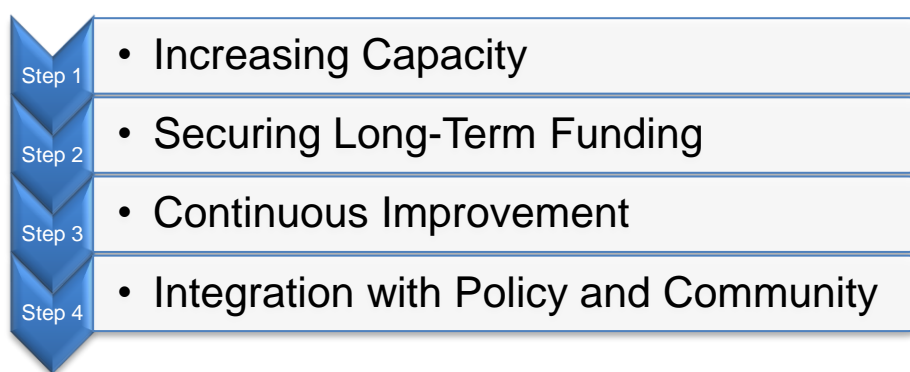
Step 1	• Increasing Capacity
Step 2	• Securing Long-Term Funding
Step 3	• Continuous Improvement
Step 4	• Integration with Policy and Community

Figure 3: Phase 3: Scaling Up and Mainstreaming

Increasing Capacity

A decision should be made on whether to expand the existing programme or replicate it in new locations. For example, the Belfast-based programme could consolidate its intake at 8-10 students, and a sister programme could be launched at another college or university in Northern Ireland (perhaps in L'/Derry or a more rural area to increase geographic reach). Scaling within the same institution would require additional staff and, potentially, splitting students into smaller groups to maintain the programme's supportive and personalised environment. This would, in turn, require a corresponding increase in funding. Alternatively, rather than expanding intake at a single institution, it may be more effective to support other institutions in establishing their own inclusive education programmes. By this stage, the Republic of Ireland should have multiple institutions running similar initiatives (since 11 launched in 2024/25, according to gov.ie - Minister Harris), so Northern Ireland could collaborate with them as part of an emerging Inclusive Higher Education Network, similar to Think College in the US.

Securing Long-Term Funding

Efforts should focus on integrating the programme into standard higher education funding allocations. For instance, the Department for the Economy could provide an annual grant to the host institution, or the programme could be incorporated into a broader Supported Education funding stream. Additionally, supported employment funds could be leveraged to sustain the internship and employment components. In Northern Ireland, initiatives such as Workable NI support employment for people with disabilities, so synergies could be explored, perhaps by securing job coaching funds for students undertaking internships. Ensuring financial sustainability will allow the programme to move beyond the precarious status of short-term grants.

Continuous Improvement

Long-term success will require ongoing curriculum updates to ensure relevance. For example, modules could be introduced on emerging workplace technologies or other evolving skill areas. Consideration should also be given to expanding the programme's scope, for example, by developing advanced modules or additional follow-up courses. Trinity College Dublin explored the possibility of adding an extra internship year (The

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Ireland Funds Flagship Grants), and Northern Ireland could develop a formal third-year option with extended internships or pathways into further qualifications. Some graduates may wish to progress to a Level 4 certificate or vocational training, which should be explored on a case-by-case basis. Additionally, an alumni network should be established to track graduate outcomes and offer ongoing support. An Alumni Network could facilitate networking, refresher courses, and career advice, while also providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of the programme. Alumni feedback can inform future curriculum development, ensuring continued improvement.

Integration with Policy and Community

Over time, the programme could serve as a model of best practice, influencing other sectors. For instance, further education colleges may adopt more inclusive approaches, and universities might incorporate more inclusive teaching strategies across their courses. The programme could also contribute to Northern Ireland's commitments under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and a future disability strategy, positioning it as a flagship initiative. Continued research, such as publishing findings in academic journals or presenting at inclusive education conferences, will further establish its reputation. Throughout all phases, the programme should remain grounded in the ethos of TCPID: a strong focus on inclusion, ability, and high expectations. As Minister Simon Harris stated:

> *"When given the opportunity, students with an intellectual disability can thrive… access to higher education can lead to employment and transform lives."*

The implementation strategy puts this vision into action, starting with a solid foundation and scaling up systematically.

7.5 Employer Engagement, Training, and Capacity Building

A specific aspect requiring continuous focus is employer engagement, as this falls outside the typical remit of education providers. Key strategies include:

Early and Ongoing Employer Outreach

A dedicated staff member (possibly the Programme/Centre Director a separate Employer Liaison Officer) should lead efforts to cultivate relationships with businesses. Building employer capacity requires educating them on the benefits of inclusive hiring. This could be done through presentations at business forums and by sharing evidence from UK and US studies demonstrating high retention rates among employees with intellectual disabilities.

Comprehensive Training for Employers

Training should extend beyond assigned mentors to include all company staff who will interact with interns. For example, a lunch-and-learn session for an entire department hosting an intern can address initial uncertainties and set a welcoming tone. TCPID's research found that mentors often experienced initial apprehension, which was alleviated through structured training and peer learning (Mentor Experiences Research -

Learnings and Actions). As part of employer training, experienced mentors from previous cohorts could be invited to share their insights with new mentors.

Internal Capacity Building

The NI programme staff should also receive training, or a vocational specialist should be hired to oversee internships. This individual would ensure job-site accommodations are in place and that interns are matched with tasks suited to their development. A key learning from TCPID is that structured training significantly enhances student readiness and aspirations. A structured Pre-Internship Workshop Series should be developed for students, covering CV writing, interview skills, and workplace etiquette. At the same time, mentors should be trained in providing constructive feedback and integrating interns effectively.

Employer Peer Support Network

As more businesses join the programme, an employer peer support network should be established. This could be an informal WhatsApp group or a structured mentoring system among employers, modelled on TCPID's Business Partner Network. A peer support structure would help new employers adapt quickly while providing ongoing reassurance and best practice sharing.

Employer Recognition and Public Engagement

Capacity-building also involves reinforcing employer commitment through recognition. Employers should be publicly acknowledged (with their permission) in success stories, media articles, or corporate social responsibility reports. Over time, hosting an intern from the programme should be seen as a prestigious and valuable opportunity rather than an act of charity. If positioned correctly, more companies will volunteer, and existing partners will remain engaged. TCPID's model demonstrates this, 93% of employer partners renew their involvement each year.

