

Transition to Adulthood Research Brief

Joana Idakwo-Agha
Rebekka Jez
Sehrish Shikarpurya

Transition to adulthood is a crucial period for individuals with disabilities. Despite some observed progress, research indicates that they still continue to face significant challenges in achieving successful post-secondary outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers (Carter et al., 2021; Cheng & Shaewitz, 2022; Goodall et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2021; Vidarte, Zambrano, & Mattheis, 2022). In the United States, even with a college degree, individuals with disabilities are three times less likely to be employed than those without disabilities (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2021). Research also demonstrates a lack of access and support in postsecondary education in countries like South Africa (Zongozzi, 2022), Canada (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021), Barbados, and Jamaica (Blackman, 2022).

In the United States, the provision of transition support is driven by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), which mandates transition planning as part of the Individualized Education Program (IEP), called Individual Transition Plans (ITP). ITPs state that planning begins at age 16 (or earlier) to prepare students with disabilities for higher education, employment, and independent living. Funding for programs such as Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) covered by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is also provided to assist students in exploring varied post-secondary opportunities. The Pre-ETS focuses on five specific areas, namely: job exploration, career counseling, work-based learning, workplace readiness, and self-advocacy (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). Kohler and colleagues (2019) provide five concrete practices that research has found to be effective, including: (a) family engagement, (b) program structure, (c) interagency collaboration, (d) youth-focused planning, and (e) youth development.

On the global scale, the legal protocol for when and how transition services should be made available to individuals with disabilities is not so cut and dry. In 2005, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia introduced the concept of transition requiring the provision of services to include specific vocational coursework in the first semester for grade 12 students in public schools, thus enforcing a grade-specific transition requirement (Alhilfi, 2025). Although disability advocates demand that the principles emphasized at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held in June 2014, should serve as the guides for the provision of transition services globally, many countries, including the United States, continue to struggle (Pearson et. al., 2020). While skill acquisition is recognized as a crucial factor in improving postsecondary outcomes, its full impact has yet to be effectively measured.

Definition of Terms

Youth-focused Planning: Focusing transition goals on a student's strengths, interests, and preferences.

Family Engagement: Active family involvement in planning and supporting transition planning.

Youth Development: Building skills and opportunities that foster independence and self-determination.

Interagency Collaboration: Coordination between schools, families, and community agencies to support transition to successful post-secondary outcomes.

Program Structure: The organized system of services, timelines, and resources guiding transition.

Predictors: Research-based factors linked to positive postsecondary outcomes.

Policy: Laws or guidelines that shape and regulate transition services.

Transition to Adulthood: The shift from school to adult roles in postsecondary education, work, and independent living.

Transition Planning: A structured process to set and achieve postsecondary goals.

Vocational Rehabilitation: Services that help individuals with disabilities prepare for and maintain employment.

Youth: Young person between the ages of 15-24

Transition Barriers and Challenges

Variance in definitions, policies, and prioritization areas has created silos in transition (Lau et al., 2024). Similarly, at the global level, there is often a lack of coordination among educational institutions, vocational rehabilitation, health, and social services that hinders access to proper support. Because of the discrepancies across the globe, policy implementations tend to fall short of proposed standards, furthering their inability to tackle broader structural barriers and ensuring equitable access to successful post-secondary outcomes (Alhilfi, 2025; Pearson et. al., 2020).

Research (ContinuumCloud, 2022; Mirzaian et al., 2024; Pearson et. al., 2020) points to inaccessibility and lack of resources as hindrances to successful transition. Variables such as inadequate funding, lack of qualified personnel, inaccessibility to services like education, community resources, healthcare, mental health, technology, and transportation severely impact the youth transition process are reported by youth, families, educators, and transition specialists. According to Mirzaian et al. (2024) the complexity of disability conditions and lack of knowledge presents challenges to the transition process for families. This is compounded with families and educators being unsure what to do, how to navigate the support systems, and not knowing their rights. Changes need to be addressed for partners working towards supporting youth as they move into adulthood, especially for children with co-occurring disabling conditions. Despite growing traction globally to improve support for youth with disabilities to successfully transition to viable post-secondary outcomes, significant barriers relative to inconsistencies in policy interpretation and implementation, resource availability, service coordination, and societal biases still persist.

Promising Evidence-Informed Strategies and Practices

Mazzotti et al. (2020) identified twenty-three in-school predictor that strongly correlate with positive post-school outcomes of which include some notable ones like career, technical, and vocational training opportunities; paid employment and work experience; goal setting around independent living skills; inclusion in general education; and self-determination skills such as supporting in developing self-advocacy, social skills, transition program goals, and youth autonomy in decision-making (Newman et al., 2016). When students are included in their transition planning process, they are more likely to gain access to the workforce and receive post-secondary support after they leave secondary education. Evidence also points to community engagement as a positive indicator of successful transition to adulthood. Community-based work experience and knowledge of functional life skills have also been linked to positive outcomes in education, employment, and independent living (Cobb et. al., 2013).

According to the IRIS Center (2025) transition planning should be individualized, student-centered focusing on self-determination. For students to succeed, educators should collaborate with families to create appropriate, measurable goals that address education, employment, and independent living.

The Division of International Special Education and Services (DISES) of the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) designed a professional learning gallery transition module focused on evidence-based practices identified in recent global research on transition to adulthood for individuals with disabilities. All activities included in the module offer real-world perspectives that emphasize youth voice, cross-cultural policy challenges, and academic best practices. In exploring global transition frameworks, placing emphasis on measurable outcomes, and guiding participants to create individualized, lifespan-focused transition plans, the module addresses key predictors of post-secondary success such as family engagement, interagency collaboration, skill development, and self-determination. This integration of contextual assessments, services, and planning strategies ensures the module is grounded in validated research.

