

# TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: POLICIES, TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

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## **Abstract**

Inclusive education policies have played a key role in optimising young adults with special educational needs' (SEN) opportunities to access higher education, especially of those with learning difficulties. These policies have facilitated access to secondary education and success in school by (1) requiring education systems to combine efficiency and equity, and (2) by empowering schools and higher education institutions to meet their accessibility requirement and support students in satisfying academic requirements (OECD, 2011). However, access of young adults with SEN to higher education is not as smooth as it is for other young adults, particularly not for those with psychological or behavioural problems. This paper looks at explanatory reasons and builds upon an OECD project analysing transition policies developed by 7 OECD countries in the past decade (Ebersold, 2012).

**Keywords:** transitions, efficiency, equity, participation in higher education, inclusive education

## **INTRODUCTION**

Access to higher education is an integral part of the right to education and a major condition for social and professional inclusion, especially in times of economic recession when youth unemployment rises faster than that of the workforce as a whole. Access to higher education reduces the burden of prejudice with respect to disability and increases the chances of employment by enhancing, *inter alia*, the means for young adults with SEN to cope with transition periods, and by preventing those who wish and are able to work from gradually withdrawing from the labour market and being excluded (Bjerkan, Veenstra, & Eriksen., 2009; Gannon, & Nolan, 2008; OECD, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2008).

Moving from upper secondary to higher education also means entering into adulthood and facing new challenges. It requires, for example, individuals to define goals and means that enable them to be proactively included into society and to shift from the role of a pupil to that of student who chooses a course of further study in light of his or her interests and professional choices and may be required to combine study and work (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

Young adults with SEN face additional challenges that have an impact on their outlook for transition to higher education. Their access to support and accommodation depends on their ability to disclose their needs, although many of them (especially when having a specific learning difficulty or a psychological disorder) hesitate or refuse to do so because they fear to be labelled or do not consider themselves “disabled” (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). Their transition to higher education may also be hampered by specific gaps and bottlenecks that impede their progression beyond secondary education. For example, in many countries changes in definitions or approaches to disability occur while transiting to adulthood, and young adults with SEN have to restart administrative procedures that are costly in energy and time and can jeopardise their access to higher education (Dewson, Aston, Bates, Ritchie, & Dyson, 2004; Felkendorff, & Lischer, 2005). Gaps and bottlenecks may also be related to the cross-ministerial dimension of disability when responsibilities and tasks are compartmentalised, when cooperation is hampered for privacy issues or when coordination at local level is weak. In most countries the responsibility for ensuring institutional accessibility lies with the education system, while the provision of support to compensate for disability falls within the health or social sector.

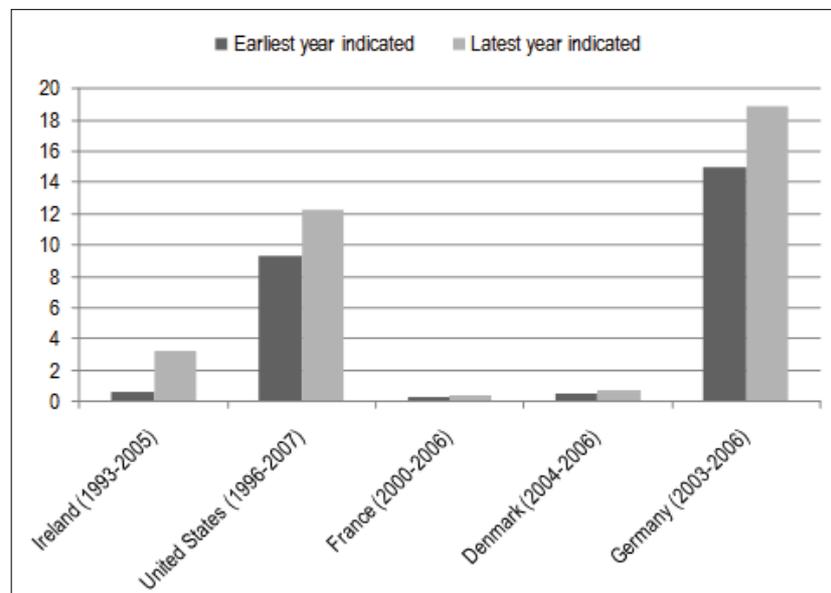
Thus, transition to higher education does not depend solely on the capacity of education systems to be equitable in terms of access and success, but also on their ability to support students with SEN in adapting to the changes inherent to the passage to adulthood. This requires education systems to prevent any discontinuities resulting from compartmentalisation of different levels and sectors of education, as well as of ministries involved in the education of persons with SEN. Transition to higher education demands support and guidance services that aim at empowering the latter to assume new responsibilities and roles, and accompany them all along the transition process beyond simply informing them about existing opportunities. Therefore, this paper focuses on the ability of inclusive education policies to promote opportunities for smooth transition of students with SEN to higher education. Transition policies developed in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Norway, Ireland and the United States are thereby taken as a reference. The paper builds upon national reports delivered by these countries and on the site visits carried out in 2009 (Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, 2009; U.S. US Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, (2010); Délégation ministérielle à l’emploi des personnes handicapées, 2009; Danish Ministry of Education et al., 2009, Legard, 2009; Higher Education Authority, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, Office

