



Best practice for inclusive VET

(CUBUFO)

Title of the best practice

WALK PEER Supported Transition Model: A Comprehensive Five-Year Approach to Inclusive VET and Competitive Employment in Ireland

Context

The best practice under analysis is the WALK PEER (Providing Equal Employment Routes) Supported Transition Model. This initiative is managed by WALK – Inclusive Employment Services.¹ The program functions as a critical bridge for young people with special educational needs (SEN), particularly those with intellectual disabilities (ID), transitioning from compulsory school education to mainstream forms of vocational education and training (VET), further education and training (FET), and paid employment.¹

At the macropolitical level, the practice aligns directly with national inclusion directives managed by SOLAS (the statutory authority for FET and apprenticeships) and Education and Training Boards (ETBs).³ The Irish education system is committed to achieving the highest possible level of inclusion, with the philosophy of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) playing a key role in this strategy.⁵ While UDL has been adopted at the national level, the WALK PEER program demonstrates a concrete, intensive, and long-term method for applying these principles within the specific VET context, where needs often differ from those in traditional higher education.⁶

The program's target group consists of senior students aged 16 and over. The program operates through collaboration with a network of 10 partner schools in Ireland, including 7 special schools and 3 post-primary schools.¹ The partner network is multifaceted, involving school leadership, families, local ETBs, and most importantly – employers such as Penneys and PJ Hegarty, who provide real jobs and training opportunities.¹ Funding, which is essential for the operational structure, is provided as a pilot supported transition project through the Dormant Accounts fund of the Department of Education.¹ This partnership between the educational, social, and labor sectors, supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) ², demonstrates that effective inclusion requires a cross-sectoral approach.

Problem and motivation

Stimulus for Changing the Educational Approach to Make It More Inclusive



The primary motivation behind the creation of WALK PEER stems from the critical challenge associated with low rates of successful progression and employment among young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) after leaving school. Traditional models often led to isolation and dependence, failing to secure competitive employment.

The program represents a direct response to the political pressure generated by the adoption of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015), which emphasizes the need for innovative and supported models for transition to employment.⁷ Research shows that standard differentiation of instruction, which is typically applied when a teacher faces the specific needs of a particular learner, is reactive.⁸ In post-secondary education, this approach is insufficient as instructors often lack the time or opportunity to establish a personal connection with all learners to uncover their diversity.⁸

Therefore, the motivation for change is linked to moving from a model focused on the learner's deficits to a model focused on systemic design. UDL serves as the ideological foundation for this shift, treating the most significant barriers as built into the learning environment rather than the learners themselves.⁵ This proactive approach allows practitioners to hypothesize potential barriers and remove them preventively through inclusive design before individual accommodations need to be provided. By shifting the focus from therapy and accommodation to strategic preparation for competitive employment, WALK PEER aims to create a system that works for everyone, regardless of their additional needs.

Description of the practical approach

Details of the Practical Application, Process, Resources, and UDL Implementation

WALK PEER introduces a radical change by replacing short-term interventions with a comprehensive, structured five-year support model.⁹ This long-term commitment is key to building sustainable career pathways.

Timeline and Process:

1. **Years 1 and 2 (School Preparation):** The focus is on senior students (16+) still in partner schools. Training covers key competencies such as employability skills, entrepreneurship basics, career planning, and "work sampling" (on-the-job trials).⁹ The goal is to develop ambitious individual transition plans.
2. **Years 3 and 4 (Transition and Direction):** Intensive, individual support is provided at this stage, aimed at choosing and planning specific transition steps toward FET, VET, or direct employment. Career and Employment Facilitators (CEF) play a central role, helping learners develop their Personal Progression Plans (PPP).²
3. **Year 5 and Beyond (Maintenance and Retention):** The most innovative aspect of the model is the ongoing mentorship. For those transitioning into paid employment or mainstream training, CEFs provide support and mentorship for a period of three



years after leaving school.¹ This directly addresses the historical problem of workplace retention.

