Exploring an inclusive educational program within Higher Education for individual with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract

Introduction: Individuals with intellectual disability have traditionally been excluded from Higher Education (HE). As HE moves towards more inclusive practices for individuals with intellectual disabilities, there is a need to capture the experience of support staff implementing and facilitating such programs. This study aims to explore support staff's experiences and perceptions regarding a third-level program for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Methods: A qualitative design was employed, utilising a focus group interview and purposive sampling to gather in-depth insights from support staff involved in the delivery of the Certificate in Personal Development program. Data were analyzed using Ritchie & Spencer, (1994) Frameworks Approach, following a five-step process: familiarization with the data; identifying a thematic framework; indexing the themes; charting those themes into a hierarchical framework, and finally, mapping and interpretation.

Results: Four themes emerged from the analysis and these included staff perspective in relation to the: (1) impact of the program on student's lives; (2) impact of the program on staff within the department and individuals with intellectual disabilities within intellectual disability services; (3) factors that support students whilst undertaking the program; and (4) future challenges.

Conclusion: This study has implications for the further development and sustainability of inclusive education for individuals with intellectual disabilities in HE nationally and internationally. Further research to examine student perspectives is warranted, to inform the future development and delivery of inclusive programs for individuals with an intellectual disability.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Higher Education; Intellectual Disability; co-creation; collaboration; confidence; support staff

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1. Introduction

Traditionally individuals with intellectual disabilities have had restricted access to, and subsequently minimal exposure to higher educational opportunities.

However, inclusive education for individuals with an intellectual disability has become a priority within Higher Education (HE) and this is reflected recently in Irish policy (Hennessy et al., 2025). One of the most important ways that HE can empower people is by fostering a sense of self-worth and agency (Freire, 1970). Access to education improves the development of technical, cognitive and communication skills and therefore provides the foundation for individuals to take control of their lives and make informed decisions (Ye & McCoy, 2024).

Increased employment opportunities are one significant area of empowerment following access to HE. The literature suggests that individuals with intellectual disabilities who receive appropriate education and vocational training will have improved job prospects as well as better progression opportunities once in employment (Burke et al., 2023).

Functional curricula that include job coaching, work placements, and supported employment programs equip students with the tools needed to enter the workforce. Gainful employment not only improves financial independence but also fosters a sense of purpose and self-worth (Banks et al., 2025).

Hennessy et al., (2025) found that for people with intellectual disability, being in third level education provided an opportunity for them to be active participants in society, something that had not previously been available to them.

Being part of the student body, allowed them to connect with new people, build social networks and develop more positive social identities.

Participants in their research, spoke of their pride in being contributing members to the campus community and having the opportunity to share their opinions and lived experience. Friendships that developed were meaningful and the social support networks developed for the students with intellectual disabilities were suggested to contribute to independence in the future.

Inclusive education environments also play a critical role in social integration. Ultimately, education is about more than just academic achievement—it is about recognising the value and dignity of every person. When people with intellectual disabilities are given access to meaningful, supportive education, they are empowered to lead fuller, more independent lives. They become visible, active members of their communities, and their voices are heard. International research exploring staff perspectives on inclusive HE has drawn attention to both opportunities and challenges in educating students with intellectual disabilities (Jones et al., 2016; Gilson et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). Situating this study within that international discourse, as HE's within Irelands national systems move towards more inclusive practices, can offer a unique opportunity to capture the experience of support staff implementing and supporting such programs. Support and departmental staff play a critical role in the development, delivery, and overall success of inclusive educational programs (Bovill, 2014; Cabral et al., 2023). Exploring their perceptions can contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive educational practices. This paper reports on the impact of a HE program delivered in Ireland for individuals with an intellectual disability from the views of support and departmental staff. In this context, this paper provides a useful insight into how the program is experienced on the ground, including areas of success, strengths, and challenges. It also highlights the impact the program has had on students, program staff and the wider university community.

1.1 Background

Research indicates that inclusion of people with intellectual disability in HE can result in widespread benefits not only for the individual student but for the wider student body, institution, staff and the community at large (Kapsalakis & Nteropoulou-Nterou 2024). Corby et al. (2022) found that inclusion in HE enabled individuals to develop and improve their skill set and provides an opportunity for them to realise new potential, goals and opportunities. By overcoming challenges in educational settings, self-belief and confidence grew. In addition, changes to identity and the enhancement of self-image from being a third level student, allowed people to challenge perceived limitations for future employability (Corby et al., 2022).

