



Rehab Group's  
Submission

# **SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029**

**RehabGroup**

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives

National Learning Network

Think *Possible*

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## NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF LEARNING



Rehab Group is pleased to contribute to the SOLAS Strategic Direction for Further Education and Training (FET) 2025-2029. In Ireland, 22% of the population lives with a disability or disabling condition (Census, 2022), highlighting the critical need to ensure that the educational and training needs of people with disabilities and chronic health conditions are fully integrated and addressed within the upcoming strategy. This commitment is essential for fostering equitable access to further education and training opportunities, in line with our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was ratified by Ireland in March 2018.

We recognise and appreciate the commitments made by SOLAS under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2022 and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. We strongly encourage the inclusion of these important commitments in the FET Strategy 2025-2029. Rehab Group remains dedicated to collaborating with SOLAS, Education and Training Boards (ETBs), further and higher education institutions, and employers to ensure people with disabilities and chronic health conditions are provided with equal opportunities in education and employment.

As the sector continues to expand and move forward with a focus on greater inclusion, we must ensure that FET remains accessible across the full continuum of existing provision. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles are a key component of existing services. It is important to acknowledge as well that many people with disabilities and chronic health conditions will continue to require additional, tailored support. The holistic and personalised approach to education and training that Specialist Training Provision (STP) offer is a fundamental response to this need, particularly for those students who struggle with the demands of existing FET programmes. Providing dedicated facilities for students who require an alternative educational environment is critical to ensuring their success and aligns to the Future of Jobs Report 2025.

A multi-layered approach to service provision, wherein disability inclusion is woven into every programme and specialist services are readily available for those who need them, provides essential choice and flexibility for learners. Through ongoing collaboration with ETBs across the country, Rehab Group actively supports the delivery of inclusive education and training initiatives in every county. We are eager to continue this partnership as we work together to roll out a more inclusive provision within the Irish FET system.

Currently, National Learning Network (NLN) and all sixteen ETBs work collaboratively to meet the needs of students with disabilities and students with chronic health conditions, ensuring they have access to educational opportunities that are aligned with their individual needs. While some students with disabilities may engage with mainstream training options, others who also require specialist training and qualifications may need more intensive or continuous support throughout their learning journey. These specialised services are provided by NLN and other specialist training providers. As such, NLN plays a vital role within the wider FET ecosystem. **It is vital that the Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029 recognise this role, call out and celebrate its value and articulate its ongoing contribution and future role in the context of the overall continuum of training and education and the significant demographic changes it is grappling with.** We need to invest in this approach and expand the range of innovative Student Support Services to better meet the growing demands of students with disabilities and students with chronic health conditions, ensuring they can access, participate in, and succeed within the FET sector.

NLN is further aligned with the City of Dublin College of the Future through the new Drumfinn College site in Ballyfermot. With improved facilities and additional resources, the new campus will further strengthen NLN's role as a hub of opportunity for people aged 16 and over with disabilities, mental health issues, learning difficulties, autism, or people who need some extra flexibility with their education. The new college, expected to open this September, reflects NLN's commitment to providing accessible, modern learning environments that empower individuals to reach their full potential.

Both the Specialist Training Provision Review and the Rehabilitative Training Review are still outstanding. We would also appreciate clarification regarding whether the findings from the Specialist Training Review will be incorporated into the strategy. To ensure a consistent learner experience across the country, we advocate for a comprehensive joined up inter-departmental approach to provision of inclusive education and training.

In the following sections of this submission, we will outline specific actions that, if implemented, will ensure equitable opportunities for all potential FET students, and significantly improve the likelihood of students with disabilities and students with chronic health conditions achieving personal and academic success upon graduation.

As an established and credible provider in the FET eco-system, NLN courses strengthen the continuum of FET provision in every county. To grow participation in FET, a strong focus will be on reaching people who are distant from education, training and employment. NLN are natural partners to work with people who need more personalised education and training provision to begin their life-long learning journey. With NLN services in every county and dedicated, experienced and professional teams, we are excited to contribute to and be part of integrated FET provision across counties. We do ask that National Learning Network is supported through capital investment and a fit for purpose funding model to truly be part of an integrated College of the Future that delivers a consistent learner experience for all FET learners.

We look forward to collaborating closely with SOLAS in shaping a more inclusive and accessible FET system and ensuring no-one is left behind.

Dr Rita Day SFEA  
Director of Learning  
National Learning Network

## ABOUT REHAB GROUP



Rehab Group is an independent, voluntary organisation committed to fostering a world where every individual can achieve their full potential and thrive in their unique way. In Ireland, we are deeply embedded in local communities, delivering world-class services, and creating opportunities for those who need them most.

Each year, over 12,500 individuals and their families benefit from the comprehensive support offered by Rehab Group across more than 250 locations. With a dedicated team of over 3,000 staff members, we provide a broad range of services, including health and social care, training and education, rehabilitation, employment, and commercial services in Ireland, Scotland, and Poland.

Our mission is to empower people to realise their best selves by helping them fulfil personal goals, access new opportunities, and actively engage in their communities. Through our services, Rehab Group enables individuals to leverage their skills and talents, pursue employment or further education, and live more independent and meaningful lives.



**Figure 1: Rehab Group's Divisions**



## ABOUT NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK



Rehab Group's training and education division, National Learning Network (NLN), supports thousands of people in making a successful transition to further education, higher education, and employment annually. We have colleges in every county in Ireland, in urban and rural locations, offering many opportunities to widen participation in further education across the country.

This includes:

- People with physical and sensory disabilities
- People with intellectual disabilities
- People with specific learning difficulties
- People recovering from accident, illness, or trauma
- People who have mental health difficulties
- Autistic people
- People with chronic health conditions and
- People who have been long-term unemployed for a variety of health reasons.

