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# A pre-college transition programme for students with Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Ireland

## Introduction

Progression to higher education can be a daunting experience for young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who require specific, person-centered support with managing such transitions. This paper describes the design and implementation of a Pretransition Programme (PTP) for young people with ASD, which facilitated:

1. acquisition of pre-transition information and guidance
2. engagement in social and communication activities
3. development of transferable personal and academic skills
4. an opportunity to experience the higher education environment

The PTP was designed and delivered by an Educational Psychologist, a Senior Occupational Therapist, and five Student Ambassadors with disabilities.

## Background

The incidence of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attending post-primary schools in Ireland has increased significantly in the past decade. This is principally considered to be a response to early identification and diagnosis, and access to early intervention. Similar increases are noted in the numbers of students with ASD transitioning into Higher Education (HE); of the 10,773 students with a disability registered to HE in Ireland in 2014 / 2015, 462 (4.3%) were registered with ASD, compared to a figure of 111 (2%) in 2008 / 2009 (AHEAD, 2010, 2015).

The university environment nurtures individual strengths and fosters personal, social and academic growth, and, for young people with ASD, also offers opportunities to engage in focused study suited to specific areas of interest. However, the transition from school requires students to grapple with complicated systems and hierarchies which are very different to those of post-primary education and which require sophisticated coping strategies. Worries about fees and accommodation, embarking on new and diverse friendships, participating in social activities, and meeting academic demands and deadlines, are pressures with conflicting priorities, and are also important factors in student retention and resilience. Away from familiar support systems, young people must rapidly develop independent living skills and learn to manage choices. In the absence of emotion-regulation skills which facilitate management of challenging situations, successful transition and adjustment into university life may be compromised.

Students with special educational needs and disabilities experience complex and uncertain journeys to higher education, and these are uniquely stressful and overwhelming for students with ASD and their families (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; VanBergeijk, Klin & Volkmar, 2008; Madaus, 2005; Jamieson & Jamieson, 2007). Changes to routines and environments are a source of tension for young people with ASD, for example, anxiety connected to the switch from the highly-structured context of school, to largely selfdirected learning. Social norms and

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expectations are not explicit, and infrequent contact hours and non-obligatory attendance can impact adversely on the ability of students with ASD to make friends and connect within the college community.

Consequently, programmes which facilitate and support a smooth transition into college benefit both students and parents. Encouraging early connections with third level can support students in managing transition (Mc Guckin et al., 2013), whilst experiencing a taste of college means that students with ASD are prepared for new teaching and learning experiences, unfamiliar physical, institutional and social environments, and diverse practical processes and structures. Robust international models provide targeted pre-college transition planning for students with disabilities (Fabri, et al., 2016; Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008), recognising that both academic and soft skills are crucial to positive outcomes (Mazzotti & Rowe, 2015). However, there is a dearth of similar opportunities within an Irish context (Mc Guckin, Shevlin, Bell, & Devecchi, 2013), and by extension, a critical need for a Pre-Transition Programme (PTP) model that addresses the needs of students with ASD.

## The Pre-Transition Programme

The target group was identified as young people with ASD enrolled in the final two years of the senior cycle of secondary school. A maximum of 20 participants was identified, to maintain an optimum ratio of four students to one Student Ambassador. In March 2016, an information pack was distributed to ASD community support groups and post-primary schools, advertised on social media, and posted as an event on the communication and news webpages of the higher education institution (HEI). Parents / carers and students were invited to complete an online profile which facilitated personalisation of the PTP based upon interests and concerns. Subsequently, 19 students aged between 15 years to 18 years (\* males and females) registered for the five-day PTP. Two students stayed in campus accommodation with parents or guardians, and the remainder commuted by public transport.

The PTP was facilitated within one HEI in Dublin, and utilised a range of academic venues (lecture theatres, seminar rooms, laboratories), within Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Other facilities used in the programme included the sports centre, libraries, computer training rooms, student restaurant facilities, and buildings of historical interest. A classroom was designated as a Home Base which functioned as a meeting point, safe space, and programme base. Consideration was given to space, lighting, potential sensory issues, and access via stairways in addition to a lift, as some students identified difficulties with enclosed spaces.

Student Ambassadors were recruited from a cohort of students with disabilities and trained by the Senior Occupational Therapist, who provided ongoing coaching and mentoring to ensure fidelity to the programme model, correct implementation of activities, and to support them in engaging and guiding the students in their group. Academic staff delivering PTP content met with the Senior Occupational Therapist to discuss the aims of the programme, scheduling, potential issues with content and delivery of teaching (for example, sensory processing in laboratory settings), and to address queries.

### Theoretical Framework

The programme was designed and guided by a theoretical framework which encompassed educational psychology (EP) and occupational therapy (OT) practices. The principal EP theory utilised was Transformative Learning (Sammut, 2014) which is concerned with individual experience, critical reflection, dialogue, holistic orientation, awareness of context, and authentic relationships. Its purpose is to go beyond simple transmission of knowledge,

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thinking and skills, by introducing and encouraging new ways of observing and experiencing the world. Such transformations are achieved through self-examination, exploration of new options, planning, experimenting with new roles, and building confidence. Whilst this perspective is primarily associated with adult learning, it has been widely tested within other educational fields such as coaching (Sammut, 2014), and management of healthcare and disability. It was deemed appropriate for use within this programme as secondary school students enrolled in the senior cycle of education are poised at the threshold of the transition to adulthood, and its procedural components are suited to exploration of new environments and roles.

