# Work Integration Social Enterprise

*What are the perceived benefits for persons with disabilities?*

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## Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of managers within Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) in Ireland, which provide employment for persons (PWD). The aim of this research was to explore perceived benefits for PWD, investigate any inclusive practices within the WISEs and document their subjective lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four WISE managers from diverse sectors; these participants were chosen purposefully to ensure they represented WISEs of different sizes and length of time in business.

Thematic analysis was utilised to identify patterns and themes in the data, revealing insights into the benefits and challenges of employing PWD and discovered a prevailing tension - navigating the balance between fulfilling a social mission and achieving commercial viability – people versus product.

The findings highlight the complexity and variability of WISEs' practices and the impact of the organisational and systematic barriers they can face. Despite limitations such as a small sample size, the study provides valuable contributions to understanding the potential of WISEs as agents of social change, not solely in the lives of PWD but also as a method to reconceptualise the meaning of work for all individuals.

This study underscores the importance of capturing the realities of WISEs and advocates for the continued exploration of the phenomenon that should include all stakeholders, to investigate their potential to improve the employment landscape for PWD.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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# Table of Contents

## Contents

## List of Abbreviations

**BWEA** Back to Work Enterprise Allowance

**CDS** Critical Disability Studies

**CES** Comprehensive Employment Strategy

**CSP** Community Services Programme

**CRPD** Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

**DASS** Disability Awareness Support Scheme

**ERG** Employee Retention Grant Scheme

**DETE** Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

**DRCA** Department of Rural and Community Affairs

**DRCD** Department of Rural and Community Development

**DSP** Department of Social Protection

**EU** European Union

**JIIG** Job Interview Interpreter Grant

**HSE** Health Service Executive

**ILO** International Labour Organisation

**LEO** Local Enterprise Office

**PRG** Personal Reader Grant

**PWD** Persons with Disabilities

**RAF** Reasonable Accommodation Fund

**SE** Social Enterprise

**UN** United Nations

**USP** Unique Selling Point

**WEAG** Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant

**WISE** Work Integration Social Enterprise

**WSS** Wage Subsidy Scheme

# List of Figures

# Chapter one – Background

## Introduction

There is significant evidence that demonstrates that rates of disability are on the rise (Cooney and Brophy, 2024). In Ireland one in five people will experience a disability during their life course (CSO, 2022). However, stigmatisation (Bialik and Mhiri, 2022), discrimination (Banks *et al.*, 2018) and marginalisation (Noel, 2016) of persons with disabilities (PWD) are barriers that are evident across a breadth of literature. PWD experience inequality (Mapp, 2016) and are distanced from opportunity, particularly in the areas of education and employment (Heera and Maini, 2019). This research is situated within the Social Enterprise (SE) sector and explores how one category of SE, Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE), aims to provide access to the labour force for marginalised cohorts, which include PWD.

## Disability

Historically people with impairments have been viewed as having a deficit, that required medical intervention or rehabilitation, positing the problem as the individual's body, ignoring the role of environmental, societal and attitudinal barriers as factors that perpetuate disability. This led to the institutionalisation of a large number of PWD (Brennan, 2013) labelling them as idiots and imbeciles, degenerates and morons (Tredgold, 1909; O'Brien, 2013). However, the social model was a paradigm shift in the construct of disability, scholars like Mike Oliver (Oliver, 2013) and Victor Finkelstein (Finkelstein, 1993) Mark Priestley (Priestley, 2003) and Colin Barnes (Barnes, 2012), posited a new definition of disability that was a catalyst for change, influencing global social and political reforms. The social construct recognises the interplay between individual abilities and societal barriers. (Barnes and Mercer, 2010) and resulted in a movement of deinstitutionalisation and integration of PWD into their communities. Nevertheless, despite legislative efforts, the stigmatisation and negative perceptions of PWD continued into the 21st century, resulting in huge inequalities in accessing all aspects of society – particularly in the areas of education and employment (National Disability Authority, 2011; CSO, 2016; CSO, 2022).

### Disability and employment

The evolving concept of disability has had profound implications for employment and workplace integration. By acknowledging the environmental, social and attitudinal barriers that impede the participation of individuals with disabilities in the workforce, these

frameworks highlight the need for inclusive employment practices that accommodate diverse abilities and needs. However, progress on integration has been slow and PWD continue to face systematic barriers to accessing paid work, specifically, from the mainstream labour market and decent work (ILO, 2020).

The employment rate for PWD in Ireland is one of the lowest in Europe (OECD, 2021), this is despite a variety of strategies and initiatives implemented by the government over the last number of years, some of which have been facilitated by the so called 'third sector'. This is defined by Byrne as,

*'…collective economic activity outside the State and Commercial sectors. It comprises nonprofits, foundations, associations, civil society groups and other collective forms..'* (2022, p. 3).

One pivotal figure situated in the third sector is Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE).

## Work Integration Social Enterprise

WISE are SEs whose primary mission are to provide training and employment opportunities for people who are otherwise distanced from the labour market (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara, 2016a; Lysaght *et al.*, 2018; Elmes, 2019a; McKinnon *et al.*, 2020).

There is a solid body of international literature that also highlights the benefits of WISE, such as well-being (Elmes, 2019a; McKinnon *et al.*, 2020), mental health (Poveda *et al.*, 2019; Blake, 2019), empowerment (Chui *et al.*, 2019) and meaningful work (Bilbija and Rendall, 2021). There have been some interesting sociological and epistemological approaches in the WISE field that include stigma theory, user-lead theory and stakeholder embeddedness theory (Chandra, 2018), ethnographic investigation (Mauksch *et al.*, 2017; Blake, 2019), eudemonic and hedonic theories of well-being (Bilbija and Rendall, 2021) systems theory (Joyce *et al.*, 2022) alongside a human rights-based approach from Hofmayer (2021a).

The vast majority of research in the field of WISE utilises qualitative, case study methodology (Laratta and Nakagawa, 2016; Lysaght *et al.*, 2018; Elmes, 2019a; McKinnon *et al.*, 2020; Rantisi and Leslie, 2021). A possible explanation for this is that the sector is relatively small so would not meet the necessary quantitative sampling requirements. Moreover, it could be argued that qualitative research allows for a richer, more nuanced, intimate investigation of such a complex phenomenon (Denscombe, 2007; Sutton and Austin, 2015).

International literature that explores the phenomenon of WISE is varied in depth and breadth from theoretical and sociological perspectives. The vast majority of research uses qualitative, case study methodology. There is scant research that details WISE from an Irish context. To this end, further investigation of this phenomenon is warranted.

## Rationale for Research

### Research question

**Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) in Ireland – are there perceived benefits for persons with disabilities?**

This research aims to;

- investigate the inclusive practices of four Irish WISEs
- document the lived experiences of managers of four Irish WISEs
- explore how they perceive WISEs to be of benefit to the lives of persons with disabilities.

### Researcher positionality

It is necessary to document the personal influences that have shaped this research. Firstly, the researcher has worked in the disability sector for over twenty years. They have witnessed first-hand, the lack of opportunities and stigma that disabled people face in nearly every aspect of their lives. It would be inaccurate to assume that these experiences have not influenced their own motivations and created an inherent bias. From an academic perspective, the researcher also holds a Masters in Disability Studies. This degree introduced them to the theories of critical disability studies, the social and human rights-based approach to disability, and highlighted the intersectionality of disability and the discriminatory and destructive powers of ableism. These theoretical concepts have helped shape the researcher's views of disability both professionally and personally, so it is natural to assume they will inherently influence the research. It was crucial for the researcher to continually assess these biases and ensure that all literature, interviews and discussions contain balanced arguments and opinions. Husserl advises that it is only possible for a researcher to 'bracket' their preconceived notions about a subject by overtly identifying them first (Tassone, 2017).

Additionally, as part of the researcher's professional role, they also manage a WISE that is situated within a disability service. This has instigated an eagerness to learn from others in the sector. WISE in Ireland is relatively small compared to other countries, so discovering how other enterprises have navigated their journeys was a significant factor in choosing the topic.

Finally, the original concept was to interview beneficiaries of WISEs and document their lived experiences of work. The researcher believed that this study would give PWD a voice and highlight what they felt were the benefits and challenges of working within the WISE sector, which aligned with CDS and a phenomenological approach. Unfortunately, the ethics constraints within NCI would not allow for this. As part of the initial research proposal, the researcher highlighted that these constraints are in direct conflict with the recently enacted Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act (Government of Ireland, 2015a), which explicitly states that the capacity to make a decision should be automatically assumed and that people have the legal right to make their own decisions. Arguably, eliminating this population from participating and contributing to research is an impingement of their fundamental human rights and is now in direct conflict with Irish legislation. The researcher would urge NCI to review their ethics procedure in light of this legislation and put the correct procedures, supports and training in place so that 'vulnerable' people have the right to consent or refuse to, participate in academic research. Their voices have been silenced for long enough.

## Literature Review

A critical review of the literature was undertaken that consists of research in the field disability studies, disability and employment, SE and WISE, in Ireland and internationally. To contextualise the issue of employment for PWD, the review includes an analysis of socio-political events and policy documents that have shaped the lives of those living with disabilities in Ireland today.

## Research design and methods

Whether a study is inductive or deductive is heavily influenced by the research question. If the researcher has a hypothesis and then collects data that aims to prove or disprove this hypothesis, this would be considered a deductive approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). In contrast inductive research begins with general observations and moves towards theory as data is collected. This study was heavily influenced by the framework of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and although it does not have a definite hypothesis, the lens it employs has

established theory that underpins it, so therefore it cannot be accurately classified as purely inductive.

A mono method was employed as it allowed the researcher to extrapolate data from the subjective, lived experiences of four WISE managers. The constraints of this research would not allow for longitudinal investigation, therefore, it was a cross-sectional study, gathered at one point in time.

This research required intersecting two very different sociological domains, the field of disability and the phenomenon of WISE so it was prudent to employ two theoretical frameworks; CDS (Schalk, 2017) and phenomenology (Ilac, 2018).

### Critical Disability Studies

The core theoretical models within the field of disability studies are the medical model, the social model, the bio-psycho-social model and a human rights-based approach (Goodley and Moore, 2000; Goodley *et al.*, 2019). This research is grounded in the social model of disability whereby a person's disability is created not by their impairment or condition, but by the systematic, attitudinal and environmental barriers created by society (Oliver, 2013). CDS emphasises the importance of centering the voices and lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, recognising them as agents of knowledge production and experts on their own lives. This approach challenges the traditional power dynamics in which disability is studied and defined by non-disabled researchers and professionals (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). This study uses CDS as a lens to analyse the structures and systems within the WISEs as well as critically examine the information shared by the WISE managers in relation to their subjective lived experiences.

### Phenomenology as methodology

Like most philosophies, phenomenology has a plethora of scholars who offer conflicting views. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Gadamer all located themselves within varying realms of the ideology (Dowling, 2007). Phenomenology is succinctly explained by Tassone as

*'…..a detailed and systematic attempt to understand the structures of first-person lived experience'* (2017, p.7). Phenomenology asks the researcher to investigate *how* individuals experience a phenomenon and analyses the data from each individual's perspective while concurrently reflecting on their own experiences and biases (Sutton and Austin, 2015).

This concept of 'bracketing' that allows the researcher to highlight their own subjective experiences, was a deciding factor for selecting phenomenology as a methodological tool.

### Sampling

For this study, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. The rationale for this being that in Ireland WISE is a relatively niche area, so the population size is small, they occupy 6.1% of the SE sector as a whole (Government of Ireland, 2023c). When disability is added as a variable the possible sample becomes even smaller. For qualitative research with a small sample size, non-probability, purposive sampling is often employed as it allows for direct recruitment of participants that are relevant to the study (Emmel, 2014).

Four participants were gathered utilising a purposive sampling method (Quinlan, 2011) of the various registers of WISE in Ireland as well as from the researcher's professional knowledge of the sector. The criteria for selection was twofold;

- a manager of a WISE based in Ireland
- the WISE's main beneficiaries must be PWD.

The sampling technique aimed to investigate a spectrum of opinions and lived experiences, identifying a diverse group of WISEs at different stages of development, and allowed for a nuanced exploration of the research topic. However, it is also important to note that this sample size is relatively small so ultimately limits the scope of this research.