7.5 Conclusion

The implementation strategy outlined in this section provides a clear, evidence-based roadmap for establishing an inclusive higher education programme in Northern Ireland, modelled on the success of TCPID. By adopting a phased approach, grounded in lessons learned from Trinity College Dublin, this strategy ensures that inclusion, student-centred design, and long-term sustainability remain at the core of the initiative. A successful pilot is essential to lay the groundwork for full-scale implementation, demonstrating both the viability and impact of the programme while refining processes to suit the Northern Irish context. The early engagement of institutions, government bodies, employers, and disability advocacy groups will be critical in securing the necessary infrastructure and financial support. Establishing a robust employer network from the outset will help bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring that graduates not only complete their studies but also transition into meaningful careers.

Beyond its immediate objectives, this initiative has the potential to transform inclusive education policy in Northern Ireland. By integrating higher education, employment pathways, and employer engagement, the programme will challenge outdated perceptions, reshape disability inclusion, and create lasting structural change within both the education sector and the labour market. With strategic planning, dedicated funding, and sustained collaboration, Northern Ireland can lead the way in inclusive higher education and workforce integration, ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities have equal opportunities to develop their potential and contribute to society. This report sets the foundation for turning policy into practice, demonstrating that an inclusive higher education model is not only feasible but essential. With cross-sector commitment, Northern Ireland can move from planning to implementation, creating a transformative and lasting impact on students, employers, and society as a whole.

8. Comparative Analysis

To inform the adaptation of the TCPID model for Northern Ireland, it is valuable to benchmark it against other established inclusive higher education programmes internationally. This comparative analysis examines three prominent models, Think College (USA), REACH Programme (USA), and Uni 2 Beyond (Australia), and considers how these approaches compare within the UK and Ireland. The focus is on curriculum design, funding mechanisms, student outcomes, and scalability, drawing on insights that can inform NI implementation.

8.1 Think College (United States) – Network and Best Practices

Think College is not a single programme but a national initiative and resource hub that promotes and supports inclusive higher education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

> Based at the University of Massachusetts Boston's Institute for Community Inclusion, it has played a key role in developing, expanding, and improving such programmes across the United States. As of 2017, over 260 colleges and universities in the US had inclusive programmes, accounting for approximately 3-4% of all post-secondary institutions.

These programmes vary widely, from small certificate courses at community colleges to four-year residential programmes at major universities but share a commitment to inclusion.

Key Features and Lessons from Think College-affiliated Programmes Curriculum

Many US programmes enable students with intellectual disabilities to audit mainstream courses alongside their peers, with appropriate modifications. These are typically combined with specialised courses focused on life skills, career preparation, and independent living. Programmes adopt individualised study plans, allowing students to engage at different levels: some fully participate in classes (without the pressure of exams), while others attend courses primarily for social learning. The overarching philosophy is to maximise academic and social integration. This contrasts somewhat with TCPID, where students typically follow a separate set of modules (though they are based on university campuses). A key consideration for Northern Ireland is whether aspects of the curriculum could be integrated with mainstream university modules, enabling students to audit first-year courses in areas of interest. However, given the complexities involved, initial implementation may be more effective with a separate curriculum, similar to TCPID.

Funding Mechanisms

A significant driver for US inclusive higher education programmes has been federal funding through TPSID grants (Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities). These grants, administered by Think College's National Coordinating Center, have provided substantial financial support for developing and

enhancing programmes. Additionally, around 25% of programmes in the US are designated as Comprehensive Transition Programmes (CTPs), enabling eligible students to access federal financial aid for tuition. Many programmes also charge tuition fees, in some cases matching standard university tuition, while others offer reduced rates. Students often secure funding through scholarships, state rehabilitation funds, or personal resources. For instance, the REACH programme at the University of Iowa (discussed later) operates on a tuition-based model similar to a two-year college. This funding structure may not be directly applicable in Northern Ireland, where the aim would be to keep tuition low or at standard for participants. However, the grant-funded approach is relevant, as it highlights the need for government or philanthropic funding to support initial implementation. The Think College experience also demonstrates that, once initial funding is secured and positive outcomes are demonstrated, institutions often invest their own resources to sustain the programme, driven by institutional value and demand from families and students.

Student Outcomes: Data from Think College indicates strong employment and independent living outcomes for graduates.

One significant finding is that students with intellectual disabilities who attend college in the US are significantly more likely to secure employment, earning on average 73% higher weekly wages than their peers who do not pursue higher education. According to national data from 2019–2020, approximately 48% of students exiting these programmes had secured paid employment within 90 days of completion. This varies by programme length and level of support but serves as a useful benchmark. Another key outcome is further education, while the majority of students complete certificate-based programmes, a small percentage progress into degree programmes. In addition, many graduates report stronger social networks and increased self-determination due to their engagement with campus life.

> *For Northern Ireland, setting ambitious but achievable benchmarks based on these statistics could be valuable. For instance, a target of at least 50% of graduates securing paid employment could be reasonable, given that UI REACH achieves nearly 90% employment within a year of graduation. Strong employer partnerships will be essential to achieving these outcomes.*

Scalability and Sustainability: The US model highlights how inclusive higher education can scale significantly. The number of programmes has grown from a handful in the early 2000s to over 260 institutions today.

This expansion has been supported by:

- Federal legislation, including the Higher Education Opportunity Act

- Sustained funding competitions, which incentivise new programmes

- A national network (Think College), which fosters knowledge-sharing, research, and advocacy

While Northern Ireland operates on a much smaller scale, a national or all-Ireland network could serve a similar role, enabling institutions to share resources and best practices. The US experience also demonstrates that inclusive models can be adapted to different types of institutions, from rural colleges to major urban universities, suggesting that, with appropriate adaptation, a Northern Ireland-based programme could be replicated across different contexts.

Implications for Northern Ireland

The US model encourages mainstream academic integration, whereas TCPID follows a separate module-based approach. Northern Ireland could explore limited integration opportunities, such as auditing mainstream courses, but may find a separate curriculum more practical in the early stages.

Funding Mechanisms

US programmes benefit from federal grants and tuition fees, whereas Northern Ireland will likely need to secure government funding to ensure accessibility. The Think College model suggests that once a programme demonstrates success, institutions are more likely to fund its continuation.

Employment Outcomes

US data indicates that college graduates with intellectual disabilities achieve significantly better employment rates and wages. Northern Ireland should aim for strong graduate employment outcomes, with employer partnerships driving success.

Scalability and Sustainability

The US experience shows that inclusive higher education can expand significantly when supported by policy and funding. Establishing a cross-institutional network in Northern Ireland could help scale the model and share best practices.

8.2 REACH Programme (University of Iowa, USA)

The REACH Programme at the University of Iowa (Realising Educational and Career Hopes) is a structured two-year certificate course (with an optional third year) for students aged 18–25 with intellectual, cognitive, and learning disabilities. It provides a comprehensive university experience, including on-campus residency, specialised courses, the ability to audit mainstream classes, and extensive career development opportunities.