of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2010). These reports cover the definitions of disability, information on existing data, policies developed over the last ten years, existing modes of funding, existing provision and support services, training provided, parental and community involvement. They also highlight anticipated trends in future policy developments both in the short and long term, and indicate their highest priorities for future development in order to facilitate the transition of persons with disabilities or learning difficulties to higher education and/or to employment.

### INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

As described in figure 1, the number of students with SEN enrolled in higher education in recent years has increased in most OECD countries. In Germany, the proportion of students reporting a health problem rose from 15% in 2003 to 18.5% of the student body in 2006, while those reporting a disability or a health problem in France doubled between 2000 and 2008 to 0.4% of the student body. The number of students reporting a disability in Denmark rose by 24% to 0.68% of the student body between 2004 and 2006 whereas, the proportion of young adults with SEN enrolled in higher education in the United States rose from 9.2% in 1996 to 10.3% in 2003 (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009).

Figure 1. Students with SEN enrolled in higher education  
As a share of total students enrolled



Source : Denmark: Danish Ministry of Education and Rambøll Management (2009), "Pathways

for Disabled Students to higher Education and Employment”, Country background report, Copenhagen; France: Délégation ministérielle à l’emploi des personnes handicapées (2009), “Parcours des personnes handicapées vers l’enseignement supérieur et vers l’emploi”, Rapport de pays, ministère de l’Éducation nationale, Paris; Ireland: Higher Education Authority (2009), “OECD project on pathways for disabled students to higher education and to employment”, Country background report, Department of Education and Skills, Dublin; Germany: Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (2007), *Die wirtschaftliche und soziale Lage der Studierenden in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 2006*; 18. Sozialerhebung des Deutschen Studentenwerks durchgeführt durch HIS Hochschul-Informationssystem, Bonn/Berlin; United States: National Center for Education Statistics (2009), *Digest of Education Statistics*, US Department of Education, Washington, DC.

In Norway, the proportion of persons with SEN between the ages of 16 and 67 years enrolled in higher education rose by 7% between 2001 and 2004, and the “living conditions survey” conducted in 2005 revealed that 24% of Norwegian students consider having a health problem. The number of Czech students with SEN enrolled in postsecondary vocational training increased by 0.02% between 2005 and 2008 to 0.09% of students taking this type of instruction. A 2005 survey by the Federation of Persons with disabilities, covering 161 university faculties, counted 460 students with SEN, representing 0.4% of the student body.

As shown in table 1, this increase is particularly notable for young people with a specific learning difficulty. In Ireland, the proportion of students with this type of disability increased by nearly 2% between 2005 and 2007, to 67.1% of students with SEN, while in Denmark, the proportion of students with a specific learning difficulty rose by 5 percentage points between 2004 and 2006 to 66% of all students with SEN.