With this in mind, Ireland's National Access Plan 2022-2028, included provision for the development of a Program for Access to HE (PATH) (Program for Access to HE | Policy | HE Authority), committed to increasing participation by under-represented groups. The Department of Further and HE, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) introduced a fourth strand of PATH (PATH 4). One of the phases of PATH 4 included the implementation of a three-year pilot program to support the development or enhancement of program provision for individuals with an intellectual disability.

Inclusive HE programs have generally been categorised into three broad models: the substantially separate or segregated model, where students with intellectual disabilities learn in distinct classrooms or settings in university but there is very limited scope for integration (Grigal et al., 2006; May, 2012). The mixed or hybrid models, which combine specialized supports with opportunities for integration in mainstream classes and the wider university community; and inclusive or individualized models, in which students with intellectual disabilities participate in standard programs, with individualized supports provided as appropriate (Grigal et al., 2006; May, 2012). The South-East Technology University,

(2024) Waterford received funding to develop a Quality and Qualifications (QQI) Level 6 Certificate in Personal Development program.

This program most closely aligns with the mixed/hybrid model. The objective of the program is to embed a whole-of-institution approach to student success and universal design; and improve opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to engage in HE.

Students engage in both tailored learning experiences focused on personal development, independent living skills, and employability, as well as shared community campus activities and events that promote inclusion.

While academic modules are primarily delivered to students with intellectual disabilities, students also participate in broader university life through clubs, societies, and joint initiatives including seminars and workshops, facilitating meaningful interaction and integrations with the general student population. This program commenced in September 2024 with an initial intake of 12 students on one university campus, with an additional 22 students starting in 2025 across two university campuses.

2. Methods

2.1 Aim

This study aims to explore support staff's experiences and perceptions regarding a third-level program for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

2.2 Design

A qualitative design was employed, utilising a focus group interview and purposive sampling to gather in-depth insights. Qualitative research by its nature often involves a small sample of participants usually between 1 and 20. The sample size is often dictated by the nature of the study, the availability of participants to be interviewed and the level of data saturation (Bryman, 2015). The objectives of this focus group were to: (1) explore the perceived impact of the program on students' academic, social, and emotional development; (2) identify the strengths of the program that have contributed to its success; and (3) explore limitations or challenges that support staff have encountered in delivering the program.

2.3 Data collection

For this study, one focus group was undertaken and conducted by two independent members of the research team. The focus group took place face to face in a dedicated room and lasted 90 minutes. An interview topic guide was developed based on the extant literature on inclusive education in HE for individuals with intellectual disability, exploring support staff's views on the impact of the program while ensuring topics such as barriers and facilitators to inclusion and supports and resource availability was addressed (see table 1). The discussions were recorded with participants consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Table 1: Focus group topic guide (questions and statements were formulated as outlined by Legard et al., 2003).

Ground Mapping Questions	Dimension Mapping Questions	Perspective Widening Questions	Closing Questions
What are your views of the Certificate in Personal Development program delivered to students with an ID?	What are your views with regards to the impact the program has had on student's lives? What are your views of aspects of the program that worked well and supported positive outcomes for students? What are your views regarding challenges and/or barriers to the current provision/delivery of the program?	**Engagement and empowerment:** active participation; decision making; accessing resources; service structures; personal power; personal satisfaction; self-determination; social skills; confidence. **Informed:** knowledge and understanding; awareness of available resources; academic performance **Collaborative:** involvement in decision making (shared decision making); participatory role; communication; support; active listening; trust; respect. **Committed:** adherence; motivation; setting goals; changing behaviours. **Tolerance of uncertainty:** management of uncertainty; emotional needs-stigma; mental well-being; self-esteem, hope, positivity.	Reflecting on what we have talked about what for you are the key issues? As a support staff member what would you like to see changed? Before we finish the interview is there anything further you would like to say or add in relation to what we have discussed.

Note: Questions used for focus group discussions, moved from broad to more focused and in-depth questions, including closing questions.