From an OT perspective, the Person Environment Occupation (PEO) model (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby, & Letts, 1996) was utilised, a conceptual practice model used by Occupational Therapists. It offers a foundation for guiding assessment and intervention and works particularly well in supporting students with ASD in HE (Gleeson, Nolan & McKay, 2016). It is used as an analytical tool to identify factors within the person, environment, and occupation that facilitate or hinder the performance of occupations, and permits a focus on the student's occupations within the environment, rather than solely on the person and their difficulties. The process of negotiating the transition from formal education to adulthood falls within the parameters of such occupations. Given the highly competitive nature of entrance to third level education in the Republic of Ireland, these complementary approaches function as an enabler of successful transitions for students with ASD.

## Programme Design

Structure and content were designed and developed by a Senior Occupational Therapist with expertise in supporting students with ASD within a number of HEIs in Ireland, and an independent Educational Psychologist specialising in educational transitions and change management (Programme Organisers). A logic model was utilised to plan the steps for implementation of the PTP (Figure 1), a methodology that enabled the authors to assess existing interventions, determine the aim, objectives and goals of the intervention, identify existing and required assets, and set out the procedures for delivery of the PTP.

## Implementation of the Programme

Parents were provided with a detailed schedule two weeks prior to the commencement of the PTP, with instructions to discuss content including the potential for changes to activities and scheduling. Programme Organisers and Student Ambassadors were on site from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. with students attending from 10.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., a timeframe that facilitated long distance travel.

## A Taste of Third Level Pre-transition Programme Logic Model

Situation: The transition from school to college can be stressful and uncertain for post-primary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families. Programmes which facilitate a smooth transition into college, benefit both students and parents encouraging early connections with third level institutions prior to the departure from secondary school.

### INPUTS

1. Assess transition needs and assets of cohort.
2. Identify core components and activities.
3. Identify an organization/site.

4. Estimate costs of and produce budget.
5. Engage and train camp staff to carry out components.
6. Develop a work plan and schedule.
7. Identify a method of recruitment and selection procedure.
8. Develop an evaluation plan and instruments.

## OUTPUTS

ACTIVITIES	PARTICIPATION
Developing social skills and competencies through group work.	Occupational Therapist. Educational psychologist. Student ambassadors. Academic staff of the HEI. Students with ASD in 5th and 6th year.
Experiencing academic learning activities. Discovering technologies and supports. Learning about options and pathways.	
Negotiating and managing the physical environment and sensory challenges	HEI staff engaged in providing tours and managing sites such as libraries, museums, sports and refreshments venues.
Engaging with staff within the wider HEI environment.	

## OUTCOMES

### SHORT

1. Enhanced social skills. Greater confidence and engagement.
2. Familiarity with teaching and learning methods in HE.
3. Knowing how and where to source supports.
4. Pre-identify potential stressors in the environment.
5. Informed choices and contingency plans.
6. Develop scripts and social stories for managing common scenarios.

### MEDIUM

1. Improved peer relationships in school and post-transition.
2. Understanding how to be an independent learner. Making good choices.
3. Managing anxiety, improved organisation and time management.
4. Increased confidence in management of unpredictable events.

### LONG

1. Successful transition to HE.
2. Improved outlook for retention and graduation.
3. Enhanced quality of life.
4. Self-aware, self-determined and self-advocating.

## ASSUMPTIONS

1. The pre-college transition model is an effective way to facilitate positive transition experiences and outcomes.
2. Students with ASD will acquire academic and non-academic skills which promote self-awareness, self-determinations and self-advocacy

## EXTERNAL FACTORS

Social, economic and education factors affecting young people with ASD and their families.

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Figure 1: Procedural logic model for the Pre-transition Programme (PTP)

Five groups of four students were each assigned to a Student Ambassador, with whom they devised a group name and logo to use as an organisational tool for the duration of the PTP. This activity also functioned as an initial ice breaker task.

At the beginning of each day, students participated in social awareness and skill building exercises, followed by a review of the timetable including arrangements for breaks and meals. Academic activities were scheduled for morning sessions and included a formal lecture (English Literature), seminar (Philosophy), tutorial (History) and laboratories in Biology, Chemistry and Physics, delivered by academic staff and postgraduate teaching assistants. Students also participated in an e-learning module in Animation and Game Design, and a computing session focusing on study skills technologies.

Afternoon sessions conducted by current university students included a historical tour of the campus, a visit to the Zoological Museum, a tour of the university libraries, and an opportunity to discover clubs and societies. The Student's Union introduced its role and function in ensuring support for the health, welfare and educational experience of students, and students participated in a gentle exercise session delivered by Sports Centre staff. Students were required to complete a short homework task each evening, designed to introduce a learning experience for the following day. On the final day of the PTP, students completed a campusbased Scavenger Hunt, enjoyed a farewell lunch in the student restaurant, and presented their learning experiences to parents at an award ceremony.