Key Features and Insights from REACH

Curriculum and Support

REACH balances academic enrichment with independent living and career preparation. The first year focuses on core subjects such as writing, maths, communication, and life skills, while the second year becomes more individualised, with electives and

off-campus internships. Students live in university accommodation with trained peer mentors, and social integration is actively facilitated through structured recreational activities and student clubs. Although the Northern Ireland programme may not be residential, it could adopt a similar approach by ensuring that students are actively engaged in extracurricular activities such as sports, societies, and social events.

Career Development and Outcomes

REACH has one of the highest employment success rates among inclusive higher education programmes, with approximately 89% of graduates employed within one year of completion.

This success is attributed to its structured career development framework, which includes:

Year 1: Career exploration, volunteering, and job shadowing

Year 2: Internships (both on and off-campus), with ongoing career coaching

A key insight for Northern Ireland is the importance of multiple internship opportunities rather than a single placement. REACH students complete several internships, starting with on-campus roles and progressing to external employers. The Northern Ireland model should consider integrating short-term work experiences alongside a full internship to maximise skill development and employability. Additionally, dedicated employment support staff (such as a "Job Developer" or Internship Coordinator) would be beneficial, as seen in REACH, where career staff actively broker placements and coach students in job skills throughout the programme.

Funding Model

REACH is primarily funded through tuition fees, which are substantial (comparable to private college tuition). However, many students receive funding from state disability agencies or scholarships. The University of Iowa also provides institutional support (such as dedicated accommodation and staff salaries), viewing REACH as part of its diversity and inclusion mission. For Northern Ireland, the tuition-based model is unlikely to be viable. Instead, public funding should cover costs to ensure accessibility. However, REACH demonstrates that families may be willing to contribute if outcomes are strong. In Northern Ireland, modest fees could supplement government funding if required.

Scalability

REACH remains a single-site programme, with around 30–40 students enrolled at a time. However, it has served as a successful model for other universities seeking to integrate structured, university-based inclusive programmes. For Northern Ireland, REACH reinforces that a two-year structured certificate within a university setting is viable. This aligns closely with TCPID's approach, further validating the model's potential success in Northern Ireland.

8.3 Uni 2 Beyond (University of Sydney, Australia)

Uni 2 Beyond, operated by the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Sydney, enables students with intellectual disabilities to audit mainstream university courses while participating in university life through mentoring and social integration. Unlike TCPID or REACH, Uni 2 Beyond does not offer an academic qualification, but participants receive a certificate of achievement upon completion.

Key Features and Insights from Uni 2 Beyond

Curriculum and Inclusion

Uni 2 Beyond represents a highly inclusive model, where students select two mainstream university subjects per semester based on personal interests. They attend lectures, engage in modified assignments where possible, and experience university learning without the pressure of formal assessments. A key support mechanism is the peer mentoring system, where university students assist participants in navigating the academic and social environment. For Northern Ireland, full inclusion in standard university courses may not be feasible initially, particularly for students requiring tailored support. However, offering opportunities to audit select mainstream courses in areas of strength could be a future development, allowing for a hybrid model combining core tailored modules with elective mainstream participation.

Funding Model

Uni 2 Beyond has faced significant financial challenges. In 2024, the programme was at risk of closure due to a lack of funding, only surviving through a philanthropic intervention by the JACE Foundation.

This reflects a broader issue in inclusive higher education, relying on short-term grants creates financial vulnerability.

For Northern Ireland, this underscores the importance of securing long-term public funding rather than relying solely on philanthropic donations.

That said, private funding can play a supplementary role. If Northern Ireland's programme demonstrates clear social impact, it may attract investment from foundations or corporate sponsors, in the way that TCPID has received donor support from The Ireland Funds.

Outcomes and Scalability

Uni 2 Beyond focuses on personal development rather than employment alone. Outcomes include:

- Increased independence and self-confidence
- Broadened social networks and integration into university culture
- Some graduates securing employment through the programme's internship scheme

The Northern Ireland model could incorporate aspects of both TCPID and Uni 2 Beyond, offering a structured certificate programme while providing optional audit opportunities in mainstream courses for students capable of engaging with standard university content.

Key Adaptation Insights for Northern Ireland

- Northern Ireland could establish its own cross-institutional network (similar to IN-HEF in Ireland) to share best practices and collaborate on programme design.

- The Irish government's investment suggests that Northern Ireland may need parity of opportunity, ensuring similar options for students with intellectual disabilities.

- Northern Ireland should build relationships with the emerging Irish network, potentially exploring cross-border collaboration, shared resources, and even student exchanges.

Comparative Summary Table: To encapsulate some differences, the following table compares TCPID (as the model for NI) with these international benchmarks on key dimensions:

Programme	Location	Curriculum Model	Funding	Student Outcomes	Scalability
TCPID (Trinity College Dublin) – planned NI adaptation	Dublin, Ireland (planning for NI)	Two-year separate curriculum (Level 5 certificate) covering academic and life skills; small cohort; final-semester internship with partners.	Core funding from Trinity College; philanthropic grants; business partner sponsorship; 3,500 euro in fees for students.	Approximately 25–34% internship-to-job conversion; graduates secure employment or progress to further education; improved independence and confidence.	Single site currently; Irish government scaling to 10 institutions (150 students) in 2024; model replicable with support.
Think College Network	USA (nationwide)	Varied (mostly two to four years); mix of inclusive auditing of mainstream courses and specialised supports; many offer certificates.	Federal grants (TPSID); student tuition/fees (with financial aid); state rehabilitation funding; mix of public and	Students with intellectual disabilities who attend are 26% more likely to have paid employment; 73% higher income. Many programmes achieve 40–50%+ employment at exit; notable gains in social	Expanding across the US; increased federal backing; institutions integrate models with flexibility to local contexts.

			private sources.	skills and self-determination. (State-wide)	
UI REACH (University of Iowa)	Iowa, USA	Two-year (extendable to four); structured curriculum including REACH-specific courses with option to audit university classes; on-campus living; multiple internships (on/off-campus).	Primarily tuition-based $40k/year scholarships and state funds for some; significant resource investment by university (staff, dormitories).	89% employment one year after graduation (one of the highest nationally); improved independent living – many graduates live semi-independently; some pursue further education or paid university roles.	Single-site programme but serves as a replicable model; other universities may adopt similar structured campus-based inclusive education models.
Uni 2 Beyond (University of Sydney)	Sydney, Australia	Two-year inclusive audit model – students audit one to two mainstream courses per semester with mentor support; plus, tailored mentoring and optional internships. No separate academic courses for credit (non-award programme).	Initially university-funded; later faced financial gaps; rescued by philanthropic funding (foundation). No student fees; reliant on grants and charity support for staff and coordination.	Qualitative outcomes: "much better employment outcomes" (anecdotal) for participants; growth in social networks, confidence, and life skills. Some interns secure jobs via programme. No formal qualification granted.	Limited slots (small cohorts of approximately six to ten students at a time). Recognised with national awards but faces sustainability challenges due to unstable funding. Potential for replication in other Australian universities, with some already developing similar small-scale initiatives.