2.4 Inclusion criteria

Participants had to be support staff (academic staff, academic tutors, administration staff, peer facilitator, auxiliary staff, community and voluntary staff members) involved in the delivery of the Certificate in Personal Development program, have the ability to read and understand English language and be 18 years of age or over. Participants were between the ages of 30 and 60 years. Participants' level of involvement with the students varied: some worked with the program full-time, others interfaced with the students informally during periods of social interaction, and some participants, from the community and voluntary sector, had supported the students prior to their entry into HE and have continued to do so, reflecting several years of ongoing experience working with them.

A total of 8 participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Interviewees within the focus group are identified as participant female (Pf) and participant male (Pm) followed by a number (see Table 2).

Table 2: Demographic Details of Participants

Participant	Gender	Role
P1	Female	Administration
P2	Female	Academic
P3	Male	Community and voluntary staff
P4	Female	Peer facilitator
P5	Female	Academic tutor
P6	Female	Academic staff
P7	Female	Auxiliary staff
P8	Female	Auxiliary staff

2.5 Pilot

No pilot study took place. However, the focus group topic guide was reviewed by two other lecturing staff not involved in the focus group with a range of experience to determine its validity for use within HE and to ensure adequacy and relevance of questions. Suggested changes from the review of the topic guide referred to minor editing and some minor rewording of the questions which were amended prior to the main focus group taking place.

2.6 Data analysis

The Frameworks Approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) provides a robust interpretation of qualitative data and was used for the analysis of this study.

It involved five stages: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) identifying a thematic framework; (3) indexing the themes; (4) charting those themes into a hierarchical framework, and finally, (5) mapping and interpretation.

To ensure reliability and verification two members of the research team separately coded the data, and the same two members verified the coding with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus.

Preliminary findings were shared with the research team for feedback before final analysis where findings were triangulated with existing literature to enhance credibility.

The Frameworks Approach is particularly suited to the analysis of cross-sectional descriptive data, enabling different aspects of the phenomena under investigation to be captured (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Its emphasis on 'charting' and 'mapping' means that researchers' interpretations of participants' experiences are transparent (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

2.7 Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University's ethical committee. All the participants agreed voluntarily to participate in the study after receiving an information leaflet. Participants were reassured that the data would be anonymized and only used for research purposes.

Before the focus group began all participants were informed of the purpose of the focus group and reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Any questions from participants were answered and written consent was obtained to proceed with an audiotaped focus group interview. Each participant was given assurance that the data would be anonymised. The focus group began when all participants indicated that they were ready to begin.

3. Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis and these included staff's perspective in relation to: (1) impact of the program on student's lives; (2) impact of the program on staff within the department and individuals with intellectual disabilities within intellectual disability services; (3) factors that support students whilst undertaking the program; and (4) future challenges.

3.1 The perceived impact of the program on student's lives

The findings clearly highlighted the perception of the participants who identified the positive impact that the Certificate in Personal Development program has had on student's lives in terms of their personal development; social integration; and academic

learning. Participants acknowledged that student's self-confidence, self-esteem and overall well-being has increased because of the program:

'There's real, tangible outcomes from the lads who are on the course, they're ability, their confidence, their belief in themselves has just been transformed in such a short amount of time' (P3m).

'Students were saying by the end how their self-confidence was growing, and their self-esteem was developing. Even at the start, people were sat down when they were delivering their presentation but by the end of the program, they were standing up and using a clicker which is not easy to do to deliver their presentation and talk through all the slides. They would talk about the fact that it has a big knock-on effect on their wellbeing, they feel they have a purpose in life' (P2f).

Participants also reported that the program has had a positive impact on student's ability to integrate socially with the University and are beginning to recognise employment opportunities and future lifestyle changes:

'They are very invested in their college life and have integrated as much as possible and very proud students of SETU' (P1f).

'They're talking about employment, but they're also talking about changing their lifestyle. Some students are recognising I can live independently and that is a massive transformation' (P2f). Some participants felt that the program was an opportunity for the students to set goals for the future:

'I would look at it (the Cert in Personal Development program) as a springboard to where they are at the moment.

Even when the course finishes, it is not just going to be the end of their development, it is just springboard them to look at their future and be more focused on what goals they want to do. If that is moving out from home, if that is finding employment, if that is going on to further education'. (P3m).

3.2 Impact of the program on staff within the Department

Participants reported a renewed focus on the value of teaching, and an increased awareness of co-learning within the School of Health Sciences and Department of Nursing and Health Care:

'The thing that is very interesting I think as well is the value for the Department, for the School and for us and that also the bit that would make your heart sing…….. we did not think how bringing other people in here that really have been disenfranchised and disadvantaged all of their lives by virtue of birth, could come here and show us the value of teaching, of education, of respect of just core values and normal things… and every day theirs a smile' (P6f).