As a specialist training provider, NLN delivers education and training services which are informed by the principles of universal design. Students attending our specialist training provision achieve the same high-quality accredited training available in mainstream provision. NLN's student support services offer a continuum of support that many people need to succeed in further education and training. These supports are the critical success factor for many students on their journey to achieve qualifications, progress academically, get a job, and develop a career.

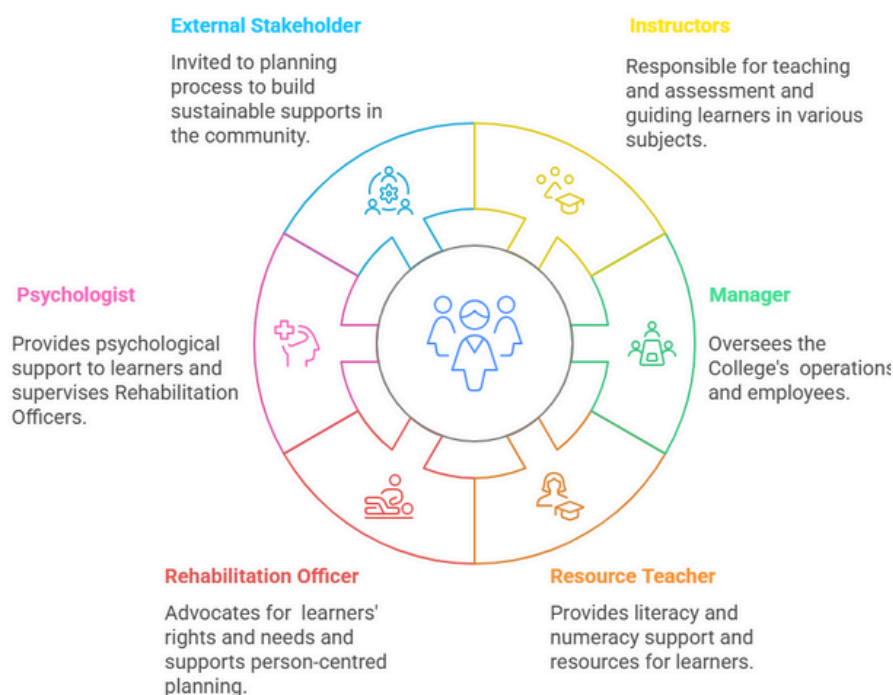
Our portfolio of training programmes also supports SOLAS's ambitions within the new strategy to promote lifelong learning. We deliver programmes spanning Level 1 to Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Currently, we provide programmes accredited on the National Qualifications Framework to over 3,000 post-2nd level students. We receive the majority of our funding from the state and employ 850 staff across a range of disciplines.

Each year, NLN meets hundreds of school-leavers with disabilities transitioning from school to our HSE Rehabilitative Training Programme and HSE-funded Day Services. Our programmes and services enable young adults to further develop personal, social, and vocational skills and progress with their personalised plans. Our Specialist Vocational Training provides pathways for learners to gain introductory/foundational skills and occupationally specific skills. Learning pathways include courses such as Catering and Retail skills, Horticulture, Horsemanship and Animal Care, Art and Performing Arts, Computer Programming and Game Design, Business Studies, and Digital Skills. All our courses have transfer and progression options to colleges of further education, higher education, and jobs. In 2024, over 90% of students who completed training progressed to positive outcomes of further/higher education or employment.

Our student support service includes chartered psychologists, student support officers and teaching staff (Literacy and Numeracy). The needs of students have evolved significantly and rapidly over the last 5 years. Teams are supporting students with higher levels of communication and social and emotional needs, cognition and learning difficulties and mental ill-health. The conditions are most frequently co-occurring. We have also seen the impact of trauma on the learning experience of students, including adults dealing with Adverse Childhood Experiences and people arriving from war-torn countries. Our chartered psychologists, in addition to providing 1-1 support to students with complex needs and supervising student support officers, are NLN's Designated Officers. Since 2022, NLN has introduced an Assistive Technology Service and has met almost 200 new AT users since its introduction.







**Figure 2: A Multi-Disciplinary Team with an External Stakeholder**

The multi-disciplinary team (MDT) collaborates with the student to drive their plans forward. Our MDT also includes external agencies, where required, to ensure supports are sustainable after training is completed. This also avoids duplication in efforts on behalf of a student and works as a circle of support for the person until they achieve their personal goals.

Certification, graduation and progression to further education and higher education are all priority targets but only tell one side of the journey that many of our students travel each day with us. Our person-centred planning process highlights both the challenges and successes of our students. Many students with disabilities and chronic health conditions, in our centres face daily challenges such as:

- Transitioning from child to adult services; sometimes losing support at age 18
- Managing mental health conditions in a period of change and transition
- Accommodation difficulties and homelessness
- Social communication and social interactions, particularly for people with autism
- Effects of medication on cognitive functioning
- Transport difficulties, meaning inequitable access to education and training
- Carer responsibilities
- Single parent and child-care responsibilities
- Benefits-trap and prohibitive costs of disability
- Stigma and lack of awareness and understanding of abilities of people with disabilities

Together with our multi-disciplinary team, our students are supported to navigate these challenges, develop sustainable supports, access resources in the community and build a personal toolbox of strategies to ensure sustainable outcomes for the person after graduation. In 2024, 90% of people who completed programmes at NLN progressed to employment or higher levels of training and education. NLN is an outcomes focused partner within the FET eco-system. On the continuum of FET provision around the country, we can continue to contribute to the the success of people with disabilities, people with chronic health conditions and people who are distant from work and education, as they progress through NLN to mainstream FET provision and Higher Education. NLN graduates are also meeting the demand from employers around the country in many hard-to-fill posts such as roles in retail and hospitality. This is also recognised in the upcoming strategy through the proposed development of specialist FET centres of skills development in these occupational areas.