Emerging UK models	UK (sporadic)	Historically non-existent or pilot-based; some further education-to-higher education link programmes (non-degree); growing discussions on alternative access routes.	No dedicated funding stream yet; any pilot likely relies on universities' widening participation funds or charity.	No sustained data due to limited implementation; expected benefits similar to international models (e.g., improved employment outcomes vs current baseline of near 0%, given the UK's current inaccessibility)	Virtually no presence yet; Northern Ireland's implementation could serve as a pathfinder for the UK. Requires overcoming traditional academic barriers to mainstream adoption.

8.4 Adaptation Insights for Northern Ireland

Based on the comparative analysis, several key insights emerge for adapting and optimising the Northern Ireland programme to align with successful international models while addressing local needs.

Emphasise Career Development

All successful models, TCPID, REACH, and many Think College programmes—place a strong emphasis on employment preparation and offer multiple opportunities for work-based learning. The Northern Ireland programme should follow suit, embedding internships and potentially an optional third "transition" year to maximise employability outcomes. UI REACH's exceptional job placement rate (89%) sets a high standard.

Achieving similar success in Northern Ireland will require dedicated personnel and resources to support employment pathways. This means incorporating:

- Multiple internships (both on-campus and external) rather than a single placement.

- Pre-employment training, including CV writing, interview coaching, and workplace etiquette.

- Ongoing career coaching to ensure post-graduation job retention.

This approach will increase the likelihood of long-term employment for graduates and strengthen the programme's credibility with both students and policymakers.

Balance Inclusion with Support

There is a spectrum between separate and inclusive models:

- TCPID follows a structured, separate curriculum.

- Uni 2 Beyond allows full inclusion in mainstream university courses.

- REACH blends elements of both.

For Northern Ireland, the best approach may be a hybrid model, starting with a dedicated, structured curriculum to ensure feasibility. Inclusion pathways should be introduced gradually by:

- Allowing students to audit a mainstream university module with mentor support.

- Encouraging participation in university clubs and societies to promote social integration.

This progressive inclusion strategy would provide the benefits of social engagement seen in more inclusive models, while maintaining a structured learning environment tailored to the specific needs of students.

Funding Mix and Sustainability

A stable funding model is essential for long-term viability. Government funding (as seen in Ireland) is the ideal solution, but international examples highlight the risks of relying solely on state support:

- Uni 2 Beyond faced near-closure due to unstable funding.

- Think College programmes use a mix of federal grants, tuition fees, and philanthropy.

To ensure financial sustainability in Northern Ireland, the programme should:

- Prioritise government backing (e.g., through the Department for the Economy).

- Diversify funding streams by engaging:

    o Philanthropic donors (e.g., corporate sponsors, charitable foundations).

    o Employer partnerships (e.g., businesses funding internship placements).

- Demonstrate cost-effectiveness by showcasing how graduate employment reduces long-term welfare dependency, a persuasive argument for policymakers.

If necessary, a modest tuition fee or training allowance could be considered (as in some US models), but ensuring accessibility for all students is paramount.

Data and Research to Strengthen Impact

The US has built a strong evidence base through Think College, with annual reports and research studies driving policy changes. Northern Ireland's programme should incorporate a research component from the outset to:

- Track graduate outcomes (employment, independence, further education).

- Provide continuous quality improvement through feedback loops.

- Support future funding bids with robust data demonstrating impact.

This could be achieved by:

- Assigning a PhD student or dedicated research team to evaluate long-term success.

- Publishing findings in academic journals and policy papers.

- Participating in international comparative studies to share best practices and cement the programme's reputation.

By embedding a research framework, Northern Ireland's programme could contribute to the international discourse on inclusive higher education, while securing its own long-term viability.

Cultural and Contextual Fit for Northern Ireland

While drawing on international models, the programme must be adapted to Northern Ireland's unique context:

- Strong community networks: The programme could partner with local organisations (e.g., community volunteering initiatives) to enhance students' social and employment skills.

- Regional job market: Identifying growth industries in Northern Ireland, such as ICT, the public sector, and hospitality, will help align internships with real employment opportunities.

- Targeted skills development: Tailoring optional course content to match local industry needs (e.g., digital literacy for office-based roles) will improve graduate employability.

International programmes often align with regional employment demands. For example, some US programmes specialise in hospitality training due to local tourism industries. Northern Ireland should adopt a similar strategy by focusing internships and skills training on sectors with high hiring potential.

8.5 Conclusion

The comparative analysis of inclusive higher education models—Think College (USA), the REACH Programme (USA), and Uni 2 Beyond (Australia)—demonstrates that while approaches vary, common success factors emerge: strong career development pathways, a balanced model of inclusion and structured support, sustainable funding, and ongoing research to inform policy and practice. These insights provide a clear roadmap for how Northern Ireland can design and implement a robust, impactful programme for students with intellectual disabilities.

A key takeaway from these international models is the strong emphasis on employment outcomes. High graduate employment rates, such as REACH's 89% success rate, are achieved through multiple internships, dedicated job coaching, and structured career preparation. For Northern Ireland, adopting a similar employment-first approach will be essential in demonstrating long-term impact to funders, policymakers, and employers. This requires intentional partnerships with businesses and a structured work experience model that begins early and continues beyond graduation. The balance between structured learning and inclusive opportunities is also a central consideration. The hybrid model, which combines a dedicated curriculum with progressive inclusion in mainstream university activities, offers a scalable and sustainable approach. Ensuring that students benefit from social integration, campus engagement, and access to mainstream university life, while still receiving targeted academic and vocational support, will create a programme that is both effective and adaptable.

Financial sustainability is another critical lesson from the international landscape. While government investment is the most stable funding source, the experiences of Think College and Uni 2 Beyond highlight the need for diversified funding streams. Northern Ireland must secure a mix of government backing, philanthropic support, and employer partnerships to protect the programme's long-term viability. Additionally, building a strong evidence base through research, as seen in Think College's policy impact, will be crucial in securing funding, improving programme quality, and demonstrating value to decision-makers. Finally, the Northern Irish context means leveraging local strengths, such as strong community networks and emerging employment sectors, will allow the programme to align with regional workforce needs. Developing sector-specific skills training, particularly in growth industries such as ICT, public services, and hospitality, will maximise graduates' employment prospects. By drawing on these international best practices while adapting to Northern Ireland's unique needs, this programme has the potential to transform access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities, setting a new standard for inclusion and employment-focused learning. With the right funding, strategic partnerships, and an evidence-based approach, Northern Ireland can build a leading model of inclusive higher education, ensuring that students with intellectual disabilities are fully equipped for independence, employment, and long-term success.