Table1: Distribution of students with special education needs, by type of disability<sup>1</sup>

	Denmark		France		Ireland	
	2004	2006	2005	2008	2005	2007
Learning difficulties	61.2	66.0	5.4	11.5	64.5	67.1
Physical impairment	20.2	17.2	20.1	20.5	10.1	7.7
Hearing impairment	6.9	5.4	9.9	8.7	7.0	5.2
Sight impairment	6.4	5.4	14.1	12.4	4.3	3.5
Health-related problems			23.0	19.0	4.7	5.2

(Cont.)

<sup>1</sup> The report provided by the Czech republic did not include any data on students with disabilities enrolled in higher education.

(Cont.)

Psychological disorders	3.5	4.3	11.2	9.9	1.4	3.1
Multiple disabilities					4.8	4.0
Temporary illness			4.2	4.4		
Other	1.7	1.5	12.1	12.6	3.2	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

By contrast, the proportion of Irish students declaring a physical or a sensorial impairment declined by 5% between 2005 and 2007, to 16.4%% of the disabled student population. A similar decline occurred in Denmark, where the proportion of persons receiving support for an impairment fell by 5% between 2004 and 2006, and in France, where the proportion of students indicating an impairment dropped by 3% between 2005 and 2008, compared to the numbers of students with temporary health problems or specific learning difficulties.

## A TREND ROOTED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

The increasing number of students with SEN in higher education reflects the diversification of educational profiles observed in recent years (Selz, & Vallet, 2006; OECD, 2004; OECD, 2005; Douglas, 2004). It echoes also the growing proportion of young adults with SEN who meet the prerequisites for enrolling in higher education. In the Czech Republic for example, the number of students with SEN enrolled in upper secondary school quadrupled between 2006 and 2008 (Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic, 2009), while it rose by 29% in France over the same years (Délégation ministérielle à l'emploi des personnes handicapées, 2009).

The growth in numbers of students with SEN is a result of education policies that foster inclusive education systems that ensure high quality education for each child without discrimination and on an equal basis with others. Reforms undertaken in most OECD countries encourage education systems to see academic excellence as a means for supporting the weakest while encouraging the strongest, focusing therefore on each student's success. The principles of equality and inclusion were at the core of Norway's reform of the education system: "Reform 94" sought explicitly to facilitate access for students with SEN into upper secondary school, while "Reform 97" introduced individualised learning plans in secondary school, and the "knowledge promotion reform" encouraged schools to pay more attention to the diversity of educational needs among school population. The IDEA reform in the United States aimed *inter alia* at reducing dropout rates, improving academic outcomes, and enhancing the cognitive and

functional aptitudes of students with SEN by encouraging collaboration among stakeholders and services and by leading schools to target each student's success, regardless of his or her circumstances, social origin or ethnic group. In most countries, schools are therefore required to develop quality assurance policies that allow for the development of universally designed learning environments capable of preventing/reducing absenteeism and dropout – something to which students with SEN are overexposed. These quality assurance policies focus on pedagogical flexibility, thus enabling stakeholders to meet the diversity of educational needs. Most countries require framing the educational process within an individual education plan (IEP) and require schools to be accountable for their accessibility strategies and for students' success. In Norway, for example, schools have to report annually to the ministry of education on initiatives taken to enhance accessibility and maximise students' chances of success. In Denmark, quality assurance policies ask schools to consider students' prospects in order to ensure the continuity of their pathways (particularly of those with behavioural problems or learning difficulties), and to prevent drop out.

The development of inclusive education systems is also connected with legislation and regulations prohibiting any form of discrimination. These anti-discrimination laws and regulations hold secondary and higher education institutions accountable for including the diversity of educational needs in their mission, for developing a strategy formalised in an action plan, and for providing students with SEN with the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers. In Denmark, schools must ensure that students with SEN enjoy equal opportunities and treatment with the support of the Ministry of Education that provide them with compensatory aids students are entitled to. In the United States, schools must offer instruction appropriate for the needs of the students, and in Norway they must ensure that students with SEN have the same chance for success as other students.