**Figure 3: Personalised Planning - more than Education and Training**

NLN’s portfolios of universally designed courses and services, our professional and qualified staff, and our national coverage with colleges in urban and rural locations can contribute to the outcomes and key performance indicators underpinning a new strategy. We look forward to the collaborative process with SOLAS and the ETBs.

## THEME 1

### DELIVERING ON IRELAND'S SKILLS NEEDS



National Learning Network (NLN) plays a pivotal role in addressing Ireland's skills needs by offering specialised training programmes that align with current labour market demands. NLN contributes significantly by delivering tailored courses that focus on upskilling and reskilling individuals in areas such as healthcare, information technology, and sustainable energy, all sectors crucial to Ireland's economic growth. What sets NLN apart is its commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities and chronic health conditions, can access training and development opportunities.

Through its innovative, learner-centred approach, NLN supports the development of a skilled workforce capable of meeting Ireland's evolving industrial and technological requirements. National Learning Network supports the proposed strategic objectives and will share our experience of delivering occupational and transversal skills development across our colleges with comprehensive student support.

National Learning Network designs and develops training programmes responding to the needs of learners and in line with the regional demands of the labour market. Our programmes provide clear pathways to lifelong learning, linked to Colleges of Further Education and Training in every country. Students also use National Learning Network Specialist Training as a platform to move into Higher Education through the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) Scheme. We are supporters and promoters of tertiary degrees. NLN want to play an active role in skills development that also supports the widening participation of students with disabilities and chronic health conditions in the growing portfolio of tertiary degrees. We share a spotlight on Student Support as part of our submission. This will highlight that skills development in NLN is more than Occupational Skills and Transversal Skills development. The level of support needs of students has grown year on year. A critical element of Student Support Services in National Learning Network colleges includes enabling and empowering people to manage their health and well-being and other aspects of their lives that impact their ability to participate in economic, social, political, and cultural life.

National Learning Network conducted a survey with management and employees across National Learning Network to capture, from their perspective, the elements of programme delivery that were critical to the delivery of high-quality programmes that deliver on Ireland's skills need.

1. Person-Centred Approach/Individual Support: Many respondents emphasised the importance of focusing on individual needs, highlighting NLN's commitment to personalised support for each student.
2. Supportive Environment: Many responses mentioned the friendly and inclusive atmosphere at NLN, with a keen sense of community and support.
3. Practical Experience: Focus on work placements and real-world skill development was noted by respondents as important, echoing information in the call for consultation.
4. Holistic Support: Addressing health and bio-psycho-social needs in addition to education and training supports was highlighted by respondents.
5. Flexibility: A flexible learning environment and pace were noted by respondents as critical to supporting real skills development and respecting challenges people are dealing with each day as they strive to succeed in education.

The views of management and employees are just one perspective on how NLN can continue to contribute to building skills in the FET sectors. Their views do, however, speak to the need for continued comprehensive and personalised supports and accommodations for some people who are distant from further education and employment. This is true within a UDL-informed environment.

In 2024, the Director of Learning, addressed the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the European Year of Skills. When the year was first mooted, it was argued strongly by MEPs and Civil Society Groups that skills should be understood in a more holistic way to encompass not only skills that provide for professional development but also the transversal and life skills required to strengthen sustainability, democracy, and social inclusion. It was because of the pivotal role National Learning Network plays in equipping people with disabilities to develop both the skills for progression to employment or further/higher education, and the transversal skills to be able to manage the transition to work and engagement in community, that we were invited to contribute. The full transcript can be accessed here:

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_education\\_further\\_and\\_higher\\_education\\_research\\_innovation\\_and\\_science/submissions/2024/2024-04-23\\_opening-statement-lucianne-bird-director-of-learning-national-learning-network\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/submissions/2024/2024-04-23_opening-statement-lucianne-bird-director-of-learning-national-learning-network_en.pdf)

We ask that:

1. Skills building is broadened to consider not only occupational skills and transversal skills, but the personal skills people need to manage their life, their personal relationships, and their health and wellbeing.
2. Particular focus is placed on the NLN student voice. Through this submission that speaks to outcomes such as being able to travel independently, manage money, make friends, stay safe and well, and self-advocate. These are skills that are to be valued in a society. The voice of the students show that they value these skills building opportunities on a par with occupational and transversal skills building. These must be delivered as part of FET provision. These are equally critical skills that are supporting many people to become more independent. For many young adults this impacts on reducing dependence on families and paid supports in the future. These are also skills that build resilience and help people stay safe and well as they transition to further education, higher education, and jobs.

NLN programmes are designed to meet needs of students and the local and regional skills needs of employers. NLN graduates are filling many difficult to fill roles around the country. Examples include Retail and Hospitality Services. Edel McSorley, Operations Director, Mr. Price Branded Bargains said *“NLN are a critical partner around the country in meeting the business needs of Mr. Price Branded Bargains. Our established partnership is mutually beneficial. Mr. Price teams around the country offer inclusive, supported work placements to help students learn in the workplace. In return, we meet the most talented people who join our teams, get jobs and start careers with us. We continue to grow our partnership with NLN, progressing to internships and roles in our HQ. Skills building is a partnership approach. We are committed to continuing to be change-makers in inclusive employment with NLN, moving the dial on the shameful employment statistics for people with disabilities in every county in Ireland”*.





## THEME 2

### FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGING THE WAY WE DELIVER FET



National Learning Network (NLN) makes an original contribution to fundamentally changing the way Further Education and Training (FET) is delivered by embracing a highly personalised, flexible, and inclusive approach to learning. NLN tailors its programmes to meet the diverse needs of learners, including those facing barriers such as disabilities or long-term unemployment, offering specialised supports to ensure every individual can thrive. By integrating innovative teaching methods, such as blended learning and hands-on training, NLN ensures that learners are not only gaining theoretical knowledge but also developing practical, real-world skills. This learner-focused model fosters a more accessible and adaptive FET system, challenging traditional methods and offering a progressive alternative that better supports the evolving needs of both learners and the labour market.