9. Models for Implementation in Northern Ireland

Building on the preceding analysis, this section outlines specific models and approaches for implementing the programme in Northern Ireland. It presents a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to assess Northern Ireland's readiness to adopt the TCPID model, alongside an evaluation of key challenges and proposed mitigation strategies. This structured approach will enable Northern Ireland to leverage its strengths, address existing challenges, and develop a sustainable framework for the successful establishment and long-term viability of the programme. Using the TCPID model, insights from staff interviews, an evaluation of funding models, and a comparative analysis of international inclusive higher education programmes, this section presents a structured SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats). By leveraging proven frameworks, addressing anticipated challenges, and drawing on international best practices, this SWOT analysis lays the foundation for a sustainable and scalable implementation strategy. The findings will inform key decisions on funding, institutional structure, and stakeholder engagement, ensuring that the programme is both viable and impactful in the long term.

9.1 SWOT Analysis

Strengths (Internal Advantages for Implementation)

- Northern Ireland benefits from an existing successful template, as it can leverage the proven TCPID programme framework, including its curriculum, support model, and student outcomes, minimising trial-and-error and ensuring a structured, evidence-based implementation.

- The educational infrastructure in Northern Ireland is well-established, with reputable higher education institutions such as Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University, and Stranmillis University College. These institutions have expertise in teacher training, inclusive education, and community engagement, providing an ideal foundation for hosting and supporting the programme.

- A small cohort size is another advantage, as Northern Ireland's relatively low student numbers will allow for close monitoring, tailored support, and a high-quality student experience. Additionally, the strong community support networks, including advocacy groups like Mencap NI and Positive Futures, could assist with recruitment, transition planning, and job coaching, fostering a supportive ecosystem for students.

- The programme also aligns with Northern Ireland's legislative commitments to equality and inclusion under Section 75 of the NI Act, reinforcing its legitimacy and increasing the likelihood of institutional and governmental backing. Furthermore, compelling personal stories from potential students can serve as powerful tools for garnering media attention, securing funding, and strengthening public support for the initiative.

Weaknesses (Internal Challenges to Overcome)

- A major challenge is the lack of precedent for inclusive higher education in Northern Ireland, meaning institutions may initially hesitate due to uncertainty about how to accommodate students with intellectual disabilities. This could lead to scepticism, which must be addressed through targeted training and partnerships with experienced institutions.

- Resource intensity is another issue, as the programme will require low student-staff ratios, specialist support, and bespoke learning materials, all within a higher education sector already facing budget constraints. Universities may struggle to justify funding a small cohort that does not generate standard tuition income, requiring strong institutional buy-in and external funding support.

- Another risk is the fragmentation of responsibilities between departments, as the programme sits at the intersection of education and social care. Without coordination between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities, critical aspects, such as student support services and employment pathways, could be overlooked.

- There is also a limited employer awareness regarding the capabilities of graduates with intellectual disabilities. Many businesses in Northern Ireland lack experience in inclusive hiring, meaning employer engagement will require significant effort to shift attitudes and ensure sufficient internship placements[47]. Additionally, the current transition services landscape in Northern Ireland tends to funnel students into day centres/day opportunities provision or further education courses with (at times) limited employment outcomes. Overcoming these low expectations among families, educators, and students themselves will be essential for recruitment and long-term success.

- Scalability is also a concern, as Northern Ireland's small population means the programme will serve limited student numbers per year. This could make it harder to justify significant dedicated infrastructure or resources, and small sample sizes may lead to overgeneralised conclusions based on a few students' experiences.

Opportunities (External Factors that Can Be Leveraged)

- The current policy environment presents an opportunity, as disability employment is a focus of both UK and NI policy discussions, and there is a clear commitment to meeting the needs of children and young people with SEN in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government. Additionally, cross-border collaboration with the Irish government, which has already funded 11 higher education institutions to develop inclusive programmes, could provide opportunities for joint initiatives, knowledge exchange, and potential Shared Island or EU PEACE Plus funding.

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[47] https://www.bitcni.org.uk/education-jobs/

- Another key opportunity is corporate social responsibility (CSR), as many multinational companies based in Belfast actively seek diversity and inclusion initiatives. This could lead to strong employer partnerships, internship opportunities, and potential corporate sponsorships.

- Northern Ireland also has an opportunity to become a UK leader in inclusive higher education, as very few comparable programmes exist. By pioneering this approach, local universities could gain recognition, attract research grants, and position themselves as innovators in inclusion.

- Additionally, there is demonstrated demand from families seeking post-school opportunities for young people with intellectual disabilities. These families are likely to be strong advocates, pushing for the programme's success and expansion once established. Finally, addressing the disability employment gap in Northern Ireland, one of the largest in the UK, presents an opportunity to make a measurable impact on workforce diversity.

Threats (External Risks That Could Hinder Success)

- A key threat is political instability, as Northern Ireland's devolved government has faced multiple suspensions, leading to delayed policy decisions and stalled funding allocations. Additionally, economic downturns and budget cuts could place financial pressure on the programme, particularly if it is seen as serving a relatively small group of students.

- Cultural misconceptions could also pose a challenge. If negative incidents occur, such as an employer struggling with accommodations or a student facing barriers whilst on placement, this could reinforce pre-existing biases that higher education is "not suitable" for students with intellectual disabilities.

- Competition for resources within universities could be another threat, as other widening participation initiatives may take priority over this programme. Additionally, safeguarding concerns, such as ensuring student safety on campus and in workplaces, must be proactively addressed to prevent reputational risks.

- Finally, graduate retention could be a challenge. If Northern Ireland's labour market remains inaccessible, successful graduates may relocate elsewhere to find employment, limiting the programme's local impact.

9.2 Conclusion

The SWOT analysis, informed by the TCPID model, staff interviews, comparative research, and funding evaluations, demonstrates that Northern Ireland has both the opportunity and the imperative to establish a world-class inclusive higher education programme. The strengths, a strong higher education sector, engaged advocacy networks, and alignment with legislative commitments to equality, provide a solid foundation. However, challenges such as institutional unfamiliarity, funding constraints, and employer readiness must be proactively addressed to ensure the programme's long-term viability and effectiveness.

The funding model is a critical factor in determining the success, sustainability, and scalability of this initiative. While philanthropy and corporate partnerships can supplement the programme, international best practice shows that a government-backed model is essential to ensure:

- Guaranteed accessibility so that students with intellectual disabilities are not excluded due to financial barriers.

- Institutional embedding within the higher education system, ensuring that universities see this as a core programme rather than a discretionary initiative.