Application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL):

WALK PEER adopts UDL not as a set of rules, but as a "lens" or "mindset" for identifying and removing barriers.⁵ The application of UDL is carried out through the so-called "Plus-One" thinking: if there is one way to interact, another is added.⁵ This ensures that teaching and assessment offer Multiple Means of Engagement (The WHY), Multiple Means of Representation (The WHAT), and Multiple Means of Action and Expression (The HOW).⁵ Through UDL, the program proactively creates opportunities *for* and *with* learners, leading to purposeful, motivated, and strategic learners.

The program has been pilot-expanded to include senior students in 10 partner schools.¹ The key resource, Career and Employment Facilitators (CEF), provides the personalized support necessary to build confidence and independence.² The long-term support, continuing for three years after entering employment¹, represents a significant investment in employment sustainability, significantly reducing the risk of regression and the need for future costly interventions.

Accessibility

Physical, Digital, and Pedagogical Accessibility, and Use of Assistive Technologies

Accessibility in the WALK PEER model is viewed as a multi-layered approach, integrating institutional design with personalized technological solutions.

Digital and Physical Accessibility:

Digital accessibility is a priority, with efforts made to comply with WCAG 2.1 AA standards.¹⁰ This includes measures such as using Plain English, publishing HTML pages instead of PDF files, and ensuring high contrast and navigation compatibility for screen reader users.¹¹ Regarding physical accessibility, while some older buildings (such as VET centers or offices) may have structural limitations¹¹, the program's focus has shifted to ensuring accessibility at the real workplace.

Pedagogical Accessibility and UDL:

Pedagogical accessibility is achieved through the systematic application of UDL (as described in section 3.1). UDL ensures that learning design is flexible and adaptive, reducing the need for post-hoc accommodations. The successful application of UDL in the FET sector is



supported by the development of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs), which encourage collaboration and the sharing of good practices among educators.⁵

Assistive Technologies (AT):

Assistive Technology (AT) is perceived as a right, not a luxury, allowing people with disabilities to participate fully in society and the economy.¹² In the context of employment, WALK PEER works with partners such as Assistiv Ireland to provide personalized technological solutions. AT can range from low-tech devices (such as ergonomic pads) to high-tech communication and computer control systems.¹³ For people with ID, specialized AT solutions can customize workflows for almost any role.¹⁴ Through this combination of UDL (reducing systemic barriers) and targeted AT (providing functional access), learner independence and productivity in a competitive environment are maximized.

Results

Number of Affected Learners, Impact, and Classroom Examples

The WALK PEER program directly covers senior students (16+) in 10 partner schools.¹ Although specific quantitative data for employment of this pilot cohort is not explicitly stated for a 12-month period, qualitative results and impact on learners are significant.

Qualitative Impact:

The model is focused on empowerment. Through intensive support and mentorship, learners develop confidence, independence, and the ability to make informed decisions about their future careers.² Participation in programs with peer support has been proven to lead to significant improvements in quality of life indicators and increased engagement with treatment or support.¹⁵

Impact on Self-Determination and Motivation (UDL):

The practical work of CEFs, assisting students in developing their ambitious Progression Plans², directly contributes to the "Multiple Means of Engagement" (The WHY of learning) principle within UDL. By providing choices and real work experience (work sampling), the program creates purposeful and motivated learners.

Examples from WBL and Employment:

Learners are given the opportunity to gain real experience in local businesses.⁹ Photographic evidence shows participation in various work environments, including large retail chains (Penneys) and construction companies (PJ Hegarty).¹ The most significant result is achieving



paid, competitive employment. Individuals participating in such supported programs experience a sense of pride in contributing to the economy and find the work to be "life-changing".¹⁴ This outcome is particularly important as it transforms dependent individuals into economically active citizens.