While the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are integral to education and training services, it is important to recognise that many students with disabilities will always require higher levels of support. The holistic and personalised approach to education and training currently deployed by National Learning Network (NLN) should not be overlooked in any re-imagining of the College of the Future. Specialist Training Provision (STP) not only provides academic accommodations to foster success but also coordinates comprehensive, wrap-around supports that address the broader needs of students. These supports extend beyond education to encompass vital aspects of daily life, such as housing, childcare, the cost of disability, mental health, and overall wellbeing.

A multi-tiered Further Education and Training (FET) ecosystem is necessary to meet the diverse needs of learners. Offering choice and flexibility ensures that students can access provision that is responsive to their individual requirements. It also recognises that some students will need access to smaller, more flexible educational environments with multi-disciplinary supports, including health and personal care services.

As part of this commitment to improving the learner experience, NLN is prepared to invest in the adoption of the ALTITUDE charter in 2025. We believe this approach would enable NLN to demonstrate our commitment to providing a cohesive and supportive learning environment for all students, ensuring their success and well-being throughout their educational journey.

We ask that:

1. Integrated Colleges of the Future recognise the role NLN can play in the provision of a multi-layered FET eco-system that can offer greater choice and flexibility to diverse and evolving learner needs.
2. The inclusion of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities is considered with the upcoming FET strategy to also recognise the ability of young adults to defer their HSE Day Service place for up to five years.
3. Our experience in delivery of comprehensive student supports and trauma sensitive practices are leveraged within FET provision to engage and retain more students who are dealing with complex issues while studying.
4. There is greater flexibility with more options for part-time studies, recognising some people with disabilities and chronic health conditions need this options to manage and maintain good health.
5. Investment in digital infrastructure should also recognise the need for investment in assistive technology to ensure no student is left behind.
6. There is a comprehensive, joined up inter-departmental approach to provision of inclusive education and training that will have real and sustainable impact in fundamentally changing the way FET is delivered.



## THEME 3

### FURTHER WIDEN PARTICIPATION BY LINKING TO COMMUNITIES AND SERVICES



National Learning Network (NLN) makes an important strategic contribution to widening participation in Further Education and Training (FET) by actively linking to communities and services across Ireland. NLN's outreach efforts focus on engaging marginalised and underrepresented groups, such as individuals with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or people facing social exclusion. By working closely with local communities, employment services, and social support organisations, NLN ensures that individuals who might otherwise face barriers to education and employment are supported in accessing training opportunities. This integrated approach not only enhances individual outcomes but also strengthens community ties, creating a more inclusive and equitable FET system. NLN's strategic efforts are crucial in fostering lifelong learning, breaking down societal barriers, and ensuring that all individuals can develop the skills needed for personal and professional growth.

NLN plays a vital role within the wider FET ecosystem and can widen participation in every county.

We ask that:

1. The Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029 recognise the role of National Learning Network, articulate its ongoing contribution and future role in the context of widening participation, given the significant demographic factors the FET sector is grappling with.
2. Consideration is given to formalising and extending referral pathways to NLN, including students who can not manage the demands of a FET College for a period of time.
3. Consideration is given to leveraging NLN's role in communities as a provider that can be a connector of a myriad of groups on the margins. This will help introduce more people to life-long learning in FET, pathways to HE, and work through NLN.

## SPOTLIGHT ON THE LEARNER'S VOICE



National Learning Network (NLN) is committed to providing transformative and impactful educational experiences that empower learners to achieve their full potential. As part of this commitment, we actively seek to ensure that our learners' voices are heard and considered in shaping the future of further education and training. In response to the Further Education and Training Strategy 2025-2029 Public Consultation, we conducted focus groups to gather valuable feedback from our learners. This report summarises their responses, highlighting the areas they feel are most important and highlighting how NLN is making a positive difference in their lives.

### Specific Skills Developed in NLN (What specific skills have you developed/learned at NLN that you feel will help you move onto further education or get a job?)

“ Along with IT skills, I also learned confidence-building. This place gave me a fresh start, hope, and the ability to see myself as I am. I developed communication, teamwork, and interpersonal skills. ”

Learners reported developing a range of practical and professional skills in NLN, which they feel will help them move onto further education or get a job. A prominent theme in learner feedback is the building of confidence and self-esteem. Learners shared that they are more comfortable and better able to communicate effectively. One learner stated, *“I improved my self-esteem, it is way better than it used to be. Because coming here I had a really low self-esteem. I wouldn't talk to anyone or anything.”* Learners also highlighted learning skills to prepare them for an office environment, such as personal hygiene, dressing appropriately for work, timekeeping, and organisation. Some learners also received training such as manual handling, IT skills, how to repair phones and laptops, and CV writing. Learners also mentioned skills like self-advocacy and problem solving.

## Other Life Skills Learned in NLN (What other skills have you learned at NLN that are important to you to manage different part of your life?)

*“ It gives you a good, strong sense of independence. It teaches you about real-world responsibilities, like living alone, buying your own food, paying bills, and saving. ”*

NLN learners emphasised the importance of life skills learned in NLN for managing various aspects of their lives. Time management and budgeting were key areas of improvement for the learners. One learner shared that they *"accomplished something that I never thought I would. I went to the ATM right and I was getting. I did everything right. So, I literally crossed the road and everything, but I managed to get a 20 out"*. Learners also mentioned opening bank accounts and managing money. Learners expressed that NLN teaches skills to encourage learners to feel independent.

## Differences and Improvements Compared to School (What is different and better, in NLN, compared to school or compared to other training courses you have attended?)