- Sustained impact by aligning with national strategies on employment, disability inclusion, and economic participation, ensuring that graduate outcomes contribute to wider workforce and social policy objectives.

- Cross-departmental coordination, particularly between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities, ensuring a joined-up approach that supports both education and employment pathways.

The government must take the lead in funding this programme as a strategic investment in both educational equality and economic empowerment. A government-backed model ensures that this initiative is not merely a tokenistic, temporary or aspirational project but a permanent, structural change in Northern Ireland's higher education and employment landscape. The case is not just one of inclusiveness, it is one of economic and social progress. By embedding inclusive higher education into mainstream policy and funding frameworks, Northern Ireland has the opportunity to lead the UK in disability-inclusive education, providing a replicable model that advances both social justice and economic productivity. A long-term government commitment will ensure that young people with an intellectual disability have the opportunity to access higher education, develop employable skills, and contribute to society in a meaningful way.

10. Validation and Student Recruitment

Implementing the TCPID programme in Northern Ireland requires careful attention to qualification validation within Northern Ireland's framework and the student recruitment process. This section examines both areas, ensuring that the programme delivers a recognised qualification and effectively identifies, recruits, and admits students who will benefit from participation.

10.1 Validation within NI's Qualifications Framework

The TCPID programme at Trinity College Dublin awards a Level 5 Certificate aligned with Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). However, Northern Ireland and the wider UK operate under different qualifications frameworks, necessitating a formal mapping process to ensure that the programme confers a qualification with tangible value for students.

10.2 Mapping NFQ Level 5 to UK Frameworks

As previously noted, NFQ Level 5 aligns with the UK's Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). Given the broad knowledge base, practical skills focus, and structured learning under guidance in TCPID's curriculum, it would be important to align with the appropriate level of study under the RQF. Thus, the Northern Ireland programme would likely be structured as a "Certificate in Inclusive Practice" or a similar title. It is essential to clearly communicate that while the course would be delivered within a university setting, it is not a degree level qualification, and therefore there is a need to set appropriate expectations for students, families and employers.

10.3 Accrediting Body Options

To formally validate the qualification, two primary accreditation pathways exist:

University-Accredited Certificate

If the host university has degree-awarding powers, it could approve the programme as an official university-awarded certificate. For example, Queen's University Belfast or Stranmillis University College could confer a "Certificate in Inclusive Applied Practice", recognising the programme within their academic framework. To achieve this, the programme team would submit the curriculum for approval through the university's programme validation committee, demonstrating alignment with QAA quality standards. The process would involve appointing external examiners (likely from another UK university) to oversee quality assurance. Upon approval, graduates would receive a university-awarded certificate, enhancing the programme's credibility and prestige.

External Awarding Body

Alternatively, the programme could seek accreditation from an established awarding body which offers appropriate qualifications in life skills and employability. While an

off-the-shelf qualification may not fully reflect TCPID's holistic curriculum, a customised qualification could be developed to ensure programme-specific relevance. The key advantage is that quality assurance would be externally managed, though this route may provide less institutional prestige compared to a university-awarded qualification. Stranmillis University College has, for instance, a very strong and well-established relationship with a wide range of awarding organisations capable of providing potential routes to accreditation.

Professional Certification

The programme could also integrate micro-credentials or professional certificates into specific modules. For example, students could obtain a Level 2 ICT Skills certificate, a food hygiene qualification, or workplace safety training, supplementing the core programme with additional industry-recognised credentials.

Recommendation for Validation

The strongest approach would be securing university validation, as this would:

- Ensure students graduate with a formal university-awarded qualification, giving them alumni status and enhancing employability prospects.

- Provide a quality assurance framework aligned with UK higher education standards.

- Offer institutional prestige, increasing recognition among employers and further education providers.

Appropriate arrangements would be required to either validate suitable courses or to create special categories (e.g., a "Certificate of Achievement"). Given the progressive nature of inclusive education, institutions such as QUB or Stranmillis should consider adapting their academic regulations to accommodate this innovative programme. Coordination with Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines will be crucial, particularly regarding inclusive education frameworks.

Ensuring Recognition and Progression Pathways

Once validated, the qualification must be recognised by employers and training providers. To achieve this:

- Modules should align with recognised standards, ensuring that students gain competencies at a level equivalent to other comparable qualifications.

- Progression pathways should be explored: for example, agreements with suitable external providers to enable graduates to continue on to other appropriate courses, apprenticeships, or specific employment pathways.

By ensuring the qualification is widely understood and valued, graduates will have greater access to employment and further training opportunities.

10.4 Student Recruitment and Admissions Strategy

The programme is designed for young adults with intellectual disabilities, particularly those who have completed secondary education in special schools and/or learning support centres attached to mainstream schools, further education, or alternative training settings. The primary target group includes:

- School leavers (aged 18–19) from special schools or Learning Support Units.

- Young adults (up to mid-20s or 30s) who may have missed earlier opportunities but would still benefit.

- Students from mainstream schools with significant learning difficulties, who may have struggled with traditional qualifications but have the potential to engage in an inclusive learning environment.

Outreach and Recruitment Channels

A proactive recruitment strategy should include:

- Special Schools and Learning Support Units – Engaging principals, transition coordinators, and educational psychologists to identify suitable candidates.

- Further Education Colleges – Connecting with FE support teams to recruit students from Entry-Level and Level 1–2 courses.

- Disability Organisations – Partnering with Mencap, the Cedar Foundation, and Enable NI to reach young people and families.

- Social Workers and Health Trusts – Ensuring learning disability teams are aware of the programme and can refer students.

- Media and Word of Mouth – Using press coverage, radio features, and social media to increase awareness.

All marketing materials should be in accessible, easy-read formats to ensure students can independently understand the programme's opportunities.

Admissions Criteria and Selection Process

To ensure students best suited to the programme are selected, admissions criteria should include:

- A diagnosed intellectual disability (moderate range), typically evidenced by special education attendance, a statement of special educational needs, or relevant disability benefits.

- Ages 18+ (potentially extending to 30), with a focus on young adults transitioning from school.

- A demonstrated interest in further education and skill development.

- Basic communication and social skills to participate in a group learning environment.

The selection process should mirror TCPID's model, including:

- A simplified application form (allowing alternative formats such as video submissions).
- References from teachers or support workers to confirm suitability.
- An open day and taster sessions to familiarise students and families.
- Interviews and group activities, using a practical, accessible approach to assess motivation and engagement.
- If oversubscription occurs, a fair selection process should ensure diversity in student backgrounds while maintaining a balanced cohort.

Transition Support

To ensure a smooth transition, additional measures should include:

- Pre-start orientation sessions to familiarise students with campus, staff, and expectations.
- Liaison with previous schools and colleges to develop individual support strategies.
- Engagement with families and caregivers to address concerns and set expectations.