'We are learning as much from them as they're learning from us '(P1f).

Participants also described the positive effect that the program has had on job satisfaction:

'It's so nice to come in to work. Like I say, work but it doesn't feel like that' (P5f).

'I think coming to college and the relationship from staff to student for me has been really energising and I have an energy in my step because of these students and there is only 12 of them (P1f).

The students were highly regarded by the participant's and viewed as positive additions to the staff and student body:

'K (a student) comes everywhere with me. I went in to a group of undergraduate students after he went upstairs and I just said, what did you think of K and the first thing they said was he was a breath of fresh air.It was amazing talking to him this morning and it lifted their morning just talking to him' (P7f).

The positive effects that the program has had on students within other services was recognised:

'The ripple effect that this has happened on other services and the other guys who are not part of the course has been transformative because they're seeing their peers now as students' (P3f).

3.3 Factors that support students whilst undertaking the program

Participants described the importance of open access with a nurturing, caring and supportive environment in fostering student support:

'And also, it's good crack like you come here and everyone has a good laugh. Like the program is very flexible and adaptable, and there's never no. This is not how we're going to do it. It's always open. Everyone has a voice, you know' (P3m).

Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that students benefited enormously from the educational experience and opportunities made available to them through the program. This highlights the potential of the program to have a significant impact on the students, with progress identified over the course of the year:

'It's just a fantastic program and have seen the lads, the self-confidence has grown even since in the last semester. All the fact that is done in the mainstream, it's just fantastic, it's a fantastic opportunity' (P4f).

Partnerships between the university and external organisations were seen as essential to the future development of the students partaking in the program through creating new opportunities and strengthening support systems:

'We can't do this without the amazing partnerships that we've had with the other service providers, the amazing partnership we've now developed. They (External organisation) are talking about maybe running a course for some of the students throughout the summer where they will develop more of their CV skills and their interview skills and their confidence skills. So, this continues. You know it's that ripple effect when you develop partnerships' (P2f).

The importance of positive teamwork was emphasised with collaborative efforts credited with contributing to the success of the program:

'I think the whole thing is all the team working together collectively, it's the values you know of unlocking that potential and being as flexible and finding alternative ways all of the time of meeting the learner's need to make sure that that potential becomes unlocked in an environment that's created by everybody around' (P2f).

The need for interaction between staff and students with disability was highlighted as an important area. The development of relationships which allowed for a personal approach where students are known to staff. Other positive Interpersonal relationships in terms of peer-to-peer support were also highlighted as fostering a sense of community and encouragement:

'The peer support I think has been you know a critical point in it and it's the bridge between the lecturer and the students' (P2f).

'This cohort is just that breath of fresh air. I wish we could transpire it into every classroom. The support that they show each other is immense. They all want each other to succeed, so it's not competitive. It's everyone wants to see everyone succeed' (P1f).

3.4 Future challenges

Concerns were raised over the long-term viability of the program and the impact on all those involved particularly following the investment by staff in implementing the program:

'Sustainability is the concern. The concern is we'll have people coming in next year and they get a year, and we would love to give them two years. The concern is we have amazing tutors in the classroom and there are people you want to keep on for the long term, but people are on short term contracts and then you want to grow. We're constantly changing and developing the program, but it's no point in having this program that ends up on a shelf' (P6f).

Participants highlighted a lack of support structures and resources which have an impact on the student experience. Students were noted to have a range of needs that indirectly impact on their study and success within the program. Lack of flexibility to provide holistic support to students with disability was noted as an issue of concern:

'There has been a lack of engagement in terms of support, of student support. The reason why we have so much support in the classroom is because there wasn't a support from the University, outside the classroom, from the Disability Office. We had the resources to overcome that and the money was there. Why, when we have a strategic goal, when we have a cohort of students clearly deserving it' (P6f).

'We do not know how they are supported outside some have said they have no internet at home. They can't follow up. So, everything is crammed, so that's a whole week of work until the next time. So that's a challenge, the assistive technology is another area of support would all be so beneficial' (P5f).