The development of inclusive education systems is also connected to the allocation of technical, human and financial resources empowering schools and higher education institutions to meet the demands for accessibility and to support young disabled adults in meeting academic, social and professional requirements. These resources may aim at facilitating access to course contents when they take the form of technical aids, of sign language or LPC interpretation, adapted learning materials or assistant teachers. These resources also take the form of pedagogical arrangements designed to facilitate academic progress and success. Such arrangements include a possible extension of the course of study (e.g. the United States and Norway), the possibility (as in France) to carry their marks over from one year to the next and to spread the tests over several sessions as well as to reduce (e.g. Denmark) the number of subjects pursued, the timetable, or adjust the teaching practices. Special examination arrangements are another form of support that countries grant secondary students with. In Ireland, 54% of disabled students earning the "leaving certificate" in 2007 and 58% of

those working for the "applied leaving certificate" were exempt from tests or were given spelling and grammar exemptions whereas 27.9% of students preparing for the "leaving certificate" received reading support. In the United States, such arrangements have allowed 8% of students sitting assessment tests under the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLCS 2) to take breaks, while 8% had the support of a sign language interpreter, 6% used documents translated into Braille or materials for the partially sighted, 5% were provided with special lighting or materials, and 23% were allowed to use a calculator for the mathematics test. The growth in proportion of disabled secondary students applying for higher education is also attributable to the methodological support offered to institutions such as guidance services helping to prevent dropouts, support services helping to diversify forms of pedagogical organisation and to differentiate teaching practices or teacher training opportunities focusing on problem-solving.

The available statistics are inadequate for a thoroughly assessment of the impact of these resources on secondary school students. However, developing inclusive education systems aiming at developing each student's talents regardless of his/her circumstances has been decisive in increasing SEN students' access to higher education. The requirement for excellence as well as additional resources provided to SEN students have reduced drop-out rates and increased success rates in upper secondary education (OECD, 1999). In Norway for example, tracking services managed to pull back into upper secondary school 50% of students who had dropped out and the "quality reform" is widely recognised as having reduced the postsecondary failure rate substantially (NCES, 2008). The French law of 11 February 2005 on equal rights and opportunities of persons with disabilities has done much to strengthen their chances of access to education. The proportion of students with SEN enrolled lower and secondary education rose by 18% between 2006 and 2007. In the United States, the proportion of disabled students dropping out of high school fell by 20% between 1993 and 2003 while the percentage of those earning a high school diploma increased by 14% between 1996 and 2005 (NCES, 2008).

Non-discriminatory legislation and regulations as well as financial and methodological incentives improved also higher education institutions' receptiveness to SEN students. Many higher education institutions now include disability in their strategic plans and have developed disability support services backing up students with SEN in fulfilling their administrative requirements, providing them with the necessary study aids and support and working closely with staff members who may need information or aid in order to adapt their practice to the needs of students. In France, universities and "grandes écoles" have signed a Charta with the government which commits them to develop individual and collective means needed to ensure equal opportunities for students with SEN. In Ireland, the Trinity College Dublin has implemented a policy of

support for the entire university community and supports initiatives to include disadvantaged students, including those with a SEN. Masaryk University in Brno has endeavoured to create a pedagogical environment accessible to students with SEN, with an electronic study agenda, 55 specially equipped workstations with computer aids in laboratories and lecture rooms, personal assistants, tutors, note takers and sign language interpreters. It has also developed a library with more than 1 000 volumes in Braille for students with a visual impairment.