By adopting an inclusive, structured, and transparent recruitment process, the programme can attract highly engaged students who will thrive and contribute to its long-term success.

10.5 Conclusion

The successful implementation of this inclusive higher education programme at Stranmillis University College, Belfast requires a strategic approach to qualification validation and student recruitment, ensuring that graduates leave with a recognised, valued and impactful certification. A university-awarded Level 3 Certificate represents the most credible and sustainable validation model, conferring institutional prestige, employer recognition, and a clear progression pathway for graduates. To maximise long-term impact, validation must be aligned with UK qualifications frameworks, ensuring the certificate is widely understood and accepted by employers, further education providers, and policymakers. The programme's alignment with Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) standards will further enhance its credibility, positioning it as a pioneering model for inclusive education in Northern Ireland.

Recruitment and admissions strategies must be proactive, inclusive, and structured, ensuring that eligible students are identified, supported, and empowered to transition successfully. Engagement with mainstream and special schools, FE colleges, disability organisations, and employer networks will be essential to building awareness and attracting highly engaged students. A clear, structured selection process will ensure that those who enrol can fully benefit from the programme, while outreach efforts will help to establish a pipeline of future applicants, demonstrating wider demand and supporting long-term expansion. This programme represents a transformational opportunity for Northern Ireland, addressing critical gaps in higher education access and employment pathways for students with intellectual disabilities. By embedding a rigorous validation process, securing employer recognition, and implementing a targeted recruitment strategy, Northern Ireland can establish a leading model of inclusive education, one that not only enhances social and economic inclusion but also sets a benchmark for policy and practice across the UK and beyond.

11. Conclusion: Long-Term Scalability and Sustainability

The implementation of the TCPID programme in Northern Ireland must be approached with a long-term vision that extends beyond the initial pilot phase. Ensuring scalability and sustainability requires careful planning in relation to programme expansion, employer collaboration, financial stability and institutional integration. This section outlines the strategies that will allow the programme to grow in reach, maintain employer engagement, and secure financial and policy support to ensure its permanent place in Northern Ireland's higher education and employment landscape.

11.1 Future Expansion and Reach

The ultimate goal is to provide inclusive higher education opportunities to as many individuals with intellectual disabilities in Northern Ireland as possible. While the initial rollout will likely focus on a single institution with a small cohort, there are several scaling pathways to expand reach over time.

11.2 Increasing Cohort Size at the Initial Institution

If the pilot phase proves successful and demand remains high, the first step towards expansion is to gradually increase the number of students admitted each year. For example, intake could grow from 6 to 10 students. However, it is essential that growth does not compromise quality, particularly in terms of staff-student ratios, access to support, and campus integration. Adequate resourcing and infrastructure expansion (such as classroom space and peer mentoring availability) must be considered.

11.3 Replicating the Programme at Additional Sites

Given Northern Ireland's geographical spread, a single site in Belfast may limit accessibility for students in more remote areas. A medium-term goal could be to introduce additional sites in strategic locations, such as:

- Derry/Londonderry (e.g., Magee College, Ulster University) – to serve the north-west.

- Coleraine or Ballymena – to improve access in the northern region.

- Armagh or Enniskillen – to support students in the south and west.

These could function as satellite programmes, either run independently by host institutions or through a networked model, where the original Stranmillis programme provides curriculum, training, and oversight. A Northern Ireland Inclusive Higher Education Network (NIIHEN) could be established, mirroring the Irish INHEF model, to ensure consistency and knowledge-sharing across multiple institutions. Expanding to a second site within 3–4 years of the initial launch would provide a structured approach to scaling while leveraging the experience of the pilot site's team.

11.4 Incorporating a Broader Age and Continuing Education Component

Beyond young adults transitioning from secondary education, a future expansion could include a part-time or continuing education option for older adults with intellectual disabilities who may not have had access to such opportunities previously. This could take the form of an evening or weekend programme, with a stronger emphasis on lifelong learning and social inclusion rather than employment. However, this should only be considered once the core full-time programme is fully established.

11.5 Integration with Mainstream Further and Higher Education Pathways

Another form of scalability is the progressive integration of students into mainstream further or higher education. While the core programme is designed to be self-contained, some students may develop the skills and confidence to transition into foundation degrees, vocational qualifications, or apprenticeships. Supporting such progression would demonstrate the long-term impact of the programme, creating an inclusive pipeline into the wider education system.

11.6 Employer Collaboration – Long-Term Strategy

A critical aspect of long-term sustainability is maintaining and expanding employer engagement. As the programme gains credibility, the employer network should grow beyond initial business partners, ensuring that students have diverse career pathways.

11.7 Establishing an Employer Advisory Council

To strengthen employer engagement over time, a formal advisory group comprising key long-term business partners could be established. This council would:

- Provide strategic input on aligning the curriculum with industry trends.

- Serve as champions for the programme within their respective sectors.

- Mentor new employer partners, supporting them in creating inclusive work environments.

This type of structured engagement ensures that employers remain invested in the programme beyond their initial involvement.

11.8 Creating Industry-Specific Employment Pipelines

As employer networks grow, clusters of partners in specific sectors (e.g., hospitality, IT support, public administration) may emerge. The programme could respond by developing tailored skill pathways that prepare students for particular industries. For example:

- Hospitality Pathway: Training in customer service and food safety leading to internships in hotels and cafés.
- IT Support Pathway: Basic digital skills training, preparing students for administrative or tech support roles.

This structured approach would improve employability outcomes while incentivising employer participation.

11.9 Encouraging Graduate Employment Beyond Programme Partners

As the programme becomes established and recognised, graduates should not be limited to partner employers but should be seen as viable hires across a wider labour market. Strategies to achieve this include:

- Hosting inclusive job fairs showcasing graduates' skills.
- Inviting new employers to student exhibitions and graduation events.
- Creating an employer-facing graduate directory, making it easy for companies to hire programme alumni.

This approach will ensure that graduates gain employment in a broad range of industries, further embedding the programme into Northern Ireland's employment ecosystem.

11.10 Financial Sustainability Strategies

For long-term sustainability, funding must shift from short-term project-based support to stable, mainstream budget allocations.

Mainstreaming the Programme into Public Budgets

The programme should be fully integrated into core government funding streams. After the pilot phase, a permanent funding commitment from the Department for the Economy (DfE) should be secured, ensuring that a set number of student places are funded annually. Additional integration into economic development funding streams, such as the City Deal or workforce inclusion budgets, may also provide long-term financial stability.

Cost Efficiency Without Compromising Quality

Efficiency strategies could include:

- Graduates returning as peer mentors or support staff, reducing reliance on external hires.
- Embedding disability support within the wider university infrastructure, distributing workload across student services.
- Leveraging external funding for technological enhancements, such as assistive learning platforms or digital skills training, reducing direct programme costs.