### Semi-structured interview

All participants were interviewed utilising a semi-structured interview technique, using open-ended questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2022). Ideally, they would have all been conducted in person, however, as many services are still under severe staffing pressures this was not always possible and in these circumstances the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

## Conclusion

This chapter gave the background to the research, clarified its rationale and presented the research question. It gave an overview of the methodology used in the study alongside the theoretical frameworks employed. The next section presents a review of the literature that identifies the historical roots of disability that have shaped the current employment landscape.

## Overview of Research

### Chapter 1 – Background to the research topic

The background of this study introduces the study and gives a brief overview of the background and rationale for the research. This section also detailed the objectives and specific aims of the study, the scope of methodology and structure of the research.

### Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter contains a comprehensive review of the academic literature, the review traces the historical roots of disability and their correlations to the employment lives of PWD in modern society. It explores the origins of WISE as a category of SE, and its predecessor sheltered workshops. It concludes with a discussion about WISE and its potential impact for PWD.

### Chapter 3 – Methodology

The methodology chapter outlines the research objectives and the methods used for primary data collection in this study. It also covers the underlying philosophies, research approaches, sample population, and provides a systematic review of the data collection process.

### Chapter 4 – Findings

This chapter discusses and critically analyses the findings of the primary research. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common themes in the data and individual insights from each of the interviews were highlighted.

### Chapter 5 – Discussion

In this chapter findings of the study are discussed in relation to the research question and information gathered in the literature review.

### Chapter 6 - Conclusions and Recommendations

The strengths and limitations of the study are outlined. Implications for policy, research and practice are discussed. Finally, recommendations are made for future research in this subject area.

# Chapter Two - Literature Review

## Introduction

This literature review examines the historical, social, and political dimensions of disability. It explores definitions of disability and identifies the one utilised in this study. It goes on to critically examine how societal norms and attitudes have historically contributed to the exclusion of individuals with disabilities as well as significant movements that have shaped perceptions and policies over time. This chapter demonstrates how all of these factors have helped to collectively shape the persistently low employment rates for PWD in Ireland today. It goes on to investigate the frameworks of Social Enterprise (SE) and Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) as possible methods to address the barriers faced by PWD in accessing the labour market.

### Literature search and selection

To begin the search for relevant literature, seven databases were searched, Pro Quest Entrepreneurship, APA PsychINFO, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Ebscohost and Sage Journals. The literature was explored using key terms that were relevant to the research question.

- *Disability*
- *Disability employment*
- *Social Enterprise*
- *Work Integration Social Enterprise*

The searches were conducted using combinations of the key terms. Limiters used were *peer-reviewed* articles and the *English language*.

The second stage of this review consisted of hand-searching through books about disability and employment, SE and WISE; chapter titles and indexes were scanned for the aforementioned keywords. Citation tracking was also used to source any other relevant material.

## Disability in context

People with disabilities (PWD) have always faced adversity, whether it was through brutality and genocide (Quarmby, 2011), incarceration and institutionalisation (O'Brien, 2013) or stigmatisation and discrimination (Dammeyer and Chapman, 2018).

The term 'disability' has a complex history and its usage has evolved from narrow, individualistic perspectives to broader, socio-political frameworks that acknowledge the intersectionality of impairment, societal structures, and cultural norms. To fully understand the construct of disability in modern society it is necessary to explore its historical roots.

### Definition of Disability

Language shapes how we perceive our world and has played a vital role in many social and civil rights movements. Language and terminology have proved to be a contentious issue in the field of disability, as today's definition may become tomorrow's term of abuse (McDonnell, 2007). There is no universally accepted definition of disability so it is important to contextualise and define what is meant by the term disability in this study.

As per the World Health Organization (WHO), a disability is not solely a condition of the body or mind that confines an individual's activities and restricts their interaction with the environment. Instead, the WHO underscores the environmental factors that significantly influence how a physical or cognitive impairment translates into disability. For instance, the physical surroundings can either assist or impede ease of movement, while societal attitudes towards individuals with impairments also hold considerable weight.

The WHO offers a holistic definition of disability;

"*How much disability a person experiences in daily life varies greatly and is dependent upon how their impairment or health condition interacts with barriers in society*" (WHO, 2020, p.3).

To this end, within the confines of this research, the terms disability, persons with disabilities (PWD) and disabled people (DP) will adhere to this definition as it acknowledges how disability intersects with various aspects of life including their health, while also recognising that each person may experience disability differently depending on individual circumstances.

### Exclusion of people with disabilities

The economic and social benefits of an inclusive and just society are evidenced across a wide variety of literature (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Tompa *et al.*, 2022; World Bank, 2023) yet PWD in

Ireland still experience more discrimination (Banks *et al.*, 2018) stigmatisation and inequality (National Disability Authority, 2011). In Ireland one in five people report having a disability, this population experiences extreme inequality across all areas of society. The Census of 2022 discovered that the disabled population was more likely to have poorer health outcomes with 25% reporting their health as 'bad or very bad' compared to 4% of the general population. 20% of PWD live in consistent poverty and the mortality rate is over four times higher for PWD than that of people without disabilities.

One area that has been identified as a key factor in facilitating the inclusion of PWD is employment.

## Employment for people with disabilities

*'Work is regarded as central in establishing an identity: the work you do tells who you are. Participation in the workforce is a condition of social inclusion and consequently the demand for access to work is seen as crucial in the struggle for equality'* (McDonnell, 2007, p.191).

The literature suggests that PWD want to work, with two-thirds of those claiming disability benefits stating they are 'able to work' (OECD, 2021) and when given the right support they can successfully participate in the labour force (Government of Ireland, 2015b). Yet, in Ireland, the employment rate for this cohort has been consistently poor. The latest Census of the Population (2022) reported an overall figure of 39.6% for labour force participation for persons who experienced any level of disability. However, it is important to note the revision of the question to include the extent at which a person experiences their disability,

- Long-lasting condition or difficulty experienced to any extent
- Long-lasting condition or difficulty experienced to a great extent
- Long-lasting condition or difficulty experienced to some extent.

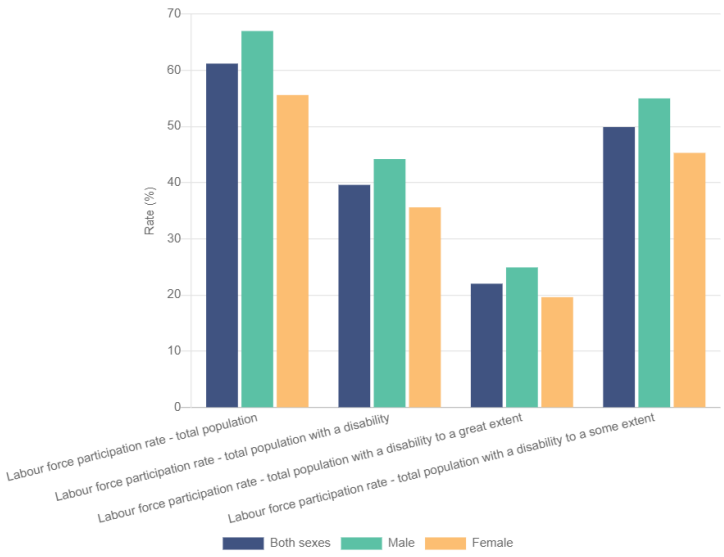


*Figure 2.1 Labour Force Participation and Rate of Disability (CSO, 2022)*

For people who reported a 'long lasting condition or difficulty experienced to a great extent' labour force participation is at **22%.**

Globally, people with disabilities have lower rates of employment but some countries have ensured much higher rates of participation in the labour force, such as Canada with over **45%,** over **50%** in Germany, Sweden and France and **61%** in Switzerland (OECD, 2017). Despite several policy reforms in both employment and disability, Ireland still has one of the lowest employment rates for PWD in the EU, well below the EU average of **51.3%** (DFI, 2023).

The inequality PWD face when trying to enter the employment market is intricate and multifaceted, encompassing various challenges and complexities. Deinstitutionalisation, the closure of sheltered workshops and policy reform had significant implications for the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce and the promotion of inclusive employment practices. The following section explores socio-political events that have helped to shape the lives, and consequentially the working lives of PWD.

## Models and movements

In order to contextualise the issue of employment for PWD, it is necessary to explore the historical context of disability and the factors have helped to create and shape the barriers that prevent them from accessing employment.

## Industrial Revolution

The advent of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century marked a pivotal moment characterised by heightened productivity demands. Industry leaders, exemplified by figures like Frederick Winslow Taylor, applied scientific principles to manufacturing processes, aiming to maximise productivity and profits (Hitt, Black, and Porter, 2012). Before this shift, the term "work" was broadly used to describe activities aimed at fulfilling essential human survival needs, the industrial revolution cemented its association with paid employment.

However, the strenuous physical demands and harsh working conditions prevalent during this era led to the exclusion of disabled individuals from the factory floor. Barnes, (2012) portrays this 'disablement,' relegating those who did not meet the criteria of a fully functioning worker to deviant status (p.473). Consequently, the Industrial Revolution rendered disabled individuals 'surplus to requirements' (Quarmby, 2011, p. 39), often resulting in destitution. This exclusion from the workforce entrenched dependence on social welfare payments, reinforcing stigmatisation and perpetuating the notion of disability as an economic burden—a barrier still identified in contemporary employment literature (Van Aswegen, 2020).

Nevertheless, amidst the adversity, the Industrial Revolution brought about some positive changes for disabled individuals. Paved streets and public transport inadvertently enhanced accessibility to cities. Technological advancements provided greater access to communication and improved overall quality of life. Additionally, a few employers began recognising the potential contributions of disabled workers (Wendt, 2023). This evolution had profound implications for individuals and communities, as it altered not only the nature of work but also societal expectations and economic structures.

## The medical model and institutionalisation

The medical model of disability can be traced as far back as ancient Greece, when the physician Galen began to describe how disability could be cured by medical intervention (Quarmby, 2011). In the 19$^{th}$ century the emergence of the asylum led to mass institutionalisation of PWD, where medical professionals could apply specialised treatments to cure them of their conditions (Kilgannon, 2021). People of ‘feeble mind’ were thought to be prostitutes, criminals and unemployables; degenerates who contribute nothing to society and ‘impede a nation’s advance’ (Tredgold, 1909, p.100) so were sent to workhouses, county homes and asylums. In 1927 out of 1834 registered ‘patients’, 974 were labelled as ‘idiots and imbeciles’ (Department

of Local Government and Public Health, 1928). In the same report it was recommended that these classes would be better suited to 'less highly organised institutions' (p. 104) and that they should be removed to Auxiliary Mental Hospitals or Homes.

### Institutionalisation

After years of colonial oppression Ireland surrendered itself to the influence of the global spiritual power that was the Catholic Church and in doing so adopted highly conservative laws on censorship, prohibited all forms of birth control and incarcerated its 'fallen women' (Sweeney, 2010, p.14). The secular ethos of paternalism and protection, the attitude that people with disabilities were eternal children underpinned the practices of infantinalisation, labelling, segregation and marginalisation. Institutions provided a medical model of care, alongside spiritual and moral guidance, so that their patients could attain the necessary skills to lead a good life in the Christian tradition (Sweeney, 2010). By the 1950's, service provision for people with intellectual disabilities was relinquished entirely, to religious orders (Power, 2010). These institutions segregated their 'patients' from society not just in the physical sense; campuses were often situated in remote locations, away from communities and surrounded by foreboding brick walls, but they also ensured segregation from society. PWD were kept inside the walls, they worked in the kitchens and laundries or in the gardens; they slept in dormitories and ate in dining halls (Noonan Walsh, 2003). They became 'the other' and were to remain within those walls for the majority of the twentieth century (Ryan, 1999). It was during this period that it became a common practice for the patients to partake in a range of duties within the institution. These duties were to become the foundation of further marginalisation, exploitation and segregation of PWD – sheltered workshops.

### Sheltered workshops

*'employment in a facility where most people have disabilities, with ongoing work-related supports and supervision'* (Voermans *et al.*, 2021, p.240).