References

- Alhilfi RA (2025) Faculty perceptions of university-based transition services for students with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. *Front. Educ.* 10:1437836. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1437836>
- Blackman, S. N. (2022). The impact of Covid-19 on education equity: A view from Barbados and Jamaica. *Prospects*, 51(4), 611-625.
- Carter, E. W., Awsumb, J. M., Schutz, M. A., & McMillan, E. D. (2021). Preparing youth for the world of work: Educator perspectives on pre-employment transition services. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 44(3), 161-173.
- Cheng, L., & Shaewitz, D. (2022). The 2022 Youth Transition Report: Outcomes for Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities. *Institute for Educational Leadership*.
- Cobb, R. B., Lipscomb, S., Wolgemuth, J., Schulte, T., Veliquette, A., Alwell, M., Batchelder, K., Bernard, R., Hernandez, P., Holmquist-Johnson, H., Orsi, R., Sample McMeeking, L., Wang, J., and Weinberg, A. (2013). Improving Post-High School Outcomes for Transition-Age Students with Disabilities: An Evidence Review Executive Summary (NCEE 20134012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S.
- ContinuumCloud. (2022). Current issues and opportunities for individuals living with IDD. Accessed 17 April, 2025. <https://resources.continuumcloud.com/blogs/current-issues-and-opportunities-for-individuals-living-with-idd>
- Gallagher-Mackay, K., Srivastava, P., Underwood, K., Dhuey, E., McCready, L., Born, K., ... & Sander, B. (2021). COVID-19 and education disruption in Ontario: Emerging evidence on impacts.
- Goodall, G., Mjølén, O. M., Witsø, A. E., Høghagen, S., & Kvam, L. (2022, April). Barriers and facilitators in the transition from higher education to employment for students with disabilities: A rapid systematic review. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 7, p. 882066). Frontiers Media SA.
- IRIS Center. (2025). Secondary Transition: Helping Students with Disabilities Plan for Postsecondary Settings. IRIS Center. <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/tran/cresource/#content>
- Jez, R. J. (2024). Culturally responsive and sustaining transition for at-promise youth. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*. 48(2) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/21651434241235886>
- Jez, R. J. (2023), Special Education Services and CRT: Dismantling the Singular Identity and Honoring Intersectionality. Lolas, J.W. and Strikwerda, H.L. (Ed.) *Contextualizing Critical Race Theory on Inclusive Education From a Scholar-Practitioner Perspective (International Perspectives on Inclusive Education, Vol. 22)*, Emerald Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 113-139. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-363620230000022007>
- Kohler, P. D., Gothberg, J. E., and Coyle, J. (2019). Taxonomy for transition programming for systems involved youth (2nd Ed.). Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University.
- Landmark, L. J., & Jez, R. J. (2023). Culturally Sustaining UDT: Individualized Education Planning. Scott, L., & Thoma, C. (2023). *Universal Design for Transition* (2nd ed., pp. 184-210). Paul H Brookes Publishing Co, Inc. <https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/books/9781681256030>
- Lau, S. J., McKelvey, S., Gokita, T., Ramsey, H., & Mosley, D. (2024). Facilitators and barriers of pre-employment transition services implementation: Preliminary findings and recommendations. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*, 60, 253-261.
- Mazzotti, V. L., Rowe, D. A., Kwiatek, S., Voggt, A., Chang, W.-H., Fowler, C. H., Poppen, M., Sinclair, J., & Test, D. W. (2021). Secondary Transition Predictors of Postschool Success: An Update to the Research Base. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 44(1), 47-64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2165143420959793>
- Mirzaian, C. B., Deavenport-Saman, A., Hudson, S. M., & Betz, C. L. (2024). Barriers to mental health care transition for youth and Young Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and co-occurring mental health conditions: Stakeholders' Perspectives. *Community mental health journal*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11199219/>
- Murray, C., Kosty, D., Doren, B., Gau, J. M., & Seeley, J. R. (2021). Patterns of early adult work and postsecondary participation among individuals with high-incidence disabilities: A longitudinal person-centered analysis. *Developmental psychology*, 57(4), 584.

- Newman, L., Madaus, J., & Javitz, H. (2016). Effect of transition planning activities on postsecondary support receipt by students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 82(4), 497-514.
- Pearson, C., Watson, N., Gangneux, J., & Norberg, I. (2020). Transition to where and to what? Exploring the experiences of transitions to adulthood for young disabled people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(10), 1291–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1820972>
- Sheppard-Jones, K., Moseley, E., Kleinert, H., Collett, J., & Rumrill, P. (2021). The inclusive higher education imperative: Promoting long-term postsecondary success for students with intellectual disabilities in the COVID-19 era. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 87(1), 48-54.
- Sinclair, J., Jez, R. J., Banks, J., & Kucharczyk, S. (2023). Building equity into transition practice and service delivery: A call for systemic changes in the field of transition. *Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals*, 46(4) 223-236.
- United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2014. Youth with Disabilities, Conference of State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, New York, 10–12 June 2014. Accessed 17 April, 2025. <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/COP/COP7/CRPD.CSP.2014.4.E.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). Workforce innovation and opportunity act. DOL. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/wioa>
- Vidarte, A., Zambrano, J. R., & Mattheis, A. (2022). Access and equity for students with disabilities in Colombian higher education. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30, 61-61.
- Zongozzi, J. N. (2022). Accessible quality higher education for students with disabilities in a South African open distance and e-learning institution: Challenges. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 69(5), 1645-1657.