*“ It was like more closed off. I guess it was like you do this, you do that. It was not personalised. Like over here. It's like it's more personal and you get to do more personalised work, and you get to focus more about yourself and you as an individual, as a person and like as a group like. In secondary school, it was more like here's your task. That's it. It was just. It was almost like robotics. ”*

Learners consistently contrasted their NLN experience with that of mainstream schools and other training courses. A significant difference highlighted by learners is NLN's flexible and individualised approach to learning. Learners appreciate that instructors are more patient and understanding, allowing them to work at their own pace and take breaks when needed. One learner said:

*“ Mainstream schools have a set curriculum that has to be followed. If you don't fit that, you're left behind. At NLN, they take somebody with any form of special need and work with what they have. There's no time limit, and there's always backup support. ”*



## Supports in NLN for Success (What supports in NLN are helping you succeed in your learning and in preparing to go onto further training or get a job?)

“ Ever since I was 16, I didn't know how to take the bus properly. But now. But now, at this stage, I know how to take a bus. ”

Learners praised the various supports at NLN that are helping them succeed in their learning and in every day life. Many learners talked about gaining life skills and learning practical skills like how to use public transport, computer skills, and work experience. One learner stated:

“ Everyone like get the help that they need. But in here like you get help, and you get support that you really need, and you're heard. ”

## Impact of Multiple Support Staff (In NLN, many staff work on your behalf to help you meet goals in your personal plans. Is it helpful that there is more than one person to help you?)

“ We didn't get much information when we were in our own in special needs schools. To be honest, all we got was ‘no,’ ‘no’ and ‘no’ and ‘maybe next time.’ It was always this. It was always the same. But in college, in National Learning Network, it's completely different. They take a chance on you without even knowing you for some reason. They didn't want to give up on us before they could start. ”

Learners found it beneficial that staff members work with them to provide personalised guidance, regular progress check-ins, and support in different areas like education, mental health, and job preparation. One learner said, "Because there are so many people here to support you at NLN, each with their own strengths, no matter what you may be struggling with, whether it's your modules, assignments, personal goals, or even personal issues, there is always someone there to help you." The smaller class sizes also make it easier to speak to the instructors.

## Impact of Community Engagement Activities (How have community engagement activities at NLN made the learning and student experience better for you?)

“ And I've recently decided to go back to basketball after five years. I've recently realised I need to get back into it to make myself feel better. I used to be really good at it, so I think I'm gonna try again. After all, basketball is life. So yeah, I think that's a good mental health strategy for me. ”

Learners reported that community engagement activities in NLN significantly enhance the learning and learning experience. Learners enjoyed the freedom of movement and exercise. Activities such as bowling, sports, and trips promote team building and social interaction and improve mental health. One learner stated, "Activities like where we did bowling and like you get to go on like trips like every second week, and I think that's great for team building and like working on like how you interact with other people, other people and in different environments and settings". Learners said that it helps them socialise and make friends. Learners also highlighted the importance of volunteering and work placements, stating that these opportunities give them hands-on experience, boost their confidence, and help them discover what types of jobs or careers suit them best.

## Role of Local Businesses in Providing Work Experience (How have local businesses/other organisations played a role in providing you with work experience and real-world learning opportunities?)

“ It gives me the confidence to ask for a part time job which I did and eventually I got it. It took some while, but we got it ”

Learners described how local businesses offering work experience placements play a crucial role in their education, allowing them to gain hands-on skills and build confidence. Some learners did work experience in retail, animal care, and public sector jobs. One learner shared:

“ I did work experience twice at Kilkenny Castle Park with the OPW. It gave me insight into what kind of work suits me best. ”

## How NLN Helped Make Community Connections (How did NLN help you make these connections in your community?)

“ Before I came here, my confidence was really bad. Since I started, it has grown so much. I can now stand up and talk about myself and my life experiences. ”

NLN supported learners in finding work experience placements and helping them to figure out what they might be interested in. Learners reported feeling more confident and prepared for job applications, further education, and independence since joining NLN. One learner stated that:

“ Before NLN, I wouldn't have known how to create a CV. Now I can put my experience down on paper and see what I'm capable of. ”

## Increased Confidence in Community Connections and Job Applications (Do you feel more confident in making these community connections, applying for jobs and other courses now?)

“ NLN helped me develop maturity and a sense of adulthood. It's not just about learning skills - it's about understanding my own individuality and making my own path in life. ”

Learners feel much more confident in making community connections, applying for jobs, and enrolling in further education since joining NLN. They pointed out that they now understand the job application process, can create a CV, and feel prepared for interviews. Others highlighted the development of real-world independence skills, such as budgeting, managing responsibilities, and advocating for themselves. They also overcame self-doubt, some had previously thought college or employment was beyond their reach, but NLN helped them believe in their abilities and provided them with the necessary support and skills to move forward.

## Positive Changes in Life Due to NLN (In your own words, is there one positive change in your life because of what you did or what you learned in NLN?)

“ Four years ago, I was a broken woman. Today, I’m confident, happy, and hopeful for the future. NLN gave me my life back. ”

Learners were asked to describe one positive change in their life due to their experiences at NLN, unrelated to jobs or certifications. Responses included increased confidence, the development of friendships, confidence to go to a concert and get back independently, improved ability to deal with difficult life situations, English and writing skills went from a 0% to a 70%, improved self-esteem, and the formation of close relationships. One learner shared:

“ Coming in here has definitely changed my life. When you get to a certain age, and I became sick I thought that was it for me. But learning a new skill has been easier because of the people here that have helped. It's never too late to learn. ”

While another learner said:

“ Confidence. Before, I would always apologise even if someone bumped into me. NLN taught me to use my voice and stand up for myself. ”

## National Learning Network Student Satisfaction Survey

In 2024, 1,675 students completed the annual National Learning Network Student Satisfaction Survey. Overall satisfaction rating across National Learning Network Centres was 98%. 98% of students surveyed also said they would recommend National Learning Network. 98% of students reported that there was a positive impact on other aspects of their life through attending NLN. This included making friends, having a structure to the day, being independent, improved confidence and self-esteem, improved ability to make choices and decisions, and greater involvement in community. One of the highest referral sources into National Learning is Word of Mouth.