Work was central to the rehabilitation and training of PWD within institutions, tasks could include the day-to-day operations such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, along with farming the land. Additionally, some engaged in cottage industries and crafts which served as sources of revenue for the institutions such as basket weaving, sewing, candle making, carpentry, and pottery. Although these were labour-intensive and sometimes highly skilled roles, they were

labelled as activities and the workers were never paid. This practice continued well into the twenty-first century with the Department of Health (DOH) having responsibility for a large volume of workshops which were the main mechanisms for providing activities, vocational training and sheltered work for PWD (HSE, 2014). Service providers also followed suit and created mini-enterprises to offer training opportunities for PWD. The ethos of medical and charitable care meant that despite generating revenue, the activities were considered rehabilitative or therapeutic and resulted in the exploitation and further segregation of PWD (McConkey *et al.*, 2019). They were forced to do menial repetitive tasks with no opportunity for progression, the vast majority of them were unpaid or given small top-up payments and were not afforded the same rights as non-disabled employees (May-Simera, 2018b).

This legacy of disabled workers not receiving equal pay and conditions continued for many years. In the early 2000s several cases against sheltered workshops were brought to the Equality Authority as breaches of the Employment Equality Act, that included little or no pay, despite many of these workshops generating considerable profits (Holland, 2007).

A subsequent review by the HSE, National Review of Sheltered Services made strong recommendations for the transfer of all HSE funded workshops that engaged in commercial activities to be transferred to the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE) and for any workshops that provided 'work-like-work' to close (HSE, 2014).

This reform resulted in the closure of the vast majority of sheltered workshops – shutting their doors without a plan for what could replace them. Many PWD were left unemployed with little else to occupy their time. In a review of Adult Day Services, one family member noted that,

*"Service users can no longer avail of a full working week in the workshop due to recent legislation. It is unfair that service users cannot work for the minimum wage in the workshop…It is soul-destroying to go into 'work' and find no work to do but just hang around idly all day."* (HSE, 2014, p.54).

However, in the context of this research it is important to note sheltered workshops also gave PWD opportunities to learn valuable skills in an albeit segregated but supportive environment– this juxtaposition laid the foundation for the subject matter of this research - WISE - as the literature has evidenced that many have origins within the sheltered workshop model and will be discussed later on in the chapter .

### Social model

In the 1970s, significant shifts in approaches to disability saw a move away from medical models focused on institutionalisation and seclusion, to a more social and holistic model focused on promoting inclusion. Stemming from the Fundamental Principles of Disability, the social model of disability argues that disability is not an inherent characteristic of an individual but rather a product of the disabling barriers and oppressive attitudes present within society (Oliver, 1990; Barnes and Mercer, 2005). This model shifts from the hegemonic paradigm (Mapp, 2016) that focused on individual limitations, to how physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers inhibit the full participation and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in various spheres of life, including employment. This model is attributed to a seismic shift in how society and governments treated disability, but it is not without its critics who argue that the social model creates a dichotomous relationship between illness and impairment when in fact they are intrinsically linked (Charmaz, 2010 cited in Owens, 2015); that it is too focused on physical disabilities and does not acknowledge the nuances and intersectionality of race, gender, age and sexuality (Oliver, 2013). Nonetheless less the social model was a powerful and transformative tool that improved people's lives and created a more equitable society.

### Deinstitutionalisation in Ireland

Ireland was a laggard when it came to reforming its support services for PWD. The Church's authority and power across a wide variety of institutions alongside their partnership with the State resulted in a refusal to acknowledge the inherent flaws in the institutional model (Brennan, 2013). Countries like the United States, Canada and Italy began to restructure their models of care and enact legislation that promoted inclusion and participation in the wider community (Iriarte *et al.*, 2016). Internationally, the Disability Rights Movement alongside the social model of disability, refocused the lens towards the fundamentals of self-determination and empowerment for PWD, moving them away from their stereotype of passive recipients of care, shifting the narrative to them as agents of their own lives (Barnes and Mercer, 2010).

## Employment

There is a significant evidence base that has demonstrated the benefits of work for those with and without disability; employment has a positive effect on levels of self-esteem and confidence, independence and social inclusion, sense of identity and quality of life (Butterworth *et al.*, 2011; Barnes, 2012; Modini *et al.*, 2016; Graham *et al.*, 2018; McKinnon *et al.*, 2020).

Yet the disabled population continues to face a range of multifaceted barriers when accessing the employment market (Hogan *et al.*, 2012; Watson *et al.*, 2017). These include environmental barriers such as the availability of the right supports and accommodations (Mcglinchey *et al.*, 2013) attitudinal barriers of employers or co-workers (Scanlon and Kamp, 2016) and systematic barriers such as governmental policies and fragmented employment schemes (OECD, 2021). The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES) highlighted seven main barriers (see Figure 2.2.).

| Barriers to Accessing Employment for People with Disabilities |
| --- |
| 1. **Insufficient expertise, training, and education:** Individuals with disabilities might lack the essential skills, training, or educational background needed to pursue certain job opportunities.<br>2. **Adverse perceptions and bias:** Employers may harbour unfavourable attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, resulting in discriminatory practices during the hiring process.<br>3. **Physical impediments:** Obstacles like inaccessible buildings or transportation can pose challenges for individuals with disabilities, impeding their ability to secure employment.<br>4. **Absence of reasonable accommodations:** Employers may neglect to provide reasonable adjustments, such as assistive technology or task modifications, necessary for individuals with disabilities to effectively carry out their job responsibilities.<br>5. **Limited flexible work options:** Individuals with disabilities may require adaptable work arrangements, such as part-time schedules or modified hours, which may not be offered in all work environments.<br>6. **Lack of information and assistance:** Individuals with disabilities may be uninformed about available supports and resources, or they may lack access to the necessary information and assistance required to navigate the employment process |

Figure 2.2 - Barriers to Employment for PWD

Adapted from: National Disability Authority, (2021).

One of the most pervasive barriers for this population is the presence of discriminatory attitudes and negative perceptions towards individuals with disabilities (Banks *et al.*, 2018). People often harbour conscious or unconscious biases, assuming that disabled individuals will be less productive, require extensive accommodations, or pose a higher risk to the workplace (Watson *et al.*, 2017). Such prejudices can manifest in various forms, from outright discrimination during hiring processes to subtle forms of exclusion and marginalisation within the workplace itself.

## Policy Reform

As the construct of disability intersects a diverse set of political spheres it is not possible to give a detailed account of all of the policy reforms that have culminated in the issues faced by PWD in modern society. Below is an overview of some of the pivotal policies and strategies that have been implemented with the intention of improving the employment landscape for PWD during the last twenty years.

The Disability Act 2005, was a catalyst for change, which established a comprehensive framework for safeguarding the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensuring their full participation in various aspects of life, including employment (Department of Justice and Equality, 2005). This Act mandated the development of sectoral plans by public bodies, outlining strategies to promote the recruitment and retention of employees with disabilities, as well as measures to ensure accessibility and reasonable accommodations within the workplace. However, it failed to address the underlying barriers that PWD face when trying to access employment, focusing instead on PWD adapting to workplaces instead of promoting the need for systematic change.

Following on from this the Irish government introduced the CES (2015-2024), which set forth an ambitious agenda to increase the employment rate of individuals with disabilities from 30% to 38% by 2024 (Government of Ireland, 2015b).

The CES promoted a range of initiatives, including the provision of tailored employment support services, the promotion of inclusive recruitment practices, and the facilitation of workplace accommodations and assistive technologies. However this strategy is not without its critics, some have argued that the implementation of these policies has been inconsistent,

with varying levels of commitment and success across different sectors and regions (May-Simera, 2018a). Additionally, there is a need for increased collaboration between government agencies, employers, and disability advocacy organisations to ensure that policies are effectively translated into tangible outcomes and that the voices of individuals with disabilities are adequately represented in the decision-making processes (Cooney and Brophy, 2024).

There are a number of government schemes to encourage employers to hire and retain PWD. These include;

- Reasonable Accommodation Fund (RAF)
- The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BWEA)
- The Disability Awareness Support Scheme (DSS)
- Employee Retention Grant Scheme (ERG)
- Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS)

It is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of these schemes in achieving their aim of increasing employment as there is not yet strong evidence in the literature (TCPID, 2022). The DSP carried out a review of the Reasonable Accommodation Fund in 2023 as the scheme had such a low uptake. This fund is made up of four supports; the Employee Retention Grant (ERG), the Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG), the Job Interview Interpreter Grant (JIIG), the Personal Reader Grant (PRG) and the Disability Awareness Support Scheme (DASS) It found that the application process was too cumbersome, people were not aware of the grants and that there was not enough funding. Spending over the last ten years has been consistently low (see Figure 2.3.).

**Table 2: Total expenditure (€) 2012 – 2021.**

| Grant | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ERG | €4,320 | €0 | €0 | €0 | €0 | €0 | €1,900 | €0 | €0 | €0 | **€6,220** |
| WEAG | €73,735 | €86,511 | €61,776 | €58,108 | €58,472 | €81,635 | €100,023 | €81,984 | €83,968 | €65,118 | **€751,330** |
| JIIG | €6,355 | €2,767 | €1,589 | €4,816 | €3,083 | €4,295 | €6,361 | €4,269 | €4,027 | €2,878 | **€40,440** |
| PRG | €27,274 | €27,526 | €14,499 | €11,866 | €16,537 | €31,619 | €12,129 | €10,903 | €18,970 | €27,572 | **€198,895** |
| DASS | €2,430 | €0 | €0 | €1,260 | €0 | €16,404 | €20,214 | €49,934 | €5,598 | €15,884 | **€111,724** |
| **Total RAF** | **€111,684** | **€116,804** | **€77,864** | **€74,791** | **€78,091** | **€117,549** | **€120,747** | **€97,157** | **€106,964** | **€95,568** | **€897,219** |
| **Total RAF & DASS** | **€114,114** | **€116,804** | **€77,864** | **€76,051** | **€78,091** | **€133,953** | **€140,961** | **€147,091** | **€112,562** | **€111,452** | **€1,108,943** |

Figure 2.3 - Reasonable Accommodation Fund Expenditure (Government of Ireland, 2023b)

The WSS is another core employment scheme provided by the government. This grant

*'…pays a subsidy to an employer if a disabled employee has the skills for the job, but due to their disability produces* ***about 20%*** *less work when compared to an employee doing the same work in the same time allocated who does not have a disability'.*

(Government of Ireland, 2024)

Arguably, this scheme is inherently ableist in nature, it provides no reference to the possibility of a PWD being able to make up the **20%** deficit in production. It is a grant written from the outdated medical model and perpetuates the narrative of discrimination based on impairment.

Despite a robust evidence base of the benefits of hiring PWD that includes increased employee retention (Chapa, 2016; Chajduga and Ingaldi, 2021) higher productivity (Fisher and Connelly, 2021) psychological safety (Kageyama, 2021) new markets and positive workplace culture (Hartnett et al., 2011; Chapa, 2016), Irish employment policies and supports for hiring PWD consistently focus on the deficit model of disability (Van Aswegen, 2020). They make no reference to any possible value that PWD can add to a business or make allowances for skill attainment and development in a role, perpetuating the narrative of economic burden and charity (May-Simera, 2018a). There is no doubt that PWD may require specific supports or accommodations but they can also flourish in a role, gain skills and out perform their non-disabled colleagues (Saha *et al.*, 2023). Policies and employment schemes need to account for this, rewarding employers who ensure Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for their staff, who demonstrate progression for PWD and who provide the necessary supports for them to achieve, develop and grow like any other employee.

The literature has demonstrated that policy reform has not been hugely successful in reducing the high unemployment rate for PWD in Ireland, in recent years the State has begun to collaborate with voluntary bodies, community groups and non-profits to assist in addressing economic disadvantage. While employment for PWD has been considered across all sectors, the current research will focus on the employment of PWD in a specific sector, namely social enterprise (SE).

### Social enterprise

In Ireland one of the earliest examples of SE that provided equitable working conditions and wages for women and girls was The Youghal Lace Co-operative Society in 1897 (Byrne, 2022).

Since then the concept and definition of what is a SE has evolved significantly. It is widely acknowledged that there is no single definition that captures its diversity, with many resorting to classification systems instead (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017).

Ireland's first official definition, which came in 2019 states that a SE is,

*'… an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders'* (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019, p.5).