Work-Based Learning and Transition to Employment

Transition of Learners to Workplaces, Including Employer Agreements and Mentor Support

The WALK PEER model ensures a highly structured transition from the school environment to the labor market. This pathway begins in school with work sampling and preparation⁹ and concludes with prolonged mentorship.

Structured Transition:

The transition to employment is focused on finding competitive, paid employment or entering mainstream FET.² For Work-Based Learning (WBL) to be successful, it must be flexible and meet the requirements of both the workplace and the VET institution.¹⁶ The program emphasizes formalizing agreements that guarantee the quality of training and the support provided by in-company trainers.¹⁷

Employer Agreements and Adaptation:

CEFs act as mediators between the learner and the employer. Their function includes ensuring necessary workplace accommodations. Research shows that using workplace and personal accommodations, such as a modified work schedule or changes in sitting/standing requirements, is strongly associated with high job satisfaction and, more importantly, long-term employment retention (four years or more).¹⁸ Employers engaged in the model become partners, supported by WALK PEER to create an inclusive environment.

Mentorship Support After Entry:

The continued mentorship provided by CEFs for three years after leaving school¹ is the distinguishing factor that ensures transition sustainability. This personalized support helps learners deal with workplace challenges, use assistive technologies effectively, and continue their professional development. This long period of support is a direct investment in workplace retention, maximizing the return on investment in training.



Outcome Indicators (0, 6, 12 months)

Measured Indicators and Effect Monitoring

Evaluating the effectiveness of WALK PEER requires tracking results over time, as the impact of supported transition manifests in the long term. Monitoring covers not only entry into employment but also quality of life, retention, and satisfaction, based on methodologies used in research on supported employment and peer support.¹⁵

Monitoring of the program is carried out by tracking participant flow¹⁹ and using self-reporting mechanisms, often completed by the facilitators (CEF).²⁰ The monitoring structure, adapted to the 5-year model, includes the following key stages:

Table: Outcome Indicators and Tracking Timeline

Indicator	Baseline (0 Months)	Mid-term (6 Months)	Long-term (12 Months)	Methodological Rationale
Participation Level	Enrollment of students (16+) in the career-preparatory phase. ¹	Percentage of retention in active phases of the program.	Ongoing engagement with CEF mentorship after leaving school. ¹	Evaluated via survey performance criteria (e.g., over 50% retention for "continuation" of the intervention). ¹⁹
Completion Level	Development and finalization of the Personal Progression Plan (PPP). ²	Successful completion of key WBL modules or exams.	Successful completion of mainstream FET/VET or securing a competitive employment contract. ⁹	Measures the effectiveness of preparation and transition planning.
Progression to WBL/Employment	Status before starting work.	Entry into a WBL internship or initial finding of a paid job.	Percentage of achieved paid, competitive employment. Similar	Primary criterion for evaluating socio-

Indicator	Baseline (0 Months)	Mid-term (6 Months)	Long-term (12 Months)	Methodological Rationale
			interventions show a significant increase in employment (e.g., from 10% to 42.4% over two years). ²¹	economic effectiveness.
Workplace/FET Retention	N/A.	Retention at workplace/training after 6 months (initial stability).	Retention at workplace for 12+ months. Use of accommodations is a key factor associated with retention. ¹⁸	Evaluates the efficacy of the 3-year support and adaptation model.
Learner Satisfaction	Self-assessment of confidence and goals. ²	Satisfaction with CEF support and relevance of opportunities.	Improvement in quality of life indicators and job satisfaction. ¹⁵	Provides a qualitative assessment of the impact on well-being and self-esteem.

The focus on long-term retention (12 months and more) is critical, as the economic justification for the program depends on employment sustainability. Evidence for retention shows that investment in intensive workplace support, facilitated by CEFs, is an effective method for achieving prolonged professional stability.



Sustainability

Implementation Duration and Long-Term Sustainability

The WALK PEER program demonstrates significant methodological sustainability, having been in operation since 2013.⁹ This long period of implementation shows that the model is operationally viable and applicable across different educational and labor cycles.