The part-time structure provided challenges in terms of supporting students with disability to embrace the full third level experience:

'I think they need more exposure to campus life in order for them to be able to do clubs and societies and things like that. That's a big challenge is that they're only here on campus two days a week and also when you are categorized as part time student? That also means you actually don't get access to certain services. So, I think it would be a great benefit going forward that the government of the college can support a full-time program' (P7f).

Insufficient resourcing for customised programs for students with disabilities limits availability, undermining long-term planning and reflects the temporary status of third level programs to the dismay of participants:

'Yeah, I think there's the struggle. Is that it's temporary and that's difficult. I mean the leaflets for school leavers is rehabilitation or Mental Health Day services. There's not even a mention of further education or HE. That's a massive problem, and I suppose the thing is awareness.' (P5f).

4. Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that participation in third-level education may have beneficial effects on the lives of students with intellectual disabilities. Increased levels of confidence, self-esteem, and overall well-being were identified as possible outcomes of the program. Thus, reinforcing the argument that inclusive third level education is not only transformative academically but also psychosocially. The findings align with previous research and literature in the field. Papay and Bambara (2011), identified self-confidence as an important outcome of inclusive university experiences, while Grigal et al. (2012) describe improved self-esteem as a key indicator of the delivery of good quality inclusive programs while also identifying a link between experiencing a sense of belonging at university and overall improved well-being. Interestingly, Zhang et al. (2023) research empirically supports these observations, demonstrating an increase in self-confidence and overall well-being across multiple groups of students with Intellectual Disabilities. Together, this evidence indicates that the psychosocial outcomes noted by participants are not isolated opinions but are reflected in other similar studies.

Participants identified that the students on the program challenged academic staff to recognise the importance of co-learning evolving into co-creation. This is significant because initially the program was developed and designed specifically for people with intellectual disabilities by academic staff only. However, from the implementation stage of this educational program participants described how their engagement with students prompted them to reflect on their own teaching practices. This re-evaluation resulted in adopting a more inclusive pedagogical approach which has shaped a co-creation process that reflects the student's needs and aspirations. This

approach is informed by continually listening and responding to the student's voice through a reflective feedback framework. Literature supports the assumption that co-creation of modules fosters enhanced educational experiences while destabilising traditional staff and student power imbalances (Bovill, 2014; Cabral et al., 2023; Wright et al., 2021). The co-created nature of the program supports a flexible and responsive approach, designed to adapt to new insights, and emerging issues. Significantly, participants recognised how the co-creation experience has been transformative, highlighting how much it had broadened their perspectives on inclusion and challenged their assumptions about ability.

The literature proposes that co-creation in universities serves not only to enhance student engagement but also as a catalyst for continuous professional growth amongst academic staff (Bovill, 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Maxwell et al., 2024). These findings align with academic staff reflections, which highlighted continuous learning and evolving professional insights as key outcomes from authentic engagement in inclusive practices. Through direct collaboration, staff gained deeper insights into the importance of accessibility and how to become more attentive to the design of lectures, seminars and assessments to meet diverse needs. Previous studies have emphasised the requirement for inclusive teaching to shift from a reactive position to embrace a proactive strategic approach (Moriña, 2017; Ryan & Struhs, 2004).

Participant's observations that students on the program positively influence other students' university experiences highlights the broader social impact of inclusive third level education. This supports findings that inclusive education can positively change peer attitudes, decrease stigma, and foster more supportive university experiences (Grigal et al. 2012). By becoming representative members of the student body, students with intellectual disabilities challenge the traditional norms of belonging and voice in HE (Papay & Bambara, 2014). Participants identified students' diverse perspectives as a strength that offered new insights. Congruent with more recent literature, disability was not identified as a deficit (Hennessy et al., 2025; Wright et al., 2021) but as an integral part of human diversity and a valuable contributor to the social cohesion of the University.

The findings from this study identify a shift towards inclusion, steered by a collaborative group of university stakeholders whose values-based approach and shared sense of purpose supports a diverse and accommodating culture. A prominent finding from this study was the participants' sense of collective responsibility for inclusion. Staff whose roles varied from domestic cleaners to administrative and academic staff offered a genuine commitment to fostering a learning environment where all students, including those with intellectual disabilities, feel valued, supported and respected. This cross-functional alliance reflects a maturing recognition

that sustainable inclusion is not the function of one section in a university but must become interweaved into the fabric of universities policies, pedagogy, and everyday practices (Becht et al., 2020; Belmonte Almagro & Bernárdez-Gómez, 2021; Brewer & Movahedazarhouligh, 2021; Uditsky & Hughson, 2012).