However, cost-cutting should never come at the expense of essential student support. Efficiency should be driven by innovation and collaboration, not reductions in quality.

Data-Driven Value for Money Assessment

To maintain government and employer investment, impact measurement is essential. The programme should collect data on employment rates, graduate earnings, and social independence, demonstrating its return on investment. A formal cost-benefit analysis, potentially conducted after five years, could provide robust evidence for sustained or increased government funding.

Diversified Funding Model

While public funding should form the core, additional revenue streams can enhance and future-proof the programme. These could include:

- Employer contributions, either through internship stipends or a corporate partnership model.
- Fundraising initiatives, such as annual donor events featuring alumni success stories.
- International and research grants, funding curriculum development and innovation.

By diversifying funding sources, the programme will remain financially resilient, even in changing economic climates.

11.11 Embedding the Programme in Policy and Culture

Institutional Commitment

To ensure long-term sustainability, the host institution must take ownership and pride in the programme. By integrating it into the university's identity, it becomes a valued and protected initiative, rather than a temporary pilot.

Embedding Inclusive Higher Education in Policy

Securing a formal commitment in government policy (such as a future NI disability strategy) would help protect the programme from political shifts. Linking the initiative to economic inclusion frameworks will also enhance its strategic importance.

11.12 Community Ownership and Adaptability

Fostering Community Ownership

For the programme to thrive in the long term, it must be embedded not only within educational and employment frameworks but also within the wider community. A strong sense of public ownership will ensure that it is recognised as a valuable initiative that benefits society as a whole. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through media engagement. Publicising graduate success stories, such as a former special school student now thriving in employment, will help to increase awareness and build widespread support. Coverage in local and national media outlets, social media campaigns, and employer testimonials can shape public perception and generate goodwill. When a programme is seen as transforming lives and contributing positively to the economy, it becomes more difficult to ignore or underfund. A programme with strong public sentiment is more likely to attract continued political support, as policymakers are responsive to voter interest and community priorities. Beyond media engagement, family involvement remains crucial post-graduation. Alumni families can serve as ambassadors for the programme, offering firsthand accounts of its impact and advocating for its continued expansion and resourcing. Keeping these families engaged, whether through alumni networking events, advisory roles, or advocacy initiatives, helps to create a sustained, multi-generational network of supporters. This long-term community involvement reinforces the programme's value and helps to secure its place within Northern Ireland's educational landscape.

11.13 Adapting to Changing Needs

A sustainable programme must be agile and responsive to shifts in education, employment, and societal needs. Long-term sustainability depends not only on financial and institutional security but also on continuous innovation and adaptability.

Aligning with Labour Market Changes

The employment landscape is constantly evolving, and the programme must adapt accordingly. Technological advancements, automation, and emerging industries will reshape job opportunities over time. To remain relevant, the programme should undergo a structured review every 3–5 years, incorporating employer feedback, alumni insights, and sectoral research. This will ensure that curricula, skills training, and internship opportunities remain aligned with workforce demands.

Evolving Student Demographics and Needs

As early intervention and inclusive education improve, the profile of students entering the programme may shift. Future cohorts may have higher baseline skills, requiring more advanced content, or a broader range of learning needs, necessitating enhanced support structures. The admissions criteria and curriculum should remain flexible and responsive to these demographic changes, ensuring that students continue to receive tailored, effective support.

Harnessing Technology for Enhanced Learning

Integrating cutting-edge educational technology can significantly enhance student engagement, independence, and employability. Innovations such as assistive learning tools, virtual reality for workplace training, and AI-driven career coaching platforms could be incorporated into the programme. These technologies not only improve learning outcomes but also attract investment and external funding from tech firms and research grants, reinforcing long-term sustainability.

Introducing Micro-Credentials and Specialist Pathways

To ensure that graduates remain competitive and adaptable, the programme could introduce micro-credentials or specialist certifications in key areas such as digital skills, customer service, or workplace health and safety. These industry-recognised qualifications would enhance employability and align with lifelong learning trends, making the programme more dynamic and future-proof.

Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Institutional Knowledge Transfer

For any long-term initiative, leadership continuity is essential. Founding staff members play a pivotal role in shaping the ethos and operations of the programme, and succession planning must be a priority to safeguard institutional knowledge and best practices. Strategies such as shadowing programmes for new staff, comprehensive training manuals, and structured handover processes can ensure that the programme's mission and operational integrity persist beyond individual leadership changes. By cultivating broad community ownership, adapting to societal shifts, and ensuring leadership continuity, the programme can evolve from a pioneering initiative into a permanent pillar of inclusive education in Northern Ireland. Its ability to respond to change, align with workforce needs, and maintain strong community support will be the foundation of its success for decades to come.

11.14 Establishing a Permanent, Scalable, and Sustainable Model

The long-term success of this programme depends on its ability to scale strategically, secure financial stability, and embed itself within Northern Ireland's educational and economic framework. A measured expansion strategy, beginning with an incremental increase in cohort sizes, followed by the establishment of additional sites, will ensure that opportunities are accessible to individuals across the region.

Growth must be matched with proportional investment in staffing, resources, and employer partnerships to maintain the high standard of support and student outcomes. A structured employer engagement strategy will be essential to sustaining meaningful employment pathways for graduates. The development of industry-specific skills pipelines, an employer advisory council, and alumni employment support mechanisms will strengthen the long-term integration of graduates into the workforce.

Employers must not only be partners in internships but also long-term advocates for the programme, ensuring its graduates are recognised beyond initial business networks. Securing permanent public sector funding is paramount to the programme's

sustainability. Government commitment must evolve from short-term project-based funding to an institutionalised budget allocation that recognises the programme's contribution to economic and social inclusion. While philanthropic and employer contributions can enhance provision, they must complement, rather than replace, a core government investment.

Demonstrating a clear social return on investment, cost-effectiveness and long-term economic benefits, including increased employment and reduced reliance on social care, will further justify ongoing public funding. Beyond funding, policy embedding is critical. The programme should be explicitly recognised within Northern Ireland's strategic frameworks for higher education, disability inclusion, and workforce development. Establishing formal policy commitments and institutional integration will ensure its longevity beyond changes in government or funding cycles.

Ultimately, this programme represents an opportunity for Northern Ireland to lead the way in inclusive higher education. By scaling with integrity, securing institutional and financial sustainability, and ensuring long-term employer engagement, it can become a permanent, transformative force, empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities to access higher education, achieve meaningful employment, and contribute fully to society. This is not just an initiative; it is the foundation of a systemic change that will shape the future of inclusive education and workforce participation in Northern Ireland for generations to come.