SE intersects diverse social, environmental, and political spheres, leveraging entrepreneurial principles to provide goods or services that drive positive social change. Unlike profit-driven businesses, SEs prioritise humanitarian or social agendas over maximising profits for owners and shareholders.

Hofmayer (2021) describes SE's intrinsic motivation as being,

*'..to respond to structural inequalities within society, by providing more than charity and including those that find themselves at the margins of society by working with these groups to empower them to participate fully within society, closely aligning them with models of inclusive equality'* (p.92).

### Social enterprise in Ireland

In the 1990s, the term social economy started to gain attention in Irish policy and discourse, identified as a means to provide employment integration, goods, and services to disadvantaged communities (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara, 2016b). Ireland's social economy encompasses a variety of entities such as charities, cooperatives, mutual associations, social enterprises, community and voluntary organisations, and other non-profits (NESDO, 2023).

Ireland's first SE policy was launched in 2019 by the Minister for State Michael Ring (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2019). The policy aimed to raise awareness of SE, provide financial and business support, and align policies across government departments. This resulted in funding streams and support, supporting a flourishing third-sector community, with a diverse set of social enterprises, positively influencing lives and their local communities (Pobal, 2022; Ireland, 2023; Irish Social Enterprise Network, 2023).

In 2023, the Department of Community and Rural Affairs commissioned Amárach Research to undertake a baseline data-gathering exercise, estimating that 4,335 social enterprises are operating in Ireland, employing 84,382 people and thereby creating a substantial impact on the economy (Government of Ireland, 2023c).

## Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISE)

WISEs have emerged as a distinct model within the broader domain of SE, characterised by their explicit mission to integrate marginalised individuals, including those with disabilities, into the workforce. These enterprises represent a unique convergence of economic activity and social impact, embodying the principles of inclusive employment and sustainable business practices (Spear, 2002).

According to O'Shaughnessy (2008) there are three main types of Irish WISEs: sheltered workshops, local development WISEs and social economy WISEs.

She defines sheltered workshops as entities that,

*'…provide training and employment opportunities to persons with a physical disability and/or learning difficulty and are run by voluntary, non-profit organisations. These types of WISEs provide on the job training, temporary and longer term re-integration opportunities to persons with a registered disability'* (O'Shaughnessy, 2008, p.126).

At their core, WISEs are driven by a dual objective: to create meaningful employment opportunities for individuals facing significant barriers to labour market participation, while simultaneously operating as viable commercial entities (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008). This duality sets them apart from traditional businesses, as their primary motivation extends beyond profit maximisation, encompassing a commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable society.

As defined by the European Research Network, WISEs are

"*autonomous economic entities whose main objective is the professional integration, within the enterprise, of people who have disabilities or who have severe difficulties entering the labour market*" (Davister *et al.*, 2004, p.3).

This definition underscores the central role played by WISEs in facilitating the employment of individuals with disabilities. One of the key characteristics of WISEs is their utilisation of a work

integration model, which involves providing training, job coaching, and ongoing support to employees (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008). This model recognises that traditional employment pathways may not be readily accessible or suitable for individuals with diverse abilities and needs. WISEs often adopt a person-centered approach, tailoring their programs and accommodations to the specific requirements of each employee (Laratta and Nakagawa, 2016). This emphasis on individualised support is crucial in fostering an inclusive work environment that empowers people, who are excluded from the labour force, to thrive.

Another defining feature of WISEs is their commitment to economic viability, which distinguishes them from purely charitable or grant-based organisations (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara, 2016). While social impact remains the primary objective, WISEs engage in commercial activities that generate revenue, enabling them to sustain their operations and maintain financial independence.

By challenging traditional assumptions about the capabilities of disabled workers and demonstrating their potential as productive members of society, WISEs contribute to shifting societal perceptions of a cohort that has historically faced significant barriers in accessing mainstream job opportunities (Farmer *et al.*, 2021).

Health and well-being have also been attributed to WISE, Elmes, (2019) found that beneficiaries in a Canadian WISE reported improved health, increased social supports and enhanced well-being. Similarly in Sweden people in WISE reported a better quality of life and sense of belonging (Macassa *et al.*, 2023).

Yet, the concept of WISE is not without its critics. Chui, Chan and Chandra, argue that they proivide a convienent scapegoat for governments to avoid mainstreaming disability policy and that they offer little opportunity for transition to open employment (2023). Similarly Hoffman (2013), purported that they instigate systematic discrimination of PWD.

Nonetheless, WISEs represent a unique and influential model that combines economic activity with a commitment to inclusive employment and the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce. By offering tailored support, challenging societal perceptions, and aligning with the principles of social entrepreneurship, it could be argued that these enterprises have the potential to reshape the employment landscape for PWD.

## Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted dimensions of disability, examining its historical, social, and political aspects. It has demonstrated how societal norms and attitudes have systematically contributed to the marginalisation of PWD. This review examined SE and WISE phenomena as innovative strategies to mitigate the barriers PWD encounter when trying to access the labour market. The next chapter presents the research question and research design and gives a rationale for the methodological approaches chosen for the study.

# Chapter Three - Methodology

## Introduction

When undertaking research it is important to link research and theory. This requires the researcher to consider the research philosophies available and which will best serve the research topic. The choice of methodology and methods should relate to the assumptions framing the research and then on to the theoretical perspective (Quinlan, 2011). This chapter presents the research question and aims of the study. It discusses different research philosophies and approaches and gives a rationale for the methods employed in this study. It details the sampling technique and gives an overview of the data analysis framework that was utilised.

## Research philosophies and paradigms

The ontological position of this research is rooted in constructivism, acknowledging that reality is not a fixed entity but rather, that it can be constructed through interactions and individual experiences. The epistemological approach for this study aims to investigate the relationship between SE managers' subjective experiences—which are influenced by their unique origins and contexts—and their lived experiences. Critically, epistemological considerations are the foundation and acceptance of a knowledge statement (Moon, and Blackman, 2014) and having an "objective detachment" to the knowledge presented (Aliyu et al., 2015).

It is also necessary to highlight the axiological stance of the researcher. As mentioned in Chapter One, this study is grounded in the personal and professional experiences of the researcher. As someone who has seen the detrimental effects of exclusion and inequality on the lives of PWD as well as being a manager of a WISE it is important to emphasise these points from an axiological perspective, in that the researcher needed to continually reflect on these values and assumptions and remain reflexive throughout the process.

### Positivist and interpretivist approaches

In the context of social sciences, a positivist approach is often associated with a focus on measurable and quantifiable aspects of human behaviour, seeking to identify patterns and regularities that can be used to make predictions and draw conclusions. It often employs quantitative methods and statistical analysis to test hypotheses and establish relationships.

Interpretivism, also known as constructivism, is a research paradigm centered on understanding the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals attribute to their social world. Interpretive research often utilises qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and content analysis to explore the richness and complexity of human experiences (Chen *et al.*, 2011).

### Approach used in this study

This study, which focuses on the lived experiences of WISE managers in the disability sector, employs a blend of interpretivist and critical theory paradigms. These philosophies were chosen to allow for the exploration of phenomena within their social and cultural contexts, considering historical, political, and cultural influences. Because this research tries to investigate rather than prove a hypothesis, it does not lend itself well to a positivist methodology.

## Critical Disability Studies

Critical disability studies (CDS) is a theoretical framework that challenges the traditional construct of disability and promotes a more nuanced understanding of its complex social and political dimensions. Rooted in the principles of social justice and emancipatory scholarship, CDS offers a lens through which to examine the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities, unveiling the ways in which disability is constructed and perpetuated within societal structures and systems (Goodley *et al.*, 2019).

At its core, CDS rejects the medical model of disability, which reduces disability to a personal tragedy or an individual deficit that requires fixing or curing (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009). This conceptualising of disability as purely a physical impairment, places no onus on society to dismantle the physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that marginalise and exclude individuals with disabilities.

A key principle of CDS is the recognition of disability as a socio-political construct, shaped by power dynamics, cultural norms, and dominant ideologies (Goodley *et al.*, 2019). CDS scholars argue that disability is intersectional with forms of oppression, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, and that the experiences of individuals with disabilities cannot be understood in isolation from these intersections (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012). This perspective highlights the need to reconceptualise disability as a valuable aspect of human variation, rather than a deficiency

or a tragic circumstance. This view strengthens the argument that every human being should have equal access to paid work and not be reduced to passive recipients of charity.

In this study CDS lens is applied to the structures and systems within WISEs to investigate if they, like their predecessors, sheltered workshops, are perpetuating the deficit model of disability. This type of analysis is crucial to determine whether they are agents of positive change for PWD, exemplars of inclusive employment practices, or whether they are simply a rebranded form of segregation and exploitation.

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology distinguishes itself through its specific focus on the exploration of subjective consciousness and the meaning-making processes that shape individual experiences (Denscombe, 2007). This emphasis on the first-person perspective sets phenomenology apart as a robust framework for uncovering the intricacies of human existence. Moreover, phenomenology's emphasis on rich, detailed descriptions allows for a profound level of engagement with the phenomena under investigation. This depth of insight is invaluable in fields where the comprehension of subjective experiences is crucial, such as psychology and sociology. However phenomenology is not without its criticisms, it has strong potential for researcher bias, as it significantly relies on the author's ability to bracket personal experiences and preconceived notions. Additionally, its exclusive focus on subjective realities do not take into account the broader cultural and socio-political factors that shape those realities. Nonetheless there is significant body of literature that successfully employs phenomenology to highlight important social issues that are relevant to this study, namely disability studies (Papadimitriou, 2008; Kulnik and Nikoletou, 2017; Lajoie, 2023) employment (Voermans *et al.*, 2021; Romaniuk *et al.*, 2023) and Social Enterprise (Wells, 2016; Ilac, 2018).

As this study documents the lived experiences of WISE managers, phenomenology allows for commonalities and individual nuances to be explored. Each WISE operates in a different sector, phenomenology allows for these contextual differences to be acknowledged as well as their subjective realities, personal beliefs and individual challenges to be investigated.

## Research Design

### Inductive and deductive

In considering research design, one of the fundamental decisions to make is whether a deductive or inductive approach is required. Deductive theory begins with a specific hypothesis, the researcher collecting data based on the hypothesis for example, a survey that asks specific questions based on the variables in the hypothesis. Inductive theory begins with a research question and the researcher collects empirical data to analyse to develop a hypothesis.

### Qualitative and quantitative

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) a researcher's ontological and epistemological stance can influence if a qualitative or quantitative approach is employed in a study. Quantitative approaches generally require large population samples or data sets, and use surveys with more close-ended, quantifiable items. Quantitative research likes to employ mathematical analysis that can be transformed into a statistic, measuring items like behaviours, attitudes and demographics (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term that is used to describe a variety of different research methods that include interviews, case studies, focus groups, observations and content analysis (Somekh and Lewin, 2007). The world view of a qualitative researcher could be described as 'subjectivist', that is that reality and truth are relative and cannot be defined and measured, that through observation we change and shape the very reality we are trying to explain (Muijs, 2005). Qualitative data is rich in detail and content, it is not there to measure cause and effect or to predict trends (Denscombe, 2007).

### Research design in this study

This study employs a qualitative, deductive approach to explore the lived experiences of WISE managers who employ PWD. Exploring a lived experience would not be possible utilising a quantitative methodology, this research requires rich and detailed information that could not be accurately gathered through a survey or closed end approach to questioning that quantitative research entails.

This study also is deductive in nature, although it does not have a specific hypothesis it leans heavily on CDS as a framework, which provides a foundation for the research. CDS contains a

specific set of theories and assumptions about disability so employing an authentic inductive approach was not feasible.

## Measures and materials

A list of open-ended questions was compiled to form a loose structure for the interviews. This approach was utilised in social enterprise research by Hofmayer (2021). The author found that having open ended questions that could be probed and expanded upon to fully explore each managers experience. The semi-structured format supported the deductive approach by focusing on key theoretical constructs from the literature, while also being open to insights from each subjective experience.

