# National Learning Network Submission on the Review of Student Grant Scheme – SUSI

To support students with disabilities to access flexible Higher Education (HE) courses we suggest the following:

* **Broaden the “approved institution” criteria to include online, non-public funded institutions in the EU and UK**
* **Redefine “approved courses” to include online, blended learning and part-time courses**
* **Modify the release of grants to accommodate part-time courses**
* **Include Further Education and Training courses in the SUSI eligibility criteria**

The current eligibility criteria for the SUSI grant is unsuitable for some people with disabilities in Ireland who want to access further and higher education. Students with the academic ability to participate in HE find themselves unable to because of the unaccommodating, inflexible structure of HE courses. Similarly, in Further Education and Training (FET), many face financial barriers to courses as the SUSI grants scheme does not include FET learners. Many look to distance learning and blended learning courses that are part-time to suit their needs, but find that there is little financial support to participate in such courses.

Thomas is a National Learning Network student looking to access an online HE course in History and Politics that suits his needs. This is his story:

*“I have always had an interest in history and its impact on the politics of the world today. I've always studied bits of history and had long conversations with others about history and how it can have an impact on the modern world.*

*The BA Honours History and Politics degree at the Open University is of particular interest to me. These modules cover the parts of history and politics that I am most interested in and I think I would benefit greatly by studying these. I believe this degree will help me develop my abilities and talents to the fullest potential.*

*I was diagnosed with ASD in 2017. I came to The Prospects Course in 2018 to support me to get ready for Higher Education. When I came to NLN I first thought my next step would be to study Computing at LYIT. This is not what I would like to do now. NLN is an environment where I feel very safe and secure. I really work well with and trust my tutor Heather. I need routine and structure and NLN is an environment where I can get help with my social skills. The environment in NLN meets my support needs and I feel safe there but it does not run the kinds of courses that I am interested in studying. I think I should be able to have both. I should be able to live at home with my parents, attend NLN to support me with my life skills and be able to engage in Higher Education to help me achieve my fullest potential in relation to my educational needs.*

*I have explored other options but I chose Open University because it has modules I'm more interested in and it's the most convenient and affordable option. I can study from home with Open University whereas with the other colleges, I would either have to get local accommodation or commute long distances.*

*I believe I have the right to be able to get funding access to this degree because according to Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.*

*I'm not ready for the University yet, I would still like to attend the NLN with other courses, but I would still like the option to study at Open University.”*

Under Article 24 of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, States Parties are to ensure access to general tertiary education on an equal basis with others, and to ensure reasonable accommodations are available. In Thomas’ case, he is limited in his options to access HE.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations would progress the State’s realisation of accessible FET and HE for students with disabilities.

***Include FET in the SUSI eligibility criteria***

Further Education and Training courses provide students with disabilities many opportunities, such as employment, re-training, or as an alternative to Higher Education or in preparation of HE. However, financial barriers can be a preventative factor for people with disabilities to enrol in FET courses.

As a Specialist Training Provider of FET courses, we would like to see the eligibility criteria widened to encompass students on our Level 5 courses, who require additional financial supports to continue their education.

The inclusion of FET learners in the SUSI eligibility criteria on at least Level 5 of the National Qualifications Framework would improve equal access to FET for students with disabilities. Furthermore, it would support the State’s compliance with Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

***Broaden the “approved institution” criteria to include online, non-public funded HE institutions in the EU and UK***

Institutions like The Open University provide high quality blended HE programmes that are highly flexible and attentive to the diverse needs of their students. However, they do not receive public funding therefore students are not currently eligible to apply for grants to attend programmes with these institutions.

To cover the cost of programme fees, SUSI grants eligibility criteria should be extended to encompass overseas or online institutions in the EU and UK that are not in receipt of recurrent public grants in the case of students who are at a disadvantage and those who have a disability.

***Redefine “approved courses” to include online, blended learning, and part-time courses***

A student with a disability may need to study part-time over a number of years. The flexibility of part-time courses suit the needs of many students, including students with disabilities, who may require a more flexible structure to complete their degree course than those offered by HE institutions in Ireland.

Including part-time, online and blended learning in the SUSI grant scheme criteria can ensure that HE is accessible to students with a disability.

***Modify the release of fee grants and maintenance grants to accommodate part-time courses***

Under the current scheme, payment mechanism for the fees grant does not accommodate studying part-time. For example, part-time students could be in academic year one for up to three years, and the mechanism will only cover one year of studying. The scheme should be modified to issue grants in line with part-time fees.

Equally, payment mechanism for the maintenance grant should be modified to accommodate part-time students to cover the duration of the student’s study.

**Who is National Learning Network and what do we do?**

National Learning Network (NLN) is the education and training division of the Rehab Group. 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).

We have 50 centres around the country offering flexible training courses and individual student supports. NLN work with about 7,000 students each year between the ages of 16 and 65. This includes people who have a long-term illness or have a disability, have experienced a life setback, had an accident, are autistic or have a mental health condition.

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. NLN delivers over 250 training programmes offering QQI major awards at levels 1-5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).

NLN’s education and training services span the following:

* Vocational Training in every county in Ireland funded by the 16 Education and Training Boards
* Day Service Provision including Rehabilitation Training on behalf of the HSE covering nine Community Health Organisation (CHO) areas.
* Disability Support Services - 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 (Maynooth University, Technological University of Dublin (Blanchardstown), Institute of Art, Design and Technology, the National College of Art and Design, National University of Ireland, Galway and University College Cork.
* NLN are partners in delivery of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) with the HSE. IPS is an evidenced approach to Inclusive Employment Services specifically working people with mental health conditions in four CHO areas. It is a 'place, then train' rather than 'train, then place' approach.
* NLN are on the framework for delivery of contracted training on behalf of four ETBs.