The sustainability of inclusive HE programs remains a challenge. While project-based funding received through the Department of Further and HE, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) has enabled the development of programs such as the Certificate in Personal Development at SETU, sustainability longer-term funding structures are essential to embed inclusive practices within the Irish HE system. Mainstreamed institutional and governmental investment in inclusive education programs aligns to the Irish National Access Plan 2022–2028, which emphasises equity of access and participation.

Lack of long-term funding commitments can create uncertainty for both students and staff, destabilizing the commitment required to institutionalize inclusive practices (Grigal et al., 2019). This marginalised position reflects wider criticisms of tokenism and undermines policy commitment to greater equity in HE for students with intellectual disabilities (Kubiak, et al, 2021; Papay & Bambara, 2014). Failure to financially futureproof these programs limits access to third level education for people with intellectual disabilities and therefore jeopardizes student's opportunities to benefit from the psychosocial advancement highlighted in this and other such studies (Zhang et al., 2023).

Research depicts immersion in university as playing a pivotal role in the development of positive peer relationships and psychosocial skills (Collins et al., 2019). Indeed, Corby et al. (2022) argues that part-time participation can increase the risk of reinforcing marginalization. Participants interviewed recommended increasing the number of days per week that students are present on the program. A greater presence on campus positions students as more integral members of the university community (Corby et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

Traditionally people with intellectual disabilities have been excluded from third level educational institutes due to a myriad of barriers including but not limited to; institutional, structural, attitudinal, cultural, financial, lack of appropriate support and accommodations, and lack of inclusive policy and legislation (Collins et al., 2019; Corby et al., 2022; Maxwell et al., 2024). This has perpetuated an inadequate understanding about how to support students with intellectual disabilities and reflects a wider gap in the third level education disability agenda. Participants in the study highlighted a lack of support structures and resources as impacting on the student experience. Lack of flexibility to provide holistic support to students with disability was noted as an issue of concern. University disability services

have historically concentrated on accommodations for individuals with learning, physical, or sensory disabilities, with limited focus on intellectual disability (Grigal et al., 2012). Developing institutional disability strategies that move beyond compliance and align to the international frameworks on inclusive education are important steps in bringing about systemic and cultural transformation (Buckley & Quinlivan, 2023).

5. Limitations

This study focused singularly on staff perspectives to gain an understanding of inclusive practice implementation from their perspective. While student experiences are acknowledged as critical for a holistic understanding of inclusive HE, it was beyond the scope of this research. Future studies will explore student voices to build on the current findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of inclusion in Irish HE. This study was conducted on a single program in SETU in Waterford, additionally a small sample size, narrow focus of the research, gender imbalance within the focus group and contextual factors within the university may limit the generalizability of the findings. Data was collected through focus group format with primary and secondary stakeholders linked to the program, which may be subject to bias or have influenced group dynamics.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore support staffs' perspectives in relation to a third level certificate program delivered to students with intellectual disabilities in an Irish university. This research has highlighted the transformative potential of inclusive HE program such as the Certificate in Personal Development, for students, staff, the University and the wider community. Findings demonstrate that when educational environments can embrace co-creation, collaboration, and a values-driven approach, students can experience meaningful growth in their confidence, self-esteem, social integration and capacity. Staff and peers are further provided with opportunities to challenge assumption, increase understanding and gain renewed perspectives on teaching, learning and inclusion. Although the findings of this research provide valuable insight into the benefits of this type of educational program, further research is warranted to examine the perspectives of students who are currently participating in the program, their families and wider support communities as well as the views of wider university staff and policy makers.

Inclusive education is not a privilege, but a right that must be expanded into the landscape of HE. The Certificate in Personal Development provides an example of an authentic opportunity for students with intellectual disabilities to belong, to learn, and to contribute. What is captured in these research

findings is that the benefits ripple far beyond the individual, impacting all categories of staff, peers and the inclusive culture of the wider University. Despite the evident benefits, without secure investment, sustained policy commitment and a systemic culture change, such opportunities are limited. It is not enough to view these programmes as pilot initiatives; they must be embedded as a permanent and valued part of HE. Students with intellectual disabilities should not merely be included, they must be empowered as equal members of our academic, professional and social communities.

Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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