### A TREND FOSTERED BY AN ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACH TO DISABILITY

The increasing receptivity of higher education towards disability can also be related to a shift from a diagnostic approach to disability, which emphasises what children and young adults with disabilities cannot achieve, to an environmental perspective relating disability to schools accessibility and ability to be equitable in terms of access, outcomes and prospects (UNESCO, 1994; WHO, 2001; UN, 2006). Countries that have moved beyond the diagnostic approach of disability relate the latter to the need for support to promote learners' success and commit educational settings to provide students with the same opportunities as the general population. For example Ireland's legal definition of disability emphasises the means to be mobilised to allow a person with SEN to exercise his/ her right to education and the 2005 Disability Act requires educational settings to meet students' educational needs. Norway's 2001 White Paper entitled "From User to Citizen" refers disability to schools' inaccessibility and to barriers hindering the full participation of persons with SEN. Such countries focus on the educational needs of students beyond the impairment and, as shown in table 2, Denmark (66%) and Ireland (67%) counts mostly students with SEN having a specific learning difficulty. By contrast, in countries where the diagnostic approach to disability prevails, it is mainly students with an impairment that are being identified as having a SEN. In France, for example, students with SEN enrolled in higher education have mainly a physical or sensorial impairment (42%).

Table 2. Students with SEN enrolled in higher education, by type of disability

	Denmark	France	Ireland	United States
	2006	2006	2007	2003
Specific learning difficulty <sup>1</sup>	66.0	8.2	67.1	18.4
Mobility impairment	17.2	20.3	7.7	25.3
Hearing impairment	5.4	10.8	5.2	4.9

(Cont.)

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visual impairment	5.4	13.9	3.5	3.8
Health problems		20.1	5.2	17.4
Mental health problems	4.3	11.2	3.1	21.9
Multiple impairments			4.0	
Temporary illness		5.3		
Communication				0.4
Other	1.7	10.2	4.2	7.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Denmark: students receiving special education support; France: students who declared a disability; Ireland: students who disclosed a disability; United States: students who declared a disability.

1. This category corresponds to the OECD cross-national category B.

Differences in approach to disability have an impact on universities' policies and strategies towards disability. In countries where a diagnostic approach to disability prevails, HEIs see the diversity issue as an exception related to atypical students. Students with SEN tend to be seen as a burden hampering the proper functioning of the institution. Such institutions rarely include disability in their policy and seldom address accessibility issues in any plans of action. Supports and arrangements are related to students' impairment or health problems and are infrequently connected to an educational needs assessment procedure based on courses followed by students as well as on their expectations as, for example, in France where the higher education accessibility guide indicates that only 7% of French universities indicate assessing formally students' needs (European Agency for Development in Special needs education, 2008). Disability support services may not have means and skills required to assess students' needs properly and to consequently develop appropriate support strategies. In settings with a prevailing diagnostic approach to disability, teaching staff tends to hesitate or even refuse to take into account students' needs and to adapt the teaching methods, especially when students have an invisible disability (Waldvogel, & Ebersold, 2011). The quality of education provided to students with SEN doesn't result from a collective commitment at institutional level, but from an investment and conviction on individual level, frequently the consequence of exposure to disability issues, for example, by having a disabled family member and/or personal investment in supporting students with difficulties. Openness to diversity may become a constant struggle both for professionals (who may consider it exhausting to deal with students with SEN), and for students whose success depends on their motivation as well as their ability to compensate for weaknesses in supports by involving family members as well as friends and/or non-disabled peers.

When an environmental approach prevails, diversity tends to be seen as an issue to be met. Higher education institutions then see diversity as a source of success and development for the entire university community, and students with SEN are primarily seen as students and not only as disabled since students with SEN are seen as an added value. For example, George Washington University (United States) insists that students with SEN, like all students, must contribute to the well-being and development of the university community. Accessibility is considered as a mean for establishing educational environments suitable for the entire student body and universities as, for example the University of Copenhagen, do not develop specific programmes for students with SEN. In most cases, universities and colleges include disability in their strategy and develop accessibility action plans aimed at developing an inclusive ethos involving each member of the institution in the improvement of accessibility levels. Policy documents seek to combine the implementation of a universal learning environment involving the whole university community with the allocation of support and accommodation for students with SEN. The University of Oslo has established a teaching environment committee to examine the institution's accessibility and issue recommendations for creating a pedagogical environment accessible to all students, in observance of the "universal design for learning" principle. George Washington University defines "universal design for learning" as a method for designing a curriculum that can adapt to the variety of educational needs and learning styles and create learning experiences that suit the learner and maximise his or her ability to progress. Admission and support are understood as a collective commitment at institutional level and not only as a service provided by a special unit, the disability support service. Universities, such as the University of Aarhus, may for example require each faculty to appoint a person responsible for assisting students with SEN, for ensuring that arrangements are properly applied. Some universities may also develop an inclusive ethos at the community level by empowering staff members to be aware of the diversity issue and by providing them with resources to cope with it. The university may therefore provide staff members with handbooks and tools encouraging them to identify educational needs students may have and to change their attitudes and practices, as well as to offer disability support services to students experiencing serious difficulties. Universities may also provide training courses empowering teachers to develop inclusive curriculum. Trinity College, Dublin gives for example all new teachers a three day training course to inform them of institution's policy, to raise their awareness on the diversity of educational profiles in a given class and to introduce them to tools and teaching methods that can be used. Training may also aim to generalise inclusive practices in all components of the institution, and may take the form of manuals, teaching tools or self-evaluation tools that encourage teachers to be pedagogically innovative, create a teaching environment accessible to all students, and to adopt knowledge