Despite its proven success and years of experience, the main challenge to the program's sustainability remains its financial foundation. WALK PEER continues to be funded as a pilot project through the Dormant Accounts Fund.¹ The annual budget for the program amounts to approximately €278,000.⁹

The problem is rooted in fragmented financial responsibility. The benefits and costs of WALK PEER are distributed among multiple government departments – education, social protection, health, and employment.⁹ The lack of a unified mechanism or fund to recognize and institutionalize proven cross-sectoral effectiveness makes the transition from pilot to permanent funding difficult. Because the benefits (e.g., reduced social welfare needs and increased tax revenues) are realized across different departments, a structural hurdle exists for securing consistent and sustainable funding.

To ensure long-term sustainability, a political decision is needed to transition toward outcomes-based funding mechanisms, which are already recommended for other FET programs focused on transition to employment.²² This would allow the budget to be directly linked to proven successes in retaining learners in competitive employment.

Transferability

Steps for Transferring the Good Practice to Other VET Contexts and Necessary Resources

The transferability of the WALK PEER model is supported by the fact that the organization has already developed and published a "Guidelines" document in October 2016, specifically intended to support the expansion of the program across Ireland.⁹

Successfully transferring this model to other VET contexts, such as those managed by ETBs or SOLAS, requires more than just copying procedures. It necessitates a transfer of competence and adaptation of the UDL philosophy.

Key Steps for Replication:

1. **Institutionalizing UDL Principles in VET Design:** Replicating institutions must recognize that the VET sector has unique needs, different from those of higher



- education, and adapt the UDL focus to practical skills and assessment in a real work environment.⁶
2. **Creating Professional Learning Networks (PLNs):** The transfer of experience and knowledge regarding UDL and supported employment must be cascaded by creating and maintaining PLNs among VET practitioners and CEF equivalents.⁵ SOLAS already has a mandate to identify and cascade best practices for vocational training within ETBs.³
 3. **Specialized Staff Training:** A resource is needed for training new Career and Employment Facilitators. Training must cover not only career guidance but also skills for providing psychosocial support and strategies for dealing with professional burnout.²⁴
 4. **Standardizing WBL Agreements:** To facilitate employer participation, standardized but flexible electronic forms for Work-Based Learning agreements should be introduced, clearly defining the responsibilities of the VET provider and the company.¹⁷

Transferability depends on building a team culture and shared understanding of UDL within the entire FET system, rather than simply having a manual.

Cost efficiency

Economic Justification of the Initiative

The economic efficiency of the WALK PEER model derives from the proven effectiveness of the Supported Employment (SE) methodology, which is at its core.

Comparative Cost-Effectiveness:

Observations show that models based on SE, such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS), provide better results at lower overall costs to the health and social systems compared to standard vocational rehabilitation approaches.²⁵ IPS is considered more cost-effective and often leads to cost savings, as it significantly increases the number of days participants work in a competitive environment.²⁵

Long-Term Return on Investment (ROI):

The annual investment of €278,000 in WALK PEER⁹ is economically rational as it provides high social and economic returns. By supporting youth with ID to transition to paid employment, the program achieves the following economic benefits:



1. **Reduction of Dependency:** It transforms individuals who would otherwise be lifelong social welfare recipients into taxpayers.¹⁴
2. **Improved Outcomes:** Similar interventions succeed in raising paid employment levels from a very low baseline (e.g., 10.0%) to levels approaching those of the general population (over 40%).²¹
3. **Reduction of Social Costs:** Long-term job retention, guaranteed by the 3-year mentorship, reduces the need for costly health, mental, and social services in the future.

Thus, although initial operational costs are significant, the model is proven to be more effective from the perspective of total public expenditure when evaluating long-term results and contributions to the economy. This supports the argument for transitioning to sustainable state funding.