## SPOTLIGHT ON DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK



In National Learning Network (NLN), digital inclusion means ensuring that every student, has the tools, skills, and support needed to succeed in an increasingly digital world. By embedding digital transformation across our colleges, we are enhancing accessibility, engagement, and opportunities for all learners.

### Creating Accessible and Engaging Learning

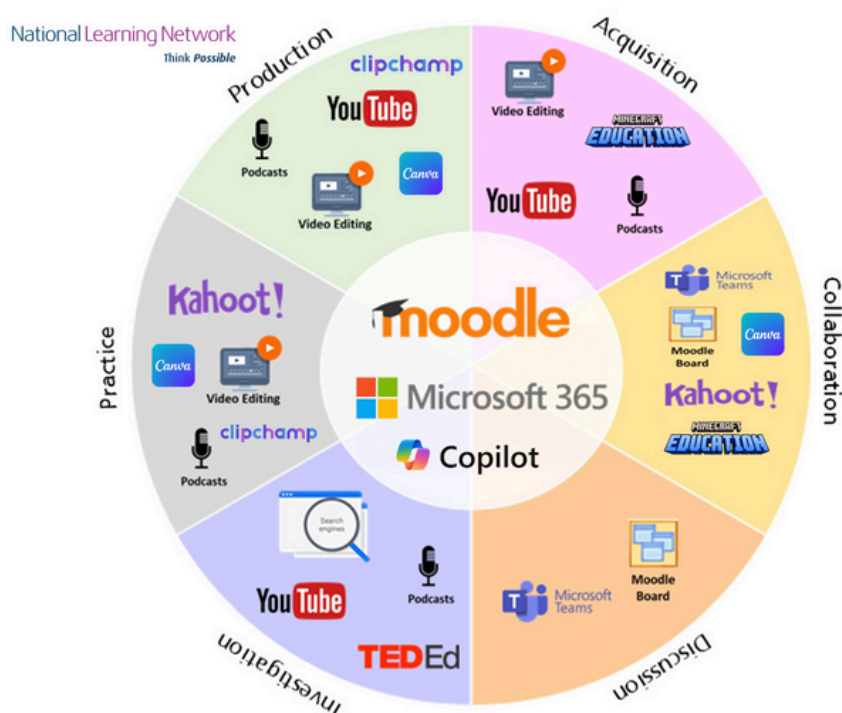
Our commitment to a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach ensures that digital tools and resources are flexible and inclusive. Online modules, co-created with students, are designed to be interactive, accessible, and aligned with real-world needs. These courses provide learners with the digital and practical skills needed for employment, education, and community participation. The promotional video for our Level 3 Community Participation course (<https://vimeo.com/1031610428/0de4813c93?ts=0&share=copy>) shows how we bring these principles to life in practice.

### Enhancing Digital and AI Literacy

In today's evolving landscape, digital literacy is essential. Our approach includes helping students understand the ethical implications of technology, including Generative AI, which support both students and instructors in using digital tools safely and responsibly. These digital tools are integrated into learning, empowering students to stay informed, connect with others, and participate fully in their communities and society.



## The NLN Tech Wheel: A Hub for Innovation



**Figure 4: The NLN Tech Wheel**

The NLN Tech Wheel highlights the digital tools available to enhance learning. From creative platforms like Canva to immersive environments like Minecraft Education, students and instructors have access to innovative technology that fosters creativity, collaboration, and practical skill development. The NLN Tech Wheel is continuously updated to reflect emerging tools and best practices in digital education.

### Supporting Instructors with TEL Training

Ensuring that instructors have the confidence and skills to integrate technology into teaching is a key priority. Ongoing Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) training equips educators with practical knowledge on using digital tools such as Immersive Reader, OneDrive, and AI tools. This training empowers instructors to create more dynamic, accessible, and personalised learning experiences.

## Strengthening Infrastructure for a Seamless Digital Experience

A robust digital infrastructure is essential for ensuring all students can fully participate in digital learning. NLN has invested in upgrading devices, enhancing internet connectivity, and ensuring reliable access to the tools and resources students need. Online accessibility features have been integrated to remove barriers and create an inclusive learning environment. In 2025, NLN will also be upgrading the Moodle platform to enhance its functionality and improve the overall learning experience for both students and instructors.

## Looking Ahead: The Future of Digital Inclusion at NLN

Digital transformation is not just about technology—it is about people. In NLN, we will continue to expand our digital inclusion initiatives, ensuring that students have the skills, confidence, and opportunities to succeed. Through continuous innovation, collaboration, and a student-centred approach, we are shaping a future where digital learning is accessible, engaging, and empowering for all. Our progress in 2024 reflects this vision. Watch our 2024 highlights video (<https://vimeo.com/1053298539/10497c005e>) to see how we are making this a reality for our students.



## SPOTLIGHT ON STUDENT SUPPORTS IN NATIONAL LEARNING NETWORK



Rehab Group’s training and education division, National Learning Network (NLN), supports people across the country, to make successful transitions to higher education, further education, training, and employment. Our neurodivergent and ever-changing student population includes people with autism, ADHD, mental health difficulties, addictions, forensic/criminal histories, intellectual disabilities, chronic and enduring health related difficulties, people recovering from accidents, illnesses or trauma; people who have for a multitude of reasons, fallen through the “traditional” system and find themselves without plan or purpose in life.

As a specialist training provider, NLN delivers education and training services which are informed by the principles of universal design. Students attending our specialist training services, achieve the same high quality accredited training available in mainstream provision. NLN’s student support services, however, offer a continuum of additional and sustained support, that many people need to succeed in further education and training. These supports are indeed often the critical stepping stones for students on their journey towards achieving qualifications, progressing academically, and accessing the employment market.