assessment methods that allow students to progress to the best of their ability. An accessibility policy is not restricted to the institution but also extends to its environment. The Limerick Institute of Technology sees itself as playing a pivotal role in the social and cultural development of its region and creates partnerships, establishes new ties with its environment, and takes initiatives that will enhance access to higher education for disadvantaged groups. Institutions are adopting piloting tools for planning and optimising their accessibility policy, as Trinity College Dublin has done.

The environmental approach to disability supports strongly the transition opportunities into higher education that SEN students have. It is an incentive for identifying educational needs of students whose disability is not visible and for supporting them in improving their chances to transit successfully to and within higher education. It is also an encouragement for schools and universities to define themselves as learning organisations relating the quality of teaching and of supports to stakeholders to the ability to adapt their practices to students' needs. This is designed to empower them to learn how to learn, to be aware of their needs and their evolution, to identify their strengths and weaknesses in relationship to their center of interests. It is also an incentive for including students' prospects and guidance strategies in support services, and for developing bridges between the education levels and sectors, as well as between the education and the employment sector. To summarize, the environmental approach is an incentive for educational institutions to combine effectiveness, equity and innovation.

### **A TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION THAT REMAINS HARDER AND BUMPIER FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH SEN**

Despite progress made, access to higher education still remains more difficult for young adults with SEN than for the general population, especially when students have a sensory, a physical or a cognitive impairment. While access to higher education rose by 8% in Ireland between 2000 and 2006, it increased by only 2.6% for young adults with SEN (Higher education authority, 2009). In the United States, only 45% of young adults with SEN are in higher education four years after leaving secondary school, while the proportion for the general population is 53% (Newman et al., 2009). In Germany, while enrolment in higher education rose by 5% between 2000 and 2006 for the general population, it increased by only 4% for young adults with SEN (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2007). Access to higher education seems also to be bumpier for them than for other students. In Norway, for example, 24% of students with SEN enrolled in higher education indicate having chosen a course of study they didn't really want and in Ireland only 68.4% of young adults with SEN applying in 2007-08 for special conditions of access to higher education, were able to

provide sufficient evidence of their disability (statistics Norway, 2007; Higher education authority, 2009).

### ***DISCONTINUITIES ARE RELATED TO WEAKNESSES OF INSTITUTIONS' STRATEGIES***

Access to higher education depends greatly on transition strategies adopted by schools, and discontinuities reflect their difficulties in preparing disabled students to adjust to higher education requirements (Dee, 2006). When leaving upper secondary education, young adults with SEN don't always feel prepared to choose the course of study to pursue and lack skills needed to pass the required admission tests or to meet the academic requirements. An OECD survey shows for example that only 41% of students with SEN estimate having the skills required by higher education, that 38% estimate that support and arrangements received enable them to fulfil the same tasks as their peers, while 35% consider having had the same opportunities as them to combine school and disability requirements (Ebersold, 2012). Upper secondary schools may also fail in including transition issues in their policy or tend to focus on students' information that is detrimental to their empowerment and their guidance. Many students feel that they are missing skills enabling them to be proactive during the transition period and complain about the lack of precise information on accessibility issues as well as about a lack of support on leaving upper secondary education. The mentioned OECD survey reveals that only 38% estimate that the schools made them familiar with their needs and enabled them to disclose it while 37% consider having sufficiently been prepared to be self-assertive and proactive for choosing a course (Ebersold, 2012). Poor information on application procedures and mechanisms may prevent them from applying in an appropriate and timely manner in order to access support, and in many cases they may be delayed in enrolment for several months. As a result, many young adults with SEN feel isolated or destabilised by the barriers they progressively discover when applying for support arrangements.