## Sampling and participants

The type of sampling method that is employed is heavily linked to research objectives and methodology (Quinlan, 2011). For this study, a non-probability purposive sampling technique was used. The rational for this being that in Ireland WISE is a relatively niche area, so the population size is small, they occupy **6.1%** of the SE sector as a whole (Government of Ireland, 2023c). When disability is added as variable the possible sample becomes even smaller. For qualitative research with a small sample size, non-probability, purposive sampling is often employed as it allows for direct recruitment of participants that are relevant to the study.

To identify suitable participants for the study, the researcher contacted individuals through their existing professional networks who met the inclusion criteria, to request them to take part in an interview. A target sample of six to eight participants was identified, this target was in line with other studies in the area and reflected the overall percentage of WISEs within the SE sector (Westoby and Shevellar, 2019)

However, due to the limited availability of the managers and the time constraints of this research a final sample of four mangers was recruited. The sample operated across a range of sectors, catering, crafts, community outreach, manufacturing and logistics - exemplifying the diverse nature of the sector (Figure 3.1). Despite this diversity, such a small sample size severely limited the scope of this study.

| Industry | Years in business | Number of employees |
|---|---|---|
| Crafts & catering | 10+ | 30+ |
| Crafts | 4+ | 3 |
| Logisitcs & manufacturing | 30+ | 50+ |
| Catering and horticulture | 10+ | 30+ |

Figure 3.1 – Selected Sample

## Data Collection

Once participants had agreed to be part of the study, they were sent the background to the study and interview, the data collection and storage process (Appendix 1).

Participants were given the option of either a face-to-face interview or a virtual interview via the MS Teams meeting platform. Two participants chose face-to-face interviews, while two opted for Teams.

The interviews were conducted between January and May 2024 and lasted on average of 45 minutes. The aim was to engage the participants, allowing the conversation to flow as freely as possible to gain an accurate representation of their experiences as WISE managers– they all came from very different sectors so a one-size-fits-all approach was not appropriate.

For the in-person interviews, recordings were made on an audio recording device and then transferred to OtterAi for transcription. The virtual interviews were recorded using MS Teams record function and were then transferred to OtterAi for transcription.

To ensure accuracy, the researcher listened back to the recordings alongside the transcriptions, correcting any mistakes as they appeared. This process also helped the researcher familiarise themselves with the data. The interviews were stored securely on an encrypted laptop, the transcripts were anonymised, redacting any data that would identify the organisation or individuals they named.

## Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in line with the National College of Ireland's (2019) Ethical Code for Research involving Human Participants. An ethical review application form was submitted alongside the research proposal and was passed by the Ethics Committee.

When undertaking research that involves human subjects adults it is necessary to obtain informed consent (Manti and Licari, 2018). Informed consent is vital in any study, it respects the autonomy of participants, demonstrates transparency and fulfils ethical responsibility requirements for any research involving human subjects (Biros, 2018).

Each participant was sent an information sheet outlining the study and its methodology. This document stated they had the right to withdraw their consent at any time, that all data would be anonymised and any names used by the participants during the interview redacted in the transcripts. Once the participants read through the information sheet they gave their consent to be interviewed via phone or email.

## Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as

*'..a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data…'* (Braun and Clarke, 2017, p.297).

Although thematic analysis is flexible in its approach, it is also grounded in a structured framework that guides researchers through the analytical process. Braun and Clarke's (2006) seminal work outlines a six-phase approach that has become a research method that has been frequently utilised in qualitative research, (see Figure 3.2).

| | |
|---|---|
| **Phase one** | Data familiarisation – extensive reading and note taking |
| **Phase two** | Initial code generation - capturing the essence of the data |
| **Phase three** | Cluster related codes – identify patterns |
| **Phase four** | Refine themes through a comprehensive review |
| **Phase five** | Defining and naming themes |
| **Phase six** | Producing a comprehensive report |

**Figure 3.2.** – Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2017)

## Research question

**Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) in Ireland – are there perceived benefits for people with disabilities?**

The aims of this research are to;

- investigate the inclusive practices of four Irish WISEs
- document the lived experiences of managers of four Irish WISEs
- explore how they perceive WISEs to be of benefit to the lives of persons with disabilities.

**Phase one** - The interviews were inputted into Otter Ai for transcription. The researcher listened to each transcript, correcting any mistakes made by the software. Any identifying names or titles were redacted at this stage.

**Phase two** - each transcript was explored and investigated and initial codes were generated

**Accommodations, Benefits, Challenges, Social Mission v Commercial Viability, State control, Confidence, Financial, Future Plans, Skills, Multi-Faceted Progression and Stigma**

**Phase three** - codes were clustered into themes that had been identified in the literature

- Benefits and barriers – specific points that address the identified barriers
- Looking forward - how to develop and grow
- Learning from past mistakes - progression, paid employment, recruiting

**Phase four** - the themes were refined into categories

- The Role of the State
- Benefits and Challenges
- Progression of people and business

**Phase five –** the categories were then defined, alongside one theme that permeated all three categories; the tension between commerciality and social mission (product v people).

- **Benefits and Challenges**
- **The** (cont)**Role of the State**
- **Learning from the past, looking to the future**

Phase six- a comprehensive report was generated that examined the findings in relation to the literature review that was presented in Chapter 2.

## Limitations

The research was based on just four interviews, so it is reasonable to assume that the findings might not be fully conclusive due to potential bias and subjectivity. Additionally, as the managers worked in such a diverse range of sectors it was problematic to find a significant amount of common themes. If there had been more time, it would have been beneficial to have conducted more interviews to reach a broader audience and deepen the investigation.

## Conclusion

This research methods chapter provided details of the research methodology utilised for this study by the researcher. Rationale was given for the chosen philosophies, paradigms and research design. A qualitative and deductive approach was employed to investigate the lived experiences of WISE managers. The methodological frameworks of CDS and phenomenology were also justified as appropriate tools for this study. The data analysis framework was presented , ethical considerations and research limitations were delineated. The next chapter presents the findings from the primary research within the three identified themes and links back to the literature presented in Chapter Two.

# Chapter 4 – Findings

## Introduction

This section aims to present the data collected in this study with reference to any similarities found in the literature as well as to highlight and example the main interpretations of the discovered data. As each of the WISEs were at very different stages of development there were unique perspectives gathered as well as commonalities discovered throughout the data. Themes of **Benefits and Challenges, The (cont)Role of the State** and **Learning from the Past, Moving Towards the Future** were identified. Throughout these themes, the tensions between the need for commerciality and social mission were evident (see Figure 4.1).

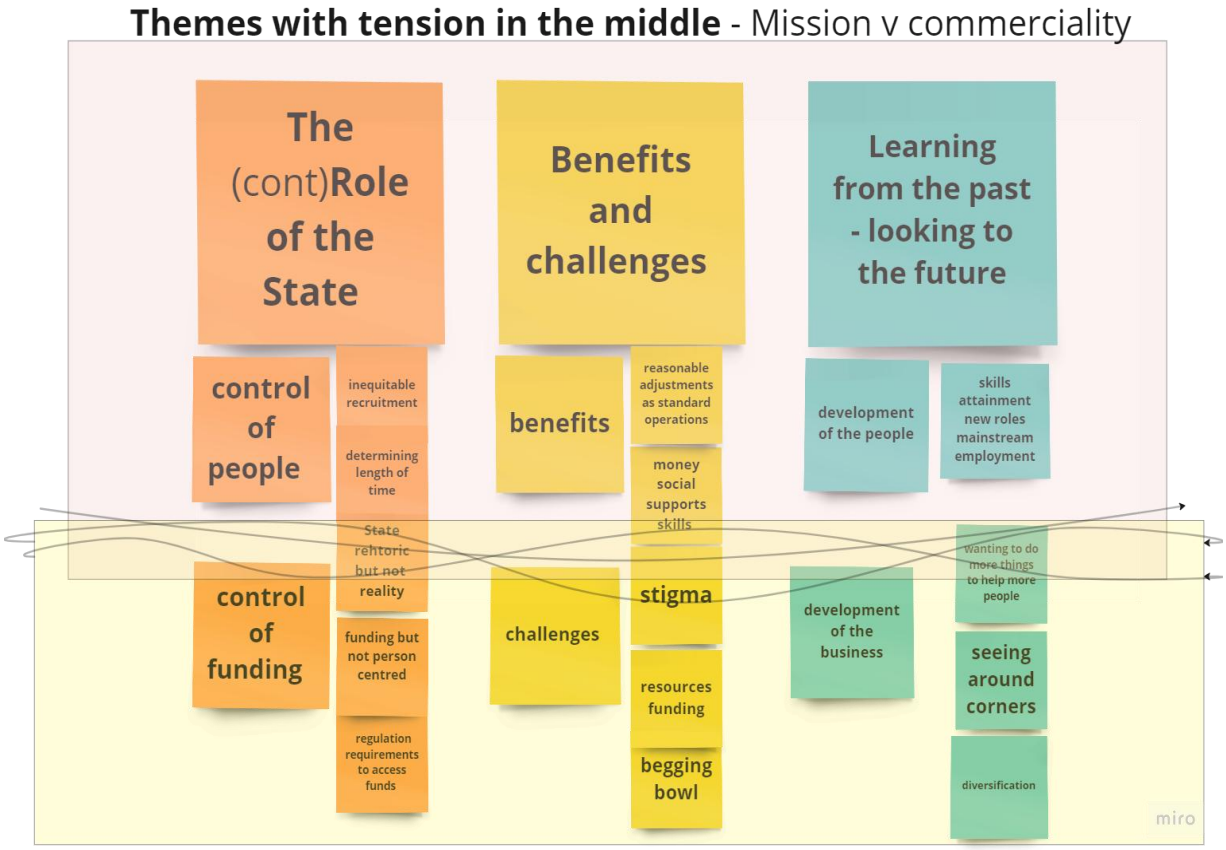


*Figure 4.1 – Themes with Tension in the Middle*

## Theme one – Benefits and Challenges

### Reasonable Accommodation

There is much written in the literature about the concept of reasonable accommodation (RA) and employment for PWD. RA refers to any modifications or adjustments required in the workplace that enable employees with disabilities to effectively perform their job (Government of Ireland, 2023b). However in the literature, the concept of RA has also been identified as a barrier to employment, the lack of clarity about what is reasonable and what constitutes an accommodation alongside the fear of additional expense and not worth the trouble for many prospective employers (Finlay, 2019).

RA was not a significant issue for the WISE managers they did not see their adaptations as disability specific, they applied the concept of accommodation to all staff, giving people tasks suitable to their skillset and supports for them to learn in other areas. They detailed RA for people across their business but they were discussed as standard operating procedures and not hugely cumbersome or expensive.

W spoke about the importance of having appropriate staff cover to ensure the business continued to operate if the participants needed time to regulate their emotions. This is particularly important for people who are neurodiverse as they will often require, time, calm and quiet if they become overwhelmed or over stimulated (Doyle, 2020).

*'So a lot of the strain and the stresses that would be daily day-to-day operations is taken away from them. So if they don't turn up, have the meltdown or anything, feeling anxious or uncomfortable…. you can actually afford to say, sit down, take five, and the business will operate well..'.* WISE Manager W

This level of team working and camaraderie are closely linked to the social benefits of work, where people often build a network of lifelong friendships. These connections are vital for humans – we are social beings who consistently seek connection , without it we fail to thrive (Dlouhy and Mitchel, 2015). Having a team who support your needs and ensure you can perform to the best of your ability is an essential part of belonging and social connectedness.

Adapting the spaces and equipment so people could perform their jobs was part of everyday operations for managers E and S. Using technology, simple strategies or piece of equipment were all mentioned by both managers.

*'So one girl she all she needed was we got an adjustable desk for the loom so it goes up and down. So basically, you know, if she's feeling tired, she can sit down if she needs to stretch she can stand up. ….we get her to stand up and we bring it up to eye level so she can see it without hurting your neck'* Manager E.

The level of practical and comprehensive supports that were provided in each WISE demonstrated how simple adjustments can enable people to effectively perform and participate at work, this is in line with much of the literature on RA, but perhaps it also suggests that RA is something that we all need in work – that accommodating for people's emotional, physical or practical needs should be an essential element of work so that we can all thrive and flourish in every aspect of our working lives and will be discussed further in Chapter Five, Although RA reasonable accommodation was a core feature of how the WISEs operated, the benefits they provided for PWD were perhaps, unsurprisingly, highly correlated with the benefits of work for the non-disabled population (Butterworth *et al.*, 2011; Modini *et al.*, 2016).

