

# National Learning Network

Apprenticeship Action Plan 2020-2025

Response to the Public Consultation – September 2020



## Contents

1.0 Introduction to National Learning Network .....	2
2.0 What we do.....	2
3.0 Response under Consultation Criteria .....	4
4.0 Conclusion: .....	7

## 1.0 Introduction to National Learning Network

National Learning Network (NLN) is the education and training division of the Rehab Group. NLN specialises in delivery of inclusive, person-centred education and training services. We have 50 centres around the country offering flexible training courses and individual supports. We are funded by the Education and Training Boards (ETB) and the Health Service Executive.

We work with over 7,000 students each year, between the ages of 16 and 65. This includes people who have experienced a life setback, had an accident, have a mental health condition, a long-term illness or have a disability. Our multi-disciplinary teams contribute to the specialisms inherent in our operations. Our students have access to instructors working in a universal design for learning informed environment. Students have access to a continuum of support while training which includes advocacy support, learning support services and psychology support services on site.

Our vision is a world of equal opportunities through learning. Our mission is to promote equality by providing world-class training, education and employment access services, and by actively influencing the creation of a more inclusive society.

Our education and training services are underpinned by a rights-based approach. NLN is an enabler of Active Inclusion, a strategic goal of the Further Education and Training Strategy. Our services contribute to Ireland's commitment under the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities with specific reference to Article 8 (Awareness Raising), Article 24 (Education) and Article 27 (Employment).

## 2.0 What we do

NLN services are diverse with varying degrees of educational focus and supports for life-long learning that work with people distant from the labour market and people who are ready to progress to higher education or further education and start or restart their careers. Our services span the following:

- Rehabilitation Training on behalf of the HSE covering 9 Community Health Organisation (CHO) areas.
- NLN are partners in delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) Services with the HSE in 4 CHO areas - A 'place, then train' rather than 'train, then place' approach.
- Vocational Training (Specialist Training Provision) on behalf of the 16 ETBs.
- Contracted Training - NLN are on the framework for delivery of contracted training on behalf of four ETBs.
- Disability Support Service - we provide disability support services in eight mainstream Colleges of Further Education on behalf of City of Dublin ETB.

- Educational Support Services - we provide education support services in seven Higher Education Institutions.
- NLN delivers over 250 training programmes offering QQI major awards at levels 1-5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)
- Students' progress to further or higher education/training and employment.

Some 1,223 students with disabilities have been supported into employment in the last three years by NLN. Since 2017, a further 2,500 people with disabilities, autistic people, people with mental health conditions and challenging life circumstances have been supported to progress to further training/education opportunities. A total of 800 of these have progressed to higher level education courses including third level colleges and universities. Those who were supported to find employment through NLN, and who may otherwise have remained reliant on social welfare payments, have contributed in the region of €750,000 to the state as a result of securing employment. It also means that the Exchequer has saved in the region of €1 million annually in reduced expenditure on social welfare benefits.

NLN students have graduated and progressed to apprenticeships. We have seen people move to the longer established apprenticeships routes of hairdressing and carpentry.

With the launch of Generation Apprenticeship NLN are highlighting pathways from NLN into newer apprenticeships and welcome the opportunity to be part of the public consultation.

It is proposed that in the future NLN could contribute to the on-going design and development of apprenticeship. This could include ensuring that people with lived experience of disability are embedded in design sessions and disability practitioners are on board to build disability confidence of employers in also considering accessible and inclusive apprenticeships.



### 3.0 Response under Consultation Criteria

One of the key objectives of the Apprenticeship Action Plan 2021 to 2025 as set out in the consultation paper is to encourage diversity and support participation by underrepresented groups in apprenticeships. This submission will look at ways that participation of people with disabilities can increase from a low of 2.7% at the end of 2019 to 7% by the end of 2025.