Discontinuities faced by young adults with SEN may also be related to admission strategies that emphasize their information instead of their guidance. Disability support services are also rarely in contact with secondary schools, with the bodies responsible for coordinating the education/transition process and tend not be coordinated with other services or faculties or do not involve the students in the process. They don't effectively encourage students to disclose their disability and only 34% of students with SEN who left upper secondary schools in 2007 disclosed while enrolling in higher education. For example, not all higher education institutions conduct a preliminary interview with applicants with SEN or, when appropriate, their parents to determine their specific profile and to advise them of the academic and behavioural demands that will be placed

upon. As a result, students may lack the appropriate information and guidance to be successful. In Denmark for example, students with SEN are only half as likely on average to be enrolled in the second cycle of higher education (Danske Studerendes Faellesrad, 2008). In the United States, they are more likely to have more non-continuous periods of study, take longer to complete courses of study or drop out at the end of the first year; only a third are likely to graduate (US General Accountability Office, 2003; Wagner et al., 2006). In France, they are less likely to be enrolled in graduate or doctoral studies (Delegation ministérielle à l'emploi des personnes handicapées, 2009).''

### ***DISCONTINUITIES RESULT FROM A LACK OF INTEGRATED TRANSITION SYSTEMS***

Lower and bumpier transition opportunities also reflect a lack of integrated transition systems. These include smoothing pathways to higher education and providing students with SEN equal opportunities in terms of access, academic success and prospects. Pathways to higher education are indeed hampered by a lack of synergy among stakeholders involved in the transition process that may be the result of existing compartmentalisation between the ministries. In Denmark, responsibilities for support provided in higher education are fragmented between the Ministry of Education, which is charge of support provided to students with SEN enrolled in higher education, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science which is responsible for accessibility issues. The lack of synergies may also be related to missing linkages between secondary and higher education, like for example in the United States where only a quarter of American high schools have contact with universities, vocational training institutes or job placement services in connection with the transition plan worked out with students with SEN (Cobb, & Alwell, 2007; Wagner et al., 2006). Such linkages often depend on individual initiatives that are too sporadic and informal to ensure effective pathways framed within institutional cooperation, as for example in Ireland where only two technology institutes in five developed a strategy for contacting students with SEN in upper secondary education, and only one in five hold "open doors" days targeted specifically at secondary school students with SEN (Mulvihill, 2005). Synergies between stakeholders may also be hampered by modes of funding failing to encourage schools to include transition issues in their policies and strategies, to support higher education institutions to develop an inclusive ethos, as well as by a lack of qualification and training of stakeholders since both initial and in-service training courses rarely highlight transition issues.

Synergies among stakeholders are also hindered by the absence of an institutional framework specifically devoted to the transition issue or, as observed for Denmark's municipal and regional guidance services, by an institutional framework that takes insufficient account of the particularities of young adults

with SEN. The agencies responsible for co-ordinating the education process do not always address the transition issue. For instance, in Ireland, the special education needs counsellors tend to have little contact with higher education institutions, and in France student advisors (*enseignants référents*) have too many students with SEN to look after to be able to fully cover transition issues as a part of their work. The methodological tools and guides prepared for institutions and students with SEN and their families do not always suffice to ensure that all those involved in the transition process are working towards the same objectives and co-ordinating their actions. Multidisciplinary co-ordination structures are not always able to organise the transition process around precise and measurable objectives in terms of outcomes and the piloting tools to achieve them. Services specifically dedicated to the transition issue can also supplement the information provided by methodological guides and tools, and support institutions as well as students with SEN throughout the process, especially when teachers and coordinators lack time. These services may also act as resource centres to help students with SEN to disclose their disability or their specific learning difficulty, to ensure the continuity of support, and to work towards the commitment and involvement of all those concerned by the transition process.