### *Social*

The social aspect of work was highlighted by all four managers, the importance of connecting with others, working in a team and having a social outlet. Similarly, Nussbaum identifies work as intimately connected with human flourishing across a range of domains including control over the environment, exercising practical reason and facilitating mutual relationships (2000).

Having a structure and a social outlet was described by S,

*'You see it, sometimes you'll see people out there and getting you know, some people that are happy, you know, very isolated, you know, they come here, and they you know, after a while, get and structure to your day you know a few people have a bit of banter, have a bit of fun, do that social interaction'.*

D highlighted the social responsibilities of work and the softer skills that are paramount for people to learn,

*'So it's really cool to kind of like, see, so I do think there's that it's not underlooked by any means the social engagement aspect, because they're kind of, you know, they're having to learn to get to work on time, wear a uniform, when break times are kind of understand that whole hospitality mentality'*

Workplaces often serve as miniature representations of the wider community, offering people a place to interact, collaborate, and build relationships. This social integration is an important factor in creating a sense of belonging. For many, workplaces can becomes a second home where they learn from others, and contribute to a collective goal.

### *Skills and Satisfaction*

The opportunity to increase skills and gain qualifications were a huge focus of the WISEs. Manager D stated,

*'So holistically, they've got to do teamwork. They're learning about initiative, they're learning about kind of, like, you know, planning….They're also having to deal with discipline at times, because it doesn't always go to plan. You know, people do things wrong. And I think that it's, that kind of whole work place'.*

S agreed,

*'Yeah, because if you're giving people more skills, and you're giving people maybe more a little bit more responsibility, all things kind of add, incrementally added to that'.*

W implied that the hard and soft skills were equally important,

*'… they've come here to learn the skills. And then the rest'.*

The satisfaction that people achieve when they have learned a skill or accomplished a task is an essential component of work and one that is highly correlated with well-being (Modini *et al.*, 2016; Kocman and Weber, 2018; Elmes, 2019b) and quality of life (Georgiadou *et al.*, 2022) . Unsurprisingly this was a common variable across all of the WISEs.

*'…So I think there's the value of work and the standard of work and the value of your performance and value of satisfaction that you will get if you've completed the task'* WISE Manager S.

*'there's the value of satisfaction that they will get, …..and then having that work structure, and those lessons, ….task completion and the satisfaction, you will get the end of a busy day'* WISE Manager W.

But perhaps the most poignant value of work and an affirmation of the importance of the WISE missions was described by E,

*'I think being able to go out into the working world and actually be able to contribute to it. I think it's like this, we have this innate urge in all of us to contribute to the community in some way, shape or form, … and so I think yeah, the confidence that comes with knowing I'm contributing to society here in some way, shape or form, I'm not just coasting along. I'm doing something'.*

Contribution to society, to a community or to a group is something that work allows all of us to feel, irrespective of what job we are doing, that we are all working towards a common goal, together as a group. The feeling of contribution, no matter how small can reinforce self-worth and provide a sense of purpose. Arguably, this was nowhere more apparent than during the COVID-19 pandemic, when our opportunities to do things collectively such as work, play sports,

sing and dance were restricted (Saladino *et al.*, 2020; Courtenay and Perera, 2020; Andrade *et al.*, 2022).

The intrinsic value of work for psychological and emotional well-being is clearly evidenced by the WISE managers, however there is one other variable that clearly delineates work from work experience and that is remuneration.

### *Financial*

The obvious difference between employment and work experience is money so therefore the financial element of paid employment was an important factor as many PWD have had little opportunity to earn a reliable income. Poverty and disability are highly correlated, in Ireland one in five PWD live in consistent poverty (DFI, 2024). Modern work can be an antidote to poverty and nothing is as fatal to human rights and the experience of individual freedom, as being poor. Basic human freedoms such a purchasing food and clothes were discussed by E,

*'II think everyone should be able to go out and think, oh, I want to earn a bit of money. I want to book a holiday. I want to have the freedom to do that. I want to be able to buy my own clothes, my own foods….'*

Future proofing financial resilience was also discussed by S,

*'We felt that it was kind of what we could offer here was to help people to live life on their terms by giving them a job, they've got greater financial independence, they've got more money, they've got more opportunity, if you can give them more training, you can… have a better chance to earn more money and to be kind of more financially resilient, as well'*

Financial remuneration that comes with paid work cannot be underestimated, as people earn money they can also gain a sense of value as contributing members of society. The ability to earn money can enhance the quality of life of PWD and the effort and responsibility required in their roles can have significant psychological benefits (Modini *et al.*, 2016). The combination of social interaction, ability to earn money and job responsibility can create a sense of community and belonging.

## Challenges

The struggle to balance commercial viability alongside a social mission is one that is unique to SE and is well-established in the literature (Katz, 2014; Young and Kim, 2015; Battilana *et al.*, 2015; Pfeilstetter, 2020; Nkabinde and Mamabolo, 2022).

This was a common theme in the experiences of the WISE managers and created tension in all aspects in managing the businesses, as described by S,

*'There's always a sort of a tension..in a social enterprise… you've got the social impact that you're trying to achieve, but you also have, it is an enterprise that needs to also be commercially viable. If it's not commercially viable. You can't provide the opportunity'.*

W agreed,

'I *suppose the social enterprise credentials that we have... because we need to be commercially viable, but we also need to by doing that, we need to be able to meet our social mission'.*

The managers encountered significant systematic barriers, primarily stemming from the necessity to register as charities to provide government-funded programmes. They were reluctant to do so due to the negative perception often associated with charities, implying a lower quality product or service. W stated that,

*'.. what I wanted to do was buck the trend of, would you say charity, feel sorry for us.. I always find that a negative thing'*

This challenge was further complicated by the need to highlight their USP of employing marginalised individuals while simultaneously striving for recognition as equals in their respective markets. The issue was exacerbated by the constant struggle to secure sustainable funding. Applying for grants was an ongoing challenge, and the lack of funding often prevented them from providing appropriate training and supports. This was further compounded as they struggled to find appropriately qualified staff.

'*…you take that to where we are now…. but we've got a pool of labour that we are dependent on, who are so far back from the labor market, require more supervision, and more support, and in fact, are costing us more…'*

E found recruiting constraints to be problematic when trying to increase revenue,

*'But that's the difficulty of kind of tussling the commercial element with the actual kind of the charitable bit, because you can't always do that recruiting, because you've kind of got to maintain that labour percentage'.*

However, being a WISE was a strongpoint at times. Where one manager felt that they were given contracts in order to tick a diversity box and although this was of a financial benefit to the business, the manager wanted more,

*'And I guess that this is a bit controversial, I guess. And when I kind of like link it a bit to stigma is that people want what people will generally use us on the basis of ..ticking one of their diversity boxes. And that's okay. Because financially, I'm benefiting from that…. But use me as a supplier, tick your box and actually really grasp who these people are and what we're doing.'*

This manager's acceptance that the client is only engaging with the WISE to tick a diversity box could be interpreted as a cynical acceptance of tokenism, fulfilling a requirement rather than an active commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, it could also be argued that ensuring the clients 'fully grasp ..these people…' is the job of the manager. Perhaps they could advocate for projects or initiatives with customers that further enhance the mission of the WISE ensuring that it goes beyond a transactional relationship, grasping the opportunity to educate the public and promote the benefits of including PWD.

This also demonstrates the contradiction of supporting PWD into the workforce, trying to champion them as equals and advocating for inclusion, while at the same time having to lean on that USP, 'playing the disability card ' perhaps. This is a clear example of the tension between social and commercial requirements. Leveraging the USP gives the WISE market differentiation, attracting financial support from investors and clients who are searching for socially responsible companies, which is crucial for it to remain sustainable and fulfil its social mission. However, it is important to note that it can undermine advocacy efforts and reinforce stereotypes, therefore it is essential for WISEs to concurrently highlight abilities, contributions and achievements.

The people v product tension sometimes affected people's daily working life, S describes this situation,

*'.. there's also a reality out there, I don't want to paint the picture that we've got this thing all squared off, because we haven't, like, there are times when people are stuck doing one job for far too long'.*

This idea of work as being unfulfilling and repetitive is a reality for many people, but has particular resonance for PWD, both in terms of individual experiences of menial, degrading work that was demonstrated throughout history (Giles, 1996; O'Brien, 2013; Brennan, 2013; Cox, 2018; Kilgannon, 2021; Social Justice Ireland, 2022). However, the fact that the manager acknowledges this as something that needs to be improved, could point to their desire to distance themselves from the exploitative workshops of the past and ensure the continual development of their employees.

## Theme Two - The (cont)Role of the State

All WISEs were financially supported by the State and although this support was invaluable for the survival of the businesses, it also came at a price. Running government programmes meant they had to be registered as charities, which excluded them from mainstream business supports. Additionally being a registered charity often came with the stigma of not offering a quality service or product, which resulted in a lack of business opportunities and an overreliance on funding. In one instance, the State controlled whom they recruited into their WISE - this was a large WISE that generated significant income so was beholden to specific requirements from the DSP. This caused some difficulties with appropriate skillsets as employees the DSP referred to the WISE were not work ready and required a significant amount of support with basic skills, something the WISE was not in a position to provide due to lack of funding and resources. Additionally, the State did not support any of the WISEs with government contracts, something that is written about in the SE consultation document as key for the success of SEs (Government of Ireland, 2023a).

### Recruitment

There was a significant discrepancy in how staff were recruited to the WISEs, non-disabled staff went through the standard recruitment process. Disabled employees came via an employment scheme, a charity partner or a training programme, word of mouth, and in one case via parents. This discrepancy creates an established otherness in the WISEs in that PWD have not undergone an interview process or reference checks. Rather, they were **brought to** the job instead of **choosing** the job, or being **chosen** for the job. This is problematic from the perspective of inclusion and equality as there is now a two-tier system of entry into the workplace – a **them** and an **us.** S's recruitment process was dictated by the eligibility for staff to avail of the CES,

*'…first of all, it's dictated primarily is like, sort of dictated by the Department of Social Protection in terms who is eligible to come in under CE scheme..'.*

Additionally their ability to hire staff was limited by the resources they had. For example, if a person presented with significant needs and there were already a number of people with significant needs in the business, they would have to refuse that person due to lack of resources.

For E, a small WISE that was less than a year old she found her staff via old contacts and through word of mouth in the disability community. Mainstream jobs are often found in this way, nonetheless, if the person did not undergo an interview it could be considered an inequitable process. This distinct discrepancy in how disabled and non-disabled people are hired could suggest that PWD are less capable and reinforce negative stereotypes and also demonstrates the lack of agency that PWD have when choosing a possible career. Arguably, this two-tier system undermines the ethos of inclusivity and equality, perpetuating 'the other' before work has even started.

There needs to be a unified recruitment process that allows for flexibility and specific accommodations. This process needs to be transparent so that it remains accessible and fair for all candidates and regularly reviewed so that it remains equitable.

