

Opening Address to Committee – Pdraig Hannafin

My name is Pdraig Hannafin. I'm the Public Affairs Research Administrator for the Rehab Group. I've been in that role since 2009, leaving University College Cork with an MA in Modern Irish, an MA in Hispanic Studies, and an MA in Film Studies.

At sixteen, I suffered a spinal cord injury after a fall from the garden wall at my home in Co Kerry. After three weeks in intensive care in the Mater and ten months in Dun Laoghaire, I left for home to return to school, joining the same class as before.

While I spent as long in education as I would have if I were training to be a doctor, not all of that was voluntary. My final MA I completed as I knew society was not ready for me to enter employment, even if I was.

The PA support I had received all throughout my education did not exist for me in employment. The person who would help me physically to do some photocopying, stapling, turning pages, eating lunch, and going to the bathroom, would not be there if I got a job.

This barrier, in combination with the indescribable fear that were I to get a job that, I might lose the benefits that made the cost of living with a disability achievable to some extent, meant that it was easier to stay in college. It was the easier and safer choice to halt my progression. It was easier and safer to stay in college, take up a spot, and use valuable resources and support than to do what I wanted to do: get into employment and start paying back.

According to a 2020 report by the ESRI: of the EU-28 countries, Ireland had the fourth-lowest employment rate among people with disabilities of working age in 2018, just 36% of working-age disabled people were in employment.

While the report highlighted gaps in qualifications caused by a lack of transitional supports from secondary school to third-level education as a reason for those figures, my example shows that transitional supports also need to exist from third-level education to employment.

In my experience, a multi-faceted approach must be taken, including a view across society more generally: for example, a college or university can be fully accessible and facilitate students with all forms of educational support; however, if accessible forms of transport do not service it then those supports are moot.

The support provided to employers to encourage the employment of people with disabilities is more realistically aimed at the retention of employees who have acquired a disability due to the short-term nature of the support available. None of the supports were of any benefit to me.

Disability awareness amongst employers must be actively encouraged and improved. I'm employed within the disability sector, and the majority of the disabled people I know who work are employed within the disability sector, where the understanding of disability is obviously the

greatest. I would love to see that understanding spread to all employers to give disabled people a fair shot.

Things have changed and improved since I got my job with Rehab in 2009. I would feel much more confident now if I were to look to change jobs, but I still feel my disability would be my greatest barrier.