Success Factors

Identifying the Conditions That Made the Practice Work

The success of the WALK PEER model is due to a specific combination of methodological, organizational, and personnel factors:

1. **Long-Term and Intensive Mentorship:** A critical factor is the provision of 3-year support from CEFs after leaving school.¹ This prolonged support eliminates barriers to workplace retention, which is often a greater challenge than initially finding a job.
2. **Integration of UDL and Supported Employment:** The combination of proactive design of learning and work environments (UDL) and personalized, intensive workplace support (Supported Employment) ensures that learners not only acquire skills but also apply them successfully in real, competitive conditions.
3. **Strong and Active Partnerships:** Success requires high-level cooperation between schools, VET institutions, and employers.¹⁶ Employers must be supported to make necessary accommodations, with CEFs serving as a bridge and guarantor of the worker's success.¹⁴
4. **Staff Competence and Support:** The quality of work depends on the Career and Employment Facilitators. Their training must be continuous (CPD), focused on supporting learners' well-being, psychological resilience, and social integration.²⁴
5. **Ambitious Outcomes:** The focus on competitive, paid employment² – rather than lower forms of employment – sets high expectations and increases learner motivation, aligning with the engagement principles in UDL.

The central role of the CEF as a qualified bridge between education, social support, and the labor market is decisive for maintaining high fidelity to the model and achieving positive results.



Challenges and Solutions

Identifying Main Obstacles and Ways They Were Overcome

Despite proven effectiveness, the implementation and sustainability of WALK PEER face systemic and operational challenges:

Financial and Administrative Fragmentation:

- **Challenge:** Scattering financial responsibility across multiple government departments, making the securing of long-term institutionalized funding difficult and uncertain.⁹ The program remains in a vulnerable pilot phase.
- **Solution:** Constant lobbying and proving economic efficiency (cost-efficiency) based on long-term employment retention data. Evidence that the model is more cost-effective than standard social support²⁵ should be used as a basis for transitioning to a results-based funding model.

Employer Attitudes and Cultural Barriers:

- **Challenge:** Skepticism, lack of awareness, and gaps in workplace organizational culture that hinder the inclusion of people with ID.²⁶
- **Solution:** CEFs play an active role in managing culture change by providing training and direct workplace support, including personalized AT solutions.¹⁴ By demonstrating success and productivity, employers transform from skeptics into partners.

Workforce Management and Facilitator (CEF) Burnout:

- **Challenge:** The intensive nature of mentorship and psychosocial support provided by CEFs can lead to a high risk of professional burnout or secondary trauma, similar to other peer-support roles.²⁴
- **Solution:** Organizational provision of continuous professional development (CPD) and support for self-assessment and reflection among CEFs.²⁴ Creating internal PLNs allows facilitators to share experiences, develop coping strategies, and maintain high motivation, ensuring model fidelity.⁵



Reason for Selecting the Practice for WIN

The WALK PEER Supported Transition Model represents a benchmark practice for inclusive vocational education and training (VET) in Ireland, especially for learners with intellectual disabilities. The program's success is due to its methodological depth – a five-year, long-term intervention that integrates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to remove systemic barriers with intensive, three-year support for workplace retention.

Key Findings:

1. **UDL and Employment:** WALK PEER demonstrates the effective application of UDL in the VET sector, where the focus has shifted from reactive accommodation to proactive design that ensures learners are strategic and purposeful.
2. **The Critical Role of Mentorship:** Long-term mentorship (3 years post-school) from Career and Employment Facilitators is the most important factor in transforming a short-term job placement into a sustainable career, directly linked to high levels of retention and satisfaction.
3. **Economic Rationality:** The model is cost-efficient. Despite initial investment costs (€278,000 annually), it leads to a reduction in long-term social and health costs and creates economically active citizens, providing a high return on public funds.

Contacts for more information and/or references

WALK - Inclusive Employment Services

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SOLAS

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Dublin City University (DCU)

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WALK PEER Programme

URL: <https://walk.tovuti.io/peer>



CEDEFOP (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training)

URL: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/ireland-u3>

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Shirley Ryan AbilityLab

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