### Begging bowl for business supports

All four enterprises were supported by a mixture of philanthropy and government grants. Three enterprises relied on the Community Services Programme (CSP) to fund staff wages. This is very common in WISEs in Ireland (Hofmayer, 2021b; NESDO, 2023; Government of Ireland, 2023c). S spoke about the importance of the CSP grant, which partly funds staff and a managerial position,

*'We do get a CSP grant from which is very important through Pobal… That's key…. coming into the social enterprise'*

They all spoke openly about the desire to be financially sustainable and to manage without grants but noted that the reality of this was highly unlikely. W noted,

*'…. on the business side of things, you know, I always say it would be nice not to have them….'*

D agreed, *'We do rely too heavily on funding as an organisation, and so the social enterprise needs to be stronger to be able to make sure that fundamentally, you've got much more of a buffer.*

E emphasised that,'

*'Grants are fantastic, but you cannot rely on them. So we have to treat every grant as if it's temporary. It might not come again. We're constantly looking for the next one'.*

Control of how people access the WISEs as well as how long they are able to stay was often determined by the funder or the charity attached to the WISE. This lack of person-centered

supports created a systematic barrier for people that were very distanced from the employment market. S described the issue,

*'..but there are periods of time that people can stay with us are dictated by the funder, as opposed to being dictated by us. And whereas we might want to keep somebody for longer… it's all categorised by the person's age, and how long they're…unemployed'.*

Similarly when discussing the WSS as a method of employment funding for PWD, E highlighted it ableist undertones in that it paid employers a subsidy to account for a deficit in performance,

*'I think the idea of someone being paid to take someone on just because they have a disability….I'm uncomfortable with that.. . it shouldn't be like that, a job should be given to someone who you think can either do the job already or can learn to do the job really well'.*

The WISEs were expected to be commercially viable but not seen as an equal in the business community, this limited their access to business supports. S described,

*'.. the local enterprise offices, wouldn't have a consistent view about social enterprise.. we can't support you because you happen to also be a charity, so we don't support charities.. 'Actually, we're a social enterprise, we have to have charitable status, because we run government programs, but like, that's not our choice. So because we have commercial businesses here, so therefore, so we need grants, like any other business, so we need access to grants and expertise that any other business has access'.*

And similarly the WISEs were not supported with State procurement practices, something S identified as being key to financial sustainability and planning,

*'..I think so one of the other areas where I think there could be a significant game changer if the government really wants to have a massive impact. And that will be around the whole kind of procurements piece… social procurement would be ticking a nice box for them under their ..SDGs... and for us, it would it would give us better sustainability'.*

The duality of WISE in its requirement to fulfill a social mission while concurrently achieving commercial success has created an inherent tension that can be seen in all aspects of their business model. The systematic challenges of government policy and procurement, attitudinal barriers such as stigma and bias that are associated with charities alongside inequitable business supports, have all had significant impacts on the WISEs. It could be suggested that the State needs to adopt a more supportive role in leveraging the potential of WISE. The funding provided by government schemes is vital, but evidently it comes at a price – control of which employees enter the WISE, the path in how they enter and how long they can stay. Additionally although the State is technically investing in the WISE, their inaction in regards to

support the WISEs with sustainable procurement contracts alludes to them not being invested in the business, perhaps demonstrating a lack of faith in the quality or capacity of service that PWD can offer.

## Theme 3 - Learning from the Past, Moving Towards the Future

### Developing the people

One of the key elements of these WISEs was the pathways up through and out of the enterprises. Much of the criticisms of sheltered workshops focused on the lack of progression both internally – to managerial or supervisorial roles and externally into the open employment market (Martin, 2001; Hoffman, 2013), arguably this is a key factor in differentiating WISEs from sheltered workshop exploitation.

*'For many people with disabilities, their dream of leaving their —'job training program' will never come true. They labor away making only a tiny portion of what they should because there is a system in place that provides no true alternatives.'* (National Disability Rights Network, 2011, Letter from the Executive Director).

This study highlighted some good practices when it came to progression, with many beneficiaries having progressed in their careers. W had people working in the café that trained in new staff. D identified that progression to a more senior role as a key,

*"One of my objectives this year is very much thinking about recruiting people into supervisory roles'.*

Moving people on from the enterprises was important to all mangers. This not only allowed people to progress but it also allowed for more people to benefit from the WISEs.

W emphasised,

*'So the whole goal would be for progression for people to move on to, you know, now, whether that takes six months, three years, it's all done. The service users for whatever, in other words, pace, yeah, okay, now, I won't rush them'*

Similarly S felt that,

*'the goal why they're here working, is so that they can move on, ultimately to move on. And I suppose gain, you know, greater financial independence by securing employment in the open labor market'.*

D stated that,

*'it's not just finding them job after they're finished, it's sustained work. So it's actually making sure that they have work, that is the future, it's not just a couple of months here and there, it's not temporary contracts…. It's, you know, it's contracted work'*

Developing relationships with industry and corporate partnerships also enabled progression partners was identified by both W and S. W had strong partnerships with established companies that proved to pivotal for progression.

*'…we have contacts in Lidl Google, Amazon, Compass Group, other sort of companies, IBM.. Lidl has been a great supporter of us'.*

However the pathway out is not always easy as one manager E highlighted,

*'So there is a pathway out at the moment, I would say it's like a path through a woods. It's a little bit you know, crowded, and it's hard to get out of both. We have a direction, and we have people that we're linking in with and that will be great if we could, you know, provide some training and help move people on as well, because we can't facilitate everyone obviously'*

The emphasis in the WISEs on both internal and external progressions alongside the efforts to develop corporate partnerships that could provide sustainable employment demonstrates the WISEs commitment to supporting and developing their employees. This is heavily linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.5, which promotes sustainable and decent work for all (Sampedro, 2021). This illustrates their genuine desire and dedication to improving the lives of PWD. It would be far easier for the managers to train up a core group of staff and leave them working in the same positions indefinitely. Instead, they consistently strived to move people up and out, to support more people entering the labour market, demonstrating their commitment to their social mission.

### Developing the business

All of the managers had ambitious plans for the future and demonstrated strong entrepreneurial skills and business acumen. Fundamentally, they all wanted to grow their businesses so that they could continue to help more people to enter the labour market and have a better quality of life. This was evident in each interview.

Collaborating with industry to create training programmes - *'developed a program around that, got some industry partners involved…. So the sort of the key to it is smaller numbers and industry involvement'.*

Diversifying their product offering to generate income - 'the bit I look after is pottery and catering and training academies that do all sorts, hair and beauty, barista, digital..'

*'We have a community café, …we have lots of community schemes here as well… we have a radio station, we have a food bank, we have tidy towns.. and there's other sort of community activities and yoga classes'*

Seeing around corners for gaps in the employment market - *we're looking for gaps in the employment market. So where are people struggling? …There was an ask for pizza chefs, so we've done a small pizza academy'.*

Creating roles that were specific to individual skills - *'he's doing analytics. Now that's a brand new role and I created it on the basis of meeting him because it was a gap and he could fill it brilliantly or better than I even imagined.'*

These entrepreneurial skills underpin the requirement of WISEs to be commercially viable. The managers were perhaps hired on the basis of these skills and have contributed to the success and development of the businesses.

Nonetheless, the struggle of product versus people was still evident, wanting to do more but being constrained by funding and systematic barriers, S felt that,

*'..but really to add real value.. we need to be doing particularly with, the trainees that we have… is that we need to be doing an awful lot more'.*

The sentiment from all of the managers was universal in terms of progressing and developing the WISEs so that could then serve as agents of change for as many people as possible, creating new learning opportunities, developing their hard and soft skills, providing paid work and perhaps most importantly facilitating progression through established networks and business contacts.

## Conclusion

This section presented the findings from the primary research. As agents of change in the lives of PWD all of the WISEs appeared to be doing the best that they could, with what resources they had. However, some of the deficits and barriers identified by the mangers are strongly linked to the State's policies and practices, controlling who can access the WISEs, how long they stay and what funding and supports the WISE can avail of are all determined by the State.

It could be argued that WISES are now finding themselves as 'other', in this liminal enterprise space, where they are expected to be businesses - without equitable supports; where they are supposed to progress people – without person-centred resources and adhere to State

regulatory practices - without real State investment, this liminality arguably leaves them in a precarious position and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

# Chapter Five – Discussion

## People versus product

The social mission of all of the WISEs was to give employment opportunities to PWD. As this chapter discusses, this element was concurrently a Unique Selling Point (USP) as well one that incurred stigma (Voermans *et al.*, 2021), lack of trust in their abilities (Eisenmenger, 2019) and a lack of support to mainstream business supports (Spear *et al.*, 2009). All of the WISEs needed to be commercially viable in order to fulfill their mission, yet a large proportion of their time was spent chasing funding opportunities so they could stay afloat, managing to just about 'wash their face', WISE Manager S. Nonetheless, the benefits they provided in terms of supports, social outlets, financial gains, skills attainment and a sense of purpose was evident throughout each WISE. This challenge was summed up by Manager E,

*'It's probably the most rewarding thing I've ever done, and it's probably the hardest thing I've ever done'.*

The ongoing duality of social mission and commercial viability permeated all aspects of the manager's experiences and was evident within of the themes. This interdependent relationship created difficulties in accessing funding, and gaining contracts and often came with the stigma of being a charity. Conversely, it also came with the benefit of having a USP and enabled the enterprises to differentiate themselves from the competition. This is similar to what was found in the literature, the delicate balance of social performance alongside commercial performance, managing the trust and expectations of donors and commercial partners while concurrently managing the complex needs of a diverse group of individuals often meant that one had to take priority over the other (Ramus *et al.*, 2018; Yaari *et al.*, 2020).

This tension was most evident in the largest of WISEs, it generated significantly more revenue than the other three and employed more than 30 beneficiaries. This WISE supported people from a variety of backgrounds, PWD, people with addiction issues, mental health issues, and people leaving the criminal justice system. This was very different from the other three WISEs, which supported a specific group of individuals (autism, intellectual disabilities and vision impairment). It is reasonable to assume that the variety of beneficiaries and their specific

social needs affected the commercial performance of this WISE, this is similar to a study by Yaari, Blit-Cohen and Savaya, that found social entrepreneurs that did not have expertise in supporting their target group struggled with the mission side of the business while conversely non-profits who had experience and expertise in working with their target group often struggled with the financial section (2020). Furthermore Ciambotti *et al.,* found that WISEs who had scaled and increased their beneficiary base resulted in a resistance by the initial beneficiaries to the new beneficiaries. The focus of the WISEs is for inclusion and integration into the workplace so it would be counterintuitive to suggest that a form of segregation by disability type would be beneficial. However, it is worth acknowledging that disability is not a one size fits all, and that the correct supports and expertise must be in place for any service to adequately enable people to realise their potential. Perhaps a suggestion of inclusion as collaboration could be posited here, that relevant stakeholders are included in how best to develop and progress the WISE and prevent an imbalance between social or commercial performance.

## WISE as workplaces reimagined

When investigating the barriers to work for PWD, the operations and attitudes within WISE seemed to provide a holistic antidote to them. Providing on-the-job training and educational programmes; fostering values of fairness, non-discrimination, inclusiveness and respect; providing RA through physical accommodations, assistive technology or task adaptation; they provided flexible working conditions and some had trained job coaches to support the individuals into mainstream employment (National Disability Authority, 2021).

Engels writes that 'labour created man himself' (1950, p. 7), that work represents a creative ability that is crucial to human development as a species, This idea champions work as more than merely instrumental, but rather as one of the most fundamental human traits.

The WISEs provided the latent functions of work as described by Jahoda (1981), structure, social relations, sense of purpose, identity and regular activity (Beck, 2024). These functions are essential for psychological wellbeing and personal development, they are something that employees and employers mutually benefit from (Nussbaum, 2000). This environment enabled people to grow in confidence and self-esteem, being part of a team, and achieving a

collective goal, these are all strongly referenced in the literature as essential components of well-being and flourishing and are arguably essential components of a modern workplace.

Yet, the shift from a more holistic understanding of work to a narrow focus on profit maximisation and salary competition has shaped contemporary perspectives on labour and has influenced how we conceptualise our professional lives (McDonnell, 2007; Voermans *et al.*, 2021). Perhaps it is time for a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of work, which includes all relevant stakeholders. Reimagining work would remove the focus from impairment and RA and instead offer unconditional supports on an individual basis to every employee, who will require different accommodations throughout their working lives, thereby benefiting everyone. This perspective would also align with the view of disability as a valuable aspect of human variation, rather than a deficiency or a tragic circumstance (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012).

### Hegemony

There were also elements of hegemony evident in the WISEs. The recruitment practices differed for disabled and non-disabled people. This created a two-tier system that is problematic in the eyes of true inclusion.

Additionally RA should include active engagement with PWD and be proactive in addressing the barriers to inclusion (Buckley and Quinlivan, 2021). However, this collaboration and engagement seemed to be lacking throughout the WISEs. This hegemonic nature of decision-making is generally the nature of work and management, however, when deciding what support someone needs the people requiring supports must be included in the process. This is concerning from a human rights perspective, the CRPD states that discrimination includes the failure to provide appropriate RA and that RA is crucial for PWD to be exercise their rights on an equal basis with others (Ferri, 2018).