### ***DISCONTINUITIES RESULT FROM A LACK OF PILOTING AND MONITORING TOOLS***

The absence of piloting and monitoring tools empowering stakeholders to cope with transition issues is another source of compartmentalisation between the ministries. Support and arrangements allocated to students are indeed rarely linked with an appropriate needs evaluation process and/or embedded in an individual education plan, as suggested by an OECD survey showing that only 18% of Czech, Danish and French young adults with SEN report having been involved in an IEP, and only 29% in a needs assessment procedure (Ebersold, 2012). Stakeholders may not be able to relate the educational process to precise goals or to the quality of supports, and consequently, to develop success oriented educational pathways. In France and in Ireland, the assignment of a special needs assistant is not always sufficiently correlated with a properly identified educational need, and assessing the quality of his/her work may be difficult. In addition, implementing ITPs is not mandatory in OECD countries and schools may not include transition issues in their policies and strategies, to reduce their support to the attainment of the diploma – all practices detrimental to students' inclusion and needs for guidance (OECD, 2011; Ebersold, 2012).

The lack of piloting and monitoring tools is all the more important, given that most countries don't have data empowering stakeholders to implement effective teaching and support, as well as transition policies and strategies. With the exception of the United States, countries rarely collect the same data for young

adults with SEN that they collect for young adults without SEN, and many of them don't have data on students' success and transition opportunities such as achievement rates within secondary education, access rates to higher education and to employment, or pathways followed over time beyond secondary education (OECD, 2011; European Agency for Development in Special needs education, 2012). Countries have also very little information on the effectiveness of supports and arrangements provided to students with SEN, and for example while French data indicate the number of students with SEN supported by teacher's assistants, no information exists on their added value and their ability to complement teachers' work. Such a lack of data does not only make it difficult to determine the impact of anti-discrimination legislation, but also prevents stakeholders from developing quality assurance policies encompassing a dynamic view of students' educational paths and a clear view on barriers hindering both success and transition opportunities. These barriers may only become very indirectly apparent, via the increase in the number of young adults with SEN who receive income allowances, or the rise in the number of unemployed persons with disabilities who no longer look for jobs (OECD, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Access to higher education for young adults with SEN, particularly for those with learning difficulties, has improved significantly over the past decade in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Norway, Ireland and the United States. This reflects the growing number of young adults with SEN meeting the prerequisites for higher education resulting from the development of inclusive education policies that seek to be both efficient and equitable, and facilitate the participation of all in the economic and social development of society. Non-discrimination legislation, as well as additional financial, technical and human resources, played a key role in providing students with SEN equal opportunities, while financial and methodological incentives have encouraged schools and higher education institutions to be receptive to the diversity of educational profiles. Development of universal design learning environments as well as quality assurance policies allowed for supporting the weakest while encouraging the strongest and reducing SEN students' dropout rates.

Inclusive education policies did not however pay sufficient attention to transition issues beyond education, although forms of transition have been multiplied and extended over the last two decades. They failed therefore to recognise the obstacles that students with SEN may encounter in the course of their studies and overexposed them to dropout at the end of the first year of HEI's course, to failure to complete their programme, or to more complicated itineraries. They have also not succeeded in embedding the transition process in an integrated transition system ensuring continuous and coherent pathways

beyond secondary education, and fail in fostering efficient and equitable education systems in terms of access, success and prospects. As a result, the responsibility for the transition to higher education is delegated to young adults with SEN and their families, and the vulnerability of those with sensory, motor or mental impairments and/or from less fortunate socio-economic backgrounds tends to be increased. By linking insufficiently the financing modalities and additional resources allocated to institutions and to young adults with SEN to their possibilities for social and professional inclusion, they failed also to combine access to higher education with better employment opportunities.

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