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities Action Plan 2019-2021 makes specific reference to improving access to apprenticeship programmes for people with disabilities (Action 1.9). Outside of the Apprenticeship consultation, it should be recognised that Ireland is not doing well in terms of employment for people with disabilities at European level. According to the latest comparative research, Ireland has the lowest rate of employment among people with disabilities of all European countries (32.3%). As evidenced in the graphic below, Ireland also has the highest employment gap between people with disabilities and the general population (42 percentage points). Not only will focusing on accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities enhance the profile and demand for apprenticeship by people with disabilities, it should also support in closing the gap between employment of disabled people and non-disabled people in Ireland.

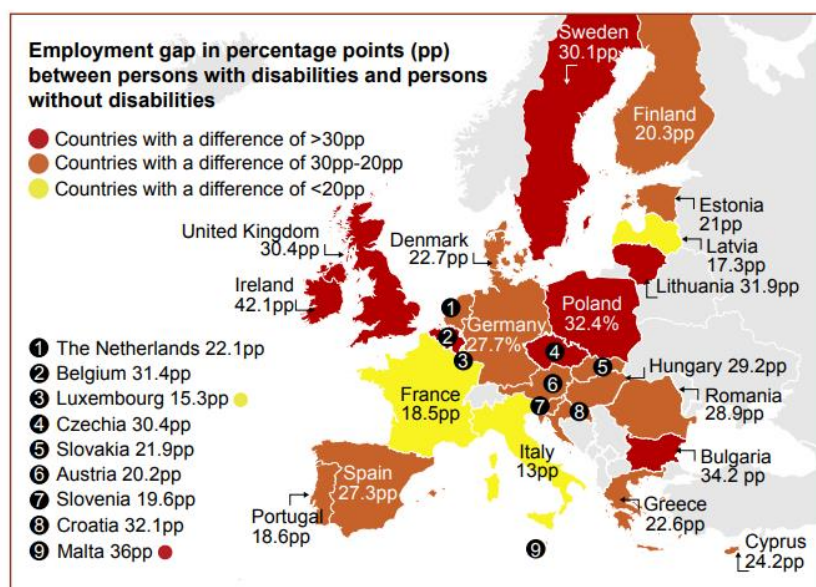


Figure 1: Employment gap between disabled and non-disabled people in Europe

NLN will consider inclusion of people with disabilities and promotion of apprenticeships to people with disabilities, mental health conditions, long-term health conditions and autism in responding under the proposed consultation criteria.

## **Definition of Apprenticeship**

*The core features of what constitutes an apprenticeship in Ireland are set out in Figure 1 on page 8. What, if any, changes should be made to these features?*

Consider language that signals to people with disabilities that their learning accommodations and work-place accommodations are considered in apprenticeships. E.g. **Apprenticeships “combine learning in INCLUSIVE education and training institutions with substantial work based learning in companies and other ACCESSIBLE workplaces.**

## **Funding of Apprenticeship**

*What, if any, role should financial incentives play in encouraging participation in apprenticeship?*

It is proposed that the “cost of disability” is considered when promoting the participation of people with disabilities. This could include additional travel costs and reasonable workplace accommodations being addressed as a prerequisite to increasing the number of people with disabilities in apprenticeships.

## **Development and Delivery of Apprenticeships**

*What are your views on the operation of the 10 step process to develop new apprenticeship described in Figure 5 on page 15. What works well and what, if any, changes do you think should be made to this process?*

It is proposed that at each stage of the process people with disabilities and disability inclusion practitioners are included to collaborate with industry partners. The role is not to advocate for a lower level of skills, knowledge and competencies of an apprenticeship as defined by industry. The roles of people with disabilities and disability inclusion practitioners would be to promote inclusive practices at each stage in the process.

## **Supports for Employers**

*How can the cost/benefit balance of participation in apprenticeship be improved for employers?*

In promoting the employment of people with disabilities as apprenticeships some misconceptions should be addressed in relation to disability. It would be

critically important that employers could access training via the Disability Awareness Grant with the DEASP and also be supported to avail of any other relevant schemes such as The Interpreter Grant, Workplace Adaptation Grant etc.