### Disablement as a charity

Unsurprisingly the struggle to find sustainable finance through government and grants and philanthropic funds was also a common experience for the managers. All mangers wanted to become financially independent but acknowledged that this was not likely. This was also common in the literature as most SEs are not adequately funded (Smith *et al.*, 2012; Rantisi and Leslie, 2021) The role of the State with schemes and initiatives such as the CSP programme was vital to supplement staff wages but further monies were required for capital and maintenance expenses. This return to the begging bowl model of charity and disability service

provision meant that the managers were not always able to adequately support their employees and address their specific needs.

The stigma that came as being a charity, which was a requirement to access government grants – meant that the WISE managers also had to face the stigma that is often associated with charities (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Again this aligns with the literature of inherent biases and stigma that PWD in all aspects of their lives (Banks *et al.*, 2018; Vornholt *et al.*, 2018). The deep-rooted construction of disability as a deficit has not been eliminated in Irish society and can be evidenced through Irish policies and lack of supports for PWD from the day they are born (Cunningham, 2024). Additionally the lack of investment from the State through procurement contracts for the WISEs could suggest a level of tokenism, that the WISEs are a convenient way for the government to avoid truly mainstreaming disability policies (Chui *et al.*, 2023).

Concurrently registration as a charity eliminated the WISEs from accessing mainstream business supports, as LEOs did not support charities. This could point to the WISEs as the 'other' within the business sector. Arguably, the WISEs are now being disabled by the systematic barriers that are forcing them out of the commercial world and into a heavily controlled and regulated environment of government funding.

Nonetheless, the managers all spoke with an inherent pride about the work they do and the positive impact that the WISEs have had on the lives of PWD. They shared stories of individuals who had developed social skills, workplace skills, improved their well-being and gain confidence and autonomy from working in the WISE. This would suggest their motivation to continue in such a complex and difficult business environment. They all had plans to scale, diversify and develop so that they could benefit more people. Despite a robust evidence of the benefits of WISE for beneficiaries (Farmer *et al.*, 2021; Morita *et al.*, 2023; Sacchetti, 2023; Macassa *et al.*, 2023) there was an acute lack of research on job satisfaction or intrinsic motivation for managers of WISEs so this may warrant further investigation.

### Progression as differentiation

The findings also discovered the inherent benefits of people progressing through the ranks of the WISEs, sometimes into supervisory or management positions alongside progression to mainstream employment, for those that wished to do so. This was a distinct indicator of their learning from the past exploitations of PWD in sheltered workshops and institutions and clearly

underpins their social missions. Their collaboration with corporate partners, other businesses in the sectors and their entrepreneurial skills to identify gaps in the market were all determinants of success and is something that all WISEs should implement as part of their strategic plans.

## Conclusion

It is evident that work can be an important site for individual and collective growth, primarily through work we come to understand and relate to each other as interdependent beings, extending and deepening human co-operation. Perhaps there needs to be a redefinition of work so that it can include all of the relevant stakeholders. PWD have much to benefit in terms of the agency, dignity and independence that employment can offer which is reciprocated with better workplace cultures, staff retention – so lower costs, and higher productivity. The issue of work as a human right for PWD, can be viewed as much more than the simple binary of being either employed or unemployed, arguably work can be viewed as a social good which can be harnessed, not just as potentially transformative in the lives of PWD but also in creating and sustaining a more cohesive and inclusive human society.

# Chapter Six – Conclusions and Recommendations

This study aimed to document the lived experiences of managers of four Irish WISEs, explore how these managers perceive WISEs to benefit PWD and investigate the inclusive practices of these WISEs. The findings have advanced the theoretical understanding of WISEs by providing some insights and highlighting the complexities of navigating both social and commercial requirements.

## Personal Reflection

Having conducted this research, the researcher's perspective on the role of WISEs in the lives of PWD has expanded. The lived experiences of the managers highlight not only the benefits of these enterprises but also the challenges they face in their struggle to manage the delicate balance between social mission and commercial viability. It also demonstrated the stigma that is still associated with charity and disability, the level of control that the State still holds in determining how PWD live their lives.

The responsibilities that accumulated through scaling and relying on government grants resonated with the researcher. As a manager of a WISE, scaling and developing the business is core element of the strategic plan. However, it will be necessary to navigate that environment carefully as it can often cause mission drift or affect the financial stability of the business.

The inclusive practices within the WISEs are perhaps something that all workplaces can learn from. The issue of RA needs to be redefined so that is not disability specific. Work should be a place where employees feel valued, where they can listen and be listened to, where co-operation and reciprocity are practiced and people can get the supports they need throughout their working lives. Reimagining work in this manner would benefit everyone.

From a personal perspective, the researcher has always advocated for full inclusion and diversity in all aspects of society, this is a complex multi-faceted issue that requires a lot of consideration. It is imperative that beneficiaries of WISE are being supported by experienced

and skilled staff who are trained in the diverse support needs of people who are distanced from the labour market. WISE should not be a one-size-fits-all.

Finally, the frustrating complexity of the sector, the systematic barriers and divisions within SE, WISE and the business world alongside government regulatory requirements demonstrate the need for supportive policies and equitable and accessible funding mechanisms to ensure they can be continue to do the impactful work they are designed to do.

## Limitations

The study focused on managers from only four WISEs, which may not be representative of all WISEs in Ireland. Furthermore, as the WISEs were so diverse in size and duration of operation, it made comparison and contrasting of the data problematic.

Additionally, the questions may not have truly captured the richness of each manager's experience, this could be also be attributed to the inexperience of the researcher in qualitative methodology.

Finally, as previously stated the limitations of the study did not allow for the inclusion of insights from the beneficiaries and employees of the WISEs. However, it may have been prudent to include customers, corporate partners, or government departments who interact with WISE to gather a more comprehensive view.

## Evaluation of the Research Tool

The qualitative interview method used in this study provided subjective insights but also had its limitations. A more effective method may have been to send a quantitative questionnaire in advance to get a better sense of the WISE, so that the semi-structured interview could have consisted of more individualised and focused questions. Additionally, the sampling frame targeted specific individuals and contributed to the limited sample size.

## Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future studies should include a larger and more diverse sample of WISEs.
2. In this study, three of the managers had previously worked in the corporate world but made the switch to a non-profit in the middle of their careers. Examining the intrinsic

motivations of the WISE managers might provide some interesting insights; currently there is a dearth of research in this area.

3. Integrating surveys and other quantitative tools could provide complementary data and allow for statistical analysis of WISE. The recent study of SEs in Ireland did not delineate demographic data that was specific to WISE, so further investigation may be warranted.
4. Finally including perspectives from employees with disabilities is essential for future research. As the purported beneficiaries, their insights, opinions and ideas must be investigated so that there can be an accurate representation of **their** lived experiences and **their** perceived benefits of WISE.

The findings of this study may be of relevance to public policy makers, the insights may inform policy decisions aimed at supporting WISEs, such as providing sustainable funding, reducing systematic barriers, and promoting WISE as a method of social inclusion. Additionally supporting WISEs with public procurement contracts is a vital step to demonstrate the State's true investment in the potential of WISE and their services.

It may also interest disability service providers, disability activists and PWD who are interested in the possibility of WISE as a tool to improving the lives of PWD. It may also be of interest to future social entrepreneurs who may be inspired to incorporate WISE into their business models.

Finally, it may be of interest to researchers and academics as the study contributes to the body of knowledge on SE and disability inclusion, providing a basis for further research.

## Recommendations

- Develop training programs that focus on both hard and soft skills to better prepare PWD for the workforce. Provide training and support to WISE managers and staff so that they can adequately support PWD who access their services
- Launch campaigns to educate the public about the quality and social impact of WISEs, helping to reduce stigma
- Create networks and partnerships among WISEs, government agencies, and private sector organisations to share resources and best practices. Allow WISE to access business supports like any other firm.

## Conclusion

This study has advanced the understanding of WISEs by highlighting their role in promoting social inclusion and empowerment for persons with disabilities. It also identified key challenges and areas for improvement, providing a basis for future research and practical recommendations for policy makers and industry stakeholders. By addressing the limitations and building on the findings, future research can further enhance the effectiveness and impact of WISEs in Ireland on the employment landscape for PWD.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Cover Letter

Date:

Dear XXXX

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Amanda Deaton and I am currently a part-time student pursuing an MSc. in Management at the National College of Ireland. I am reaching to you as part of my research on Work Integration Social Enterprises.

The specific focus of my study is on the experiences of social enterprise managers within the Irish disability sector.

I am writing to invite you to participate in this research project. Your willingness to be part of this study is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any stage. Participation would involve a one-to-one interview, approximately lasting an hour. The interview format is semi-structured, designed to encourage conversation while addressing specific questions.

Ideally, I would prefer to conduct the interview face-to-face, ensuring safety and convenience for both parties. However, an online interview via Microsoft Teams is also a viable option. If this platform is not suitable for you, please suggest an alternative, and I will explore its confidentiality and privacy standards.

**Data Structure and Capture:**

This marks the second phase of my research, employing a purposive sampling technique that identified your business as a social enterprise focusing on enhancing employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The interview will focus on understanding your role as a social enterprise manager and how you navigate the established barriers faced by disabled individuals in accessing employment.

The interview will be recorded, adhering to standard research practice. This facilitates focused engagement during the interview and aids in the accurate transcription of the conversation for subsequent analysis. Following the interview, the recording will be transcribed, and I will employ thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in the responses.

Confidentiality:

I assure you that all information obtained during the interviews will remain confidential. The data will be anonymised to protect your identity and that of your organisation. Even the examiners will only have access to an anonymised version of the interview transcripts. GDPR regulations dictate the retention of research data for ten years.

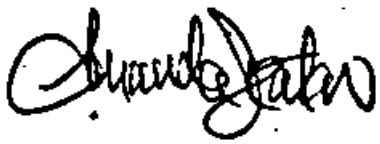
Benefit and Purpose:

Participation in this study carries no financial benefit. However, I hope the conversation will be of interest, offering you an opportunity to reflect on your experiences and their relevance to your organisation. This research aims to provide a comprehensive account of lived experiences in a sector that is not extensively researched. By showcasing your journey, it will hopefully inspire others to embark on a similar path, thereby enhancing the lives of disabled individuals.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,



# Appendix 2 – Semi-Structured Interview

## SE background

1. In your own words can you describe your social enterprise.

   Follow-up: Why did you start?

2. How long have you been operational?

   Follow-up: How has your social enterprise evolved over time?

3. How many people do you employ?

4. How do beneficiaries usually find their way to you?

   Follow-up: Do you have a specific target group?

5. Is there a pathway out of your SE towards mainstream employment?

   Follow-up: How do people get on that path? Is there criteria? What supports are there?

## Employment

1. What personal changes or developments have you observed in your employees since they joined your social enterprise?
2. Does your SE have to make any 'reasonable accommodations' in order to employ a person with a disability

   If so, what were they?

3. What do you feel are the most important factors to create a more inclusive employment market?
4. What do you feel are the main barriers that people with disabilities face when accessing employment ?

## Business

1. Can you describe a significant challenge you faced?
2. What are your main sources of funding for your business?

   Follow-up: How do you balance the need for funding with commercial viability?

3. What is your vision for the future?

## Appendix 3 – Thesis Submission Form

All thesis submissions must be accompanied by a thesis submission form. The current guidelines for submission are available through the library at the following URL: http://libguides.ncirl.ie/thesisguide. The guidelines specific to the School of Business guidelines are listed here: https://libguides.ncirl.ie/business.

### Submission of Thesis to Norma Smurfit Library, National College of Ireland

Student name: Amanda Deaton Student number: x21108072

School: School of Business Course: MSc. Management

Degree to be awarded: Master of Science in Management

Title of Thesis:

**Work Integration Social Enterprise – what are the perceived benefits for persons with disabilities?**

An electronic copy of your thesis will be lodged in the Norma Smurfit Library and will be available for consultation. This electronic copy will be accessible in NORMA norma.ncirl.ie the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository. In accordance with normal academic library practice all theses lodged in the National College of Ireland Institutional Repository (NORMA) are made available on open access.

I agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being available for consultation within the library. I also agree to an electronic copy of my thesis being made publicly available on the National College of Ireland's Institutional Repository NORMA

Signature of Candidate: 

**For completion by the School**:

The aforementioned thesis was received by _____

Date:_____

This signed form must be appended to all copies of your thesis submitted to your school.