This is where the core team and ancillary specialist supports of NLN become a vital impactor, in assisting people to stay the course, and successfully completing what they have undertaken to journey through. Establishing personal and social supports, as well as health and wellbeing markers with the assistance of professional Psychologists and Rehabilitation Officers, facilitates students to complete their journey with more ease. It is often these additional supports, cushioned in an atmosphere of equality, diversity, and inclusion throughout NLN centres, which enables the academic/certification journey to be completed. This is due to students’ enhanced feelings of acceptance and growing self-confidence, coupled with developing solid and robust knowledge and skills sets. In incidences where certification or academic achievement is less of an outcome, the individual nonetheless gains invaluable insight, awareness, and adaptive skills for daily living.

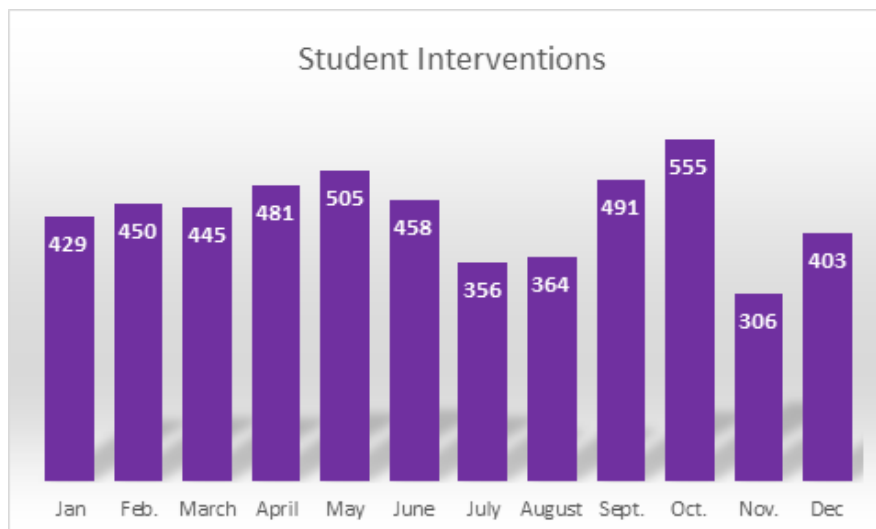
With our partners in each of the 16 ETBs, NLN works diligently with our local and national teams and students across the country, to support the achievement of personal success via enhanced self-concept work, progression, certification, and employment where viable. Whilst graduation, certification, and progression to further and higher education are priority targets, they cast light onto just one side of the story that many of our students navigate and overcome each day.

### Summary Service Overview 2024:

- 17 Psychologists employed nationally
- The Psychologists of NLN manage their own caseloads and ensure professional cover, supervision, safeguarding and ethical oversight of students and services

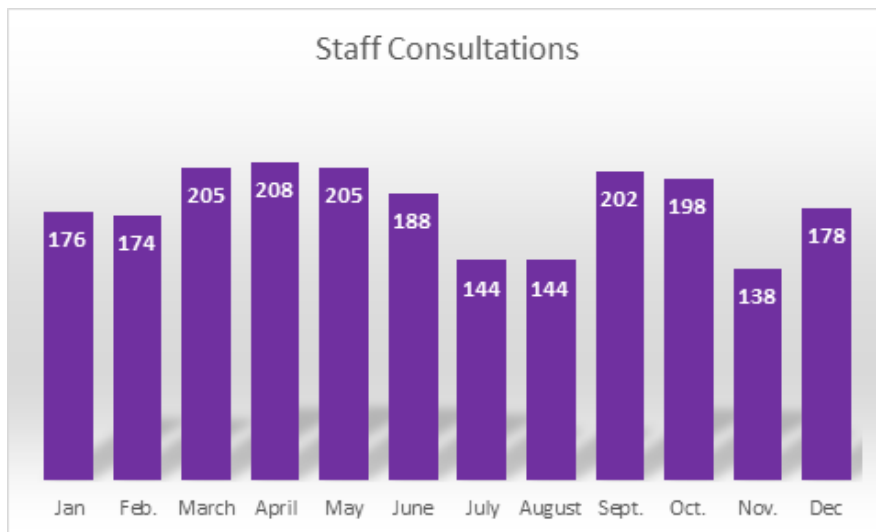
### Student & Staff Supports:

- **Total of 5.243 Student Supports/1:1 Interventions during 2024**



- **An average of 447 Psychologist: Student 1:1 monthly intervention.**
- Prevalent presentations included generalised anxiety, depression, confidence/self-esteem, OCD, ADHD, and autism.

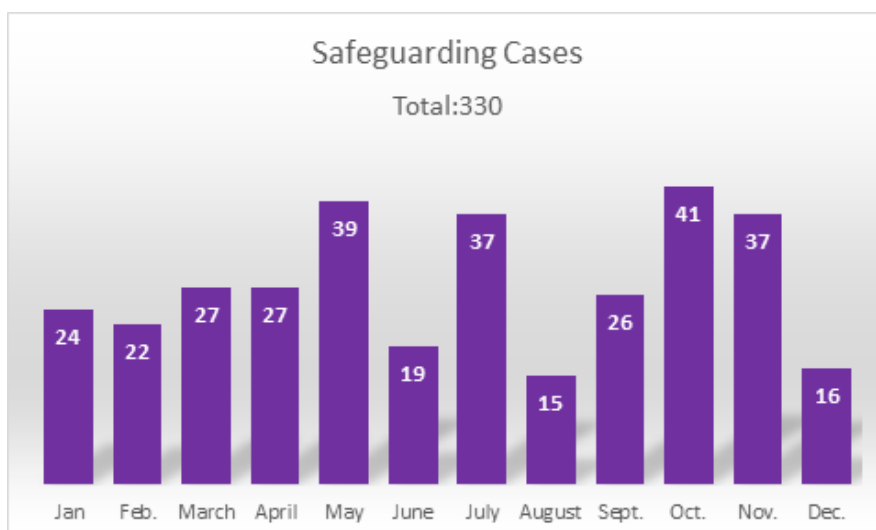
- **Total: 2,160 Staff Consultations**



- **An average of 178 monthly staff consultations were made with Psychology services** e.g. maximising student attendance/engagement/effort, reducing aberrant behaviour, suicidal ideation/self-harming/safeguarding concerns, and other professional insight regarding programme & policy development, operational, legal, ethical, and/or other matters.