### **Increasing Participation**

- *How well are the benefits of, and opportunities to apply for, an apprenticeship currently promoted to young people and adults?*
- *Are there any steps that could be taken in relation to programme design, delivery, progression pathways or other key features to improve the attractiveness of apprenticeships to young people and adults?*
- *What, are your views on the provision of specific financial and nonfinancial incentives to increase participation by underrepresented groups?*
- *How can the range of further and higher education programmes which can help people prepare for an apprenticeship be expanded and/or made more visible?*
- *What approach to target setting should be taken in the new Action Plan, in relation to participation generally and for underrepresented groups?*
- *Which, if any, of the **Generation Apprenticeship** initiatives are you familiar with and how effective do you consider them to be?*
- *How should the promotion of apprenticeship be further developed under the new Action Plan?*
- *What role can the public sector play to expand the availability of apprenticeship, through its roles as employer and substantial purchaser?*

In summary these are suggested approaches to increasing participation rates.

- Ensure disability is always part of a conversation with employers. 13.5% of the Irish population have a disability. For employers this is a lot of customers and a lot of untapped talent. Employers involved in the delivery of apprenticeships or considering being involved should be able to avail of all relevant DEASP supports and grants in the area of disability and employment to support active engagement with jobseekers with disabilities.
- The identification, design and development of all new apprenticeships should include people with lived experience of disability and disability inclusion practitioners.
- Inclusive Communication – tells people with disabilities that apprenticeships are for them without saying it!
  - Alt Text on all image in social media posts
  - All media to include closed captions and Irish Sign Language

- Subtle imagery is marketing Generation Apprenticeship so people can see themselves and their future. Ideas like an apprentice but from side profile view there is a discrete hearing aid, an apprentice with a support animal in the workplace, an apprentice using text to voice software, an apprentice with an adapted keyboard, an apprentice parking in an accessible parking area going into the workplace.
- Images of Workplace accessibility – seeing a wheelchair accessible bathroom in a shot, an evacuation chair as people are walking down a staircase, a flashing fire alarm etc
- Real Stories – perhaps some people with lived experience of disability and apprenticeship might share real stories of accommodations in the workplace.
- One Size Doesn't Fit All – consideration should be given to more flexible timing around apprenticeship cycles.
- An apprentice can have a job coach. A job coach is a fading support. Recognise that a person may benefit from job coaching at the start and during changes in duties while in the apprenticeship e.g. an autistic apprentice may have no challenges in relation to the work duties but have some communication support needs. An apprentice with low vision might need support while becoming familiar with the new building and travelling through the building at the start. A job coach may only be a small support at times but employers should be supported to understand the potential role (and benefit) of the job coach in the apprenticeship journey.
- Consider synergies in promoting pathways geographically and occupationally – NLN are showing some specific apprenticeships that people can apply to after finishing a level 4 or level 5 with us. If appropriate, Generation Apprenticeship may consider some shared communications with NLN and other specialist training providers to get the message out from both platforms that apprenticeships are inclusive.

#### 4.0 Conclusion:

NLN welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the public consultations and we believe the apprenticeships model is a pathway that can lead to long-term careers in an industry. As disability inclusion practitioners with diverse occupational backgrounds this is an area we would fully support if inputs are needed in design and development phases. In addition, NLN students have a powerful voice and we want to support them in having their voices heard in relation to inclusive education and employment. We very much look forward to reading the outputs from this consultation, seeing the way forward and in very practical terms supporting many students with disabilities on pathways to apprenticeships from NLN.





# National Learning Network

**Lucianne Bird**

**Director of Learning**

**[Lucianne.bird@rehab.ie](mailto:Lucianne.bird@rehab.ie)**