Students and parents were provided with a Student Workbook detailing the daily schedule, venues, staff, homework tasks, and feedback templates, and a Transition Workbook comprising of six units:

1. Planning and Preparing for Transition
2. Developing Study Skills
3. Exploring Post-transition Options
4. Using Technologies and Supports
5. Learning to be Independent
6. Managing the Transition Bridge (Doyle, 2016).

## Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Programme Organisers and Student Ambassadors reviewed programme content and structure at the conclusion of each day, discussing observations on improvements and amendments to activities, required changes or adaptations to the schedule, and notes on student engagement and participation. Students were encouraged to complete a reflective journal each day, and to utilise the 'Something to Say' wall on which they could leave anonymous feedback. Homework tasks were limited to short activities that complemented prior learning, introduced the self-directed nature of university study, and provided students with opportunities to reflect and engage in their own learning.

Students were provided with a total immersion experience with many opportunities to interact with the physical environment of the campus and current students and staff. Engagement with diverse learning approaches across a range of academic subjects and in a variety of settings and modalities provided them with a foundation for making

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more informed choices for life after school. For some students, exposure to 'real' work spaces such as the science laboratories, prompted a critical reflection on their potential management of the physical learning environment.

Students engaged positively throughout the PTP, acquiring group identities, forming good peer relationships, and supporting each other to share aspirations, interests and opinions. Despite initial difficulties with first level social skills which were expected, small friendship groups and partnerships, quickly evolved. There were no withdrawals from the programme, and no issues with participation in any of the tasks. An awards ceremony was scheduled for the final day, and students were invited to present their learning experiences either singly, in pairs, or as a Home Room group. They approached the planning and rehearsal of this activity with enthusiasm, demonstrating high levels of co-operation, engagement, participation and collaboration, using a wide range of presentation methods which included graphics, music, narrative, and Powerpoint presentations.

Regular and consistent engagement with parents prior to, during and at the conclusion of the PTP ensured that they were wellinformed and reassured. Parents received a transition guidance session, and a workshop focusing on the mechanics of applying to HE, access schemes, course choices, and supports in college within the same week designed and delivered by Occupational Therapists, an Educational Psychologist and a Career Guidance Counsellor.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The early introduction of activities to build rapport, collaboration, and a sense of trust and belonging was a key strength of the design. In principle, these are difficult to achieve in a short programme that spans only a few days, however, opening and closing the daily schedule with group interaction permitted opportunities for self-examination, reflection on new options and new roles, and building confidence. Some of these sessions resulted in significant increases within-group levels of trust and confidence, which were unexpected within such a short period. Providing realistic experiences of academic subjects, and teaching and learning methodologies, was highly valued by students. For some, experiencing the reality of a less structured and formal learning environment was reassuring, fostering confidence in their ability to manage the student role. For others, even a brief exposure to academic subjects, and the opportunity to explore these further by talking to Student Ambassadors and guest speakers, resulted in a re-think of future choices. The value of such encounters cannot be underestimated.

Parents were effusive in their comments on the progress and changes that they had noted over the course of the week. In its smallest aspect, the PTP provided parents with an opportunity to 'see' their young person as a student, to share the college experience with them, and to engage with other parents. Student Ambassadors inhabit a privileged position, with insider knowledge of university and the student experience, and are ideally placed to encourage and influence the participation of students. Student Ambassadors acted as positive role and social models and reported increases in their own confidence and personal skills that would benefit them in their post-college transition.

**In conclusion,** replication of the PTP across HEIs in Ireland would function as a collaborative, multi-disciplinary approach to inclusive transition to third level education. Implementing a transition programme of this type on a national scale would ensure that students with ASD are provided with an equal opportunity to participate in transformative learning experiences, irrespective of geographical location.

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Dr. Alison Doyle is a teacher, researcher and educational psychologist. She specialises in guidance and transition planning for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, focusing on the management of transitions between schools, college, and employment. She is currently researching supported transitions to employment for young people with intellectual disabilities, in association with Dublin City University. Alison has published 'Planning Transitions for Young People with Special Needs and Disabilities, a workbook for secondary students and their families' and her second book 'Ready, Steady, Go! Planning the Move to Secondary School' was published in the spring of 2017.



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Claire qualified with a Bachelor of Science Honours Degree in Occupational Therapy from Trinity College Dublin. Claire has worked within the field of Mental Health and Autism, and has worked across all educational levels, from primary school to university. Claire currently works as a Senior Occupational Therapist in the Disability Service in Trinity. Claire also holds a Master's of Science by Research from Trinity and a Post Graduate Advanced Certificate in Education from Queens University, Belfast, both specialising in the area of Autism Spectrum Disorders. Claire is currently undertaking a PhD which explores the lived experiences of women with Autism in their transition out of college. Claire is the Chairperson of the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland Mental Health Advisory Group, and a Board Member of the ASPIRE, she also sits on the Pieta House Autism and Mental Health Research Steering Committee.



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