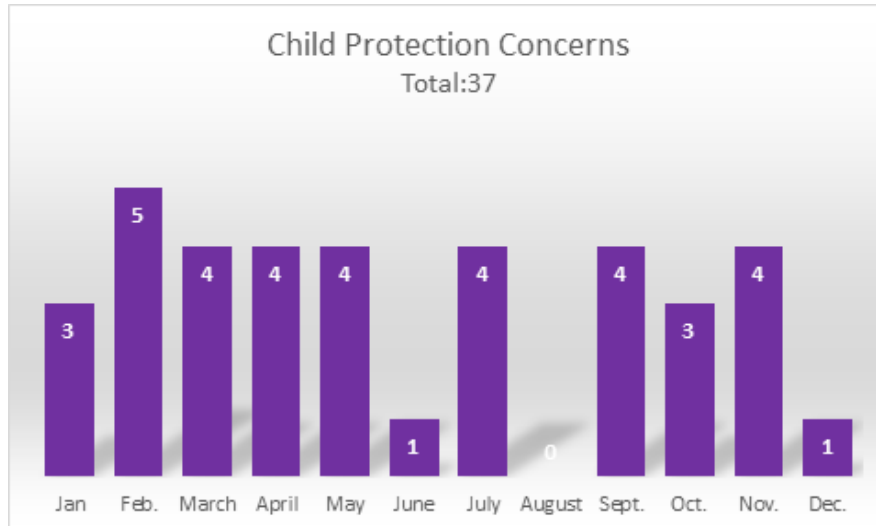
### Safeguarding Referrals:

- **330 Preliminary Screenings Submitted to HSE (highest number 41 submissions in the month of October 2024)**





- **37 Referrals were made to Tusla**



### Psychology Led National Training Days for Staff:

- Induction **x 3**
- Boundary Management **x 5**
- Promoting a Supportive Learning Environment **x 8**
- Critical Incident Training **x 8**
- Supporting neurodiversity using a neuro-affirmative approach **x 8**
- Supporting transgender students **x 8**
- R.O. National Training Day

### Psychology Led Training for Students – ongoing:

- Boundary Management
- Decider Skills Training
- Communication & Mindfulness Training
- Relationships and Sexual Health
- Self-Compassion workshops

### CPD/Supervision:

- Scheduled Regional and National CPD
- Scheduled 1:1 and Group CPD
- Telephonic, Online, in-person consultations as requested/required

## External Representation/Specific Progressions

- Promotion of NLN Services in collaboration with NLN Communications Team during 2024 via national radio, e.g. Newstalk Live, various Podcasts & Online Presentations, newspaper publications and social media. Featuring themes such as NLN student cohorts, early school leavers, social anxiety, mental health presentations, generalised anxiety, and long-standing impacts of COVID.
- Assisted Decision Making external committee representation
- Research & Development – including professional oversight of Research proposals made to Rehab Group Research and Ethics Committee
- Provision of Designated Officer/Clinical oversight
- Development of Mental Health Training for Staff - national roll-out in 2025

## Mindful Approach:

During 2024 the NLN Psychology Team, in collaboration with frontline staff and management, as always, adapted to the unique requirements and goals of our neurodiverse cohorts throughout the country; adopting individualised, inclusive, and bespoke mindful approaches to training, learning environment, theory and development, in accordance with the expressed desires, preferences and specific requirements of each student.

## CONCLUSION



Rehab Group are appreciative of the opportunity to share our experience and the voice of students to contribute to this very important call for consultation that will shape FET provision over the coming five years.

National Learning Network plays a pivotal role in equipping people with disabilities to develop both the skills for progression to employment or further/higher education and the transversal skills to be able to manage the transition to work and engagement in community. We have a significant contribution to make to an integrated College of the Future, as demonstrated by almost 4,000 students who are accessing education and training options with us each year. We ask that the skills discussion widens beyond only occupational and transversal skills to include life skills that are required to strengthen sustainability, democracy, and social inclusion.

We ask that a reimagined FET eco-system with Colleges of the Future, leverages our capabilities in UDL-informed teaching and learning practices, including our comprehensive student supports, to deliver transformative FET provision. Together, all stakeholders can make Ireland a leader in education and training that fosters inclusion, promotes belonging and delivers on skills. The inclusion of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities is critical in delivery of rights-based services and requires more inter-departmental cooperation to ensure all young adults have the same opportunities to avail of FET. There is a need for greater flexibility with more options for part-time studies, recognising some people with disabilities and health conditions need these options to manage and maintain good health. Investment in digital infrastructure should also recognise the need for investment in assistive technology to ensure no student is left behind.

National Learning Network want to take advantage of our presence in counties to further widen participation in FET and act as a connector of a myriad of groups. We ask that consideration is given to formalising and extending referral pathways to NLN, including students who cannot manage the demands of a FET College for a period of time. Together, we can introduce more people to life-long learning in FET, pathways to HE, and employment through NLN.

National Learning Network is committed to contributing to the development of Colleges of the Future, with all other stakeholders, and bringing our best to the table to ensure individual success for every student with a disability, while making lasting changes and impact for a more inclusive society.

