

2023

Submission to Strategic Framework for Lifelong Guidance



Produced by the Advocacy Team of
Rehab Group

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Overview

guidance must provide a combination of information, advice and counselling services that can enable learners and potential learners to make better choices about their learning pathways and career and life aspirations. (National Framework for Guidance, Consultation Paper, Department of Education. P. 03)

If this is the starting point for those developing Lifelong Guidance in Ireland then Rehab Group and in particular its educational arm, National Learning Network, can make a key difference in its development.

Over the course of February this year the advocacy team in Rehab Group conducted seven focus groups with over 70 students of National Learning Network to develop an understanding of their experiences and viewpoints and to ensure their voices are heard in this submission. Rehab Group welcomes the opportunity to take part in this consultation.

This submission seeks to:

- Outline our students' experiences of guidance to date, the benefits they experienced and the difficulties they encountered.
- Make suggestions as to how to work towards a system of Lifelong Guidance that is universally accessible to all and effective in its delivery. This will ensure that those who participate will become more rounded members of society, improving their personal, social, educational, and employment opportunities.
- Use the structure of the consultation to give a clear and concise representation of our students' views on the topic of Lifelong Guidance.

National Learning Network provides courses, guidance and support to students each year across a wide range of vocational and rehabilitative training courses. You will hear their views throughout this submission.

The key points suggested for Lifelong Guidance are:

- Provide free Lifelong Guidance counselling
- Ensure it is available in both digital and in-person formats.
- Provide counsellors who specialise in disability.
- Widely promote Lifelong Guidance in accessible easy read formats.

Feedback

Pillar 1: Lifelong guidance services and Information provision

Under this pillar we wish to identify your views regarding the current level of guidance information and services.

Confidence, amongst participants in guidance services was incredibly low. The majority of those who had experienced guidance supports said that it was only in secondary school, that it was “Poor”, it was “biased”, and that, with regards students with disabilities, guidance was carried out as a formality with no belief that it could lead to anything:

in school there is no guidance for people with disabilities, it's like they feel there is no point

It feels like they are just ticking a box talking to us

There are people who encourage you to go in a particular direction but they are usually trying to get you to go to their school or their course, it's not unbiased

Overall the accessibility of guidance proved to be a huge factor in the poor reaction towards this pillar. Participants described guidance as only “quite” accessible to all.

Barriers to guidance ranged from a lack of awareness that it existed beyond secondary school, to the affordability of private guidance support, and, crucially, a perception from participants that counsellors lacked belief in their ability to achieve anything in further education or employment.

Once people have been able to access guidance support, it is essential that the support they receive is accessible in itself. One reaction to this pillar highlighted the need to refer people with a disability to someone who is trained in disability awareness, who can devote the necessary time to those attending, and who can sincerely outline all the possibilities available to students with disabilities.

Having to explain one’s disability and how it may affect their education or employment to a guidance counsellor that has little time and less understanding of disability made one respondent answer that they “did not feel comfortable with this”.

The nature of lifelong guidance needs to be balanced between digital and face-to-face. In order to ensure those in rural areas can access services too, the participants were open to the idea of consultations over platforms such as *Teams*, *Skype*, or even *WhatsApp*. However, face to face meetings with a guidance counsellor remained the ideal.

Provision would need to be made for an awareness campaign for the implementation of any lifelong guidance services. Many participants were not aware that such services were available outside of secondary school. A promotional and awareness campaign to raise awareness of such services would be necessary.

Rehab asks:

- Easily accessible pathways to guidance support.
- Provision of both digital and face to face guidance support.
- Provision of free independent guidance support.
- Highlighted advertisement campaign.

Pillar 2: Professionalisation of lifelong guidance

This pillar is concerned with the relevant training appropriate to the guidance counselling role and the work setting.

A “professionalization” or a streamlined or standardised and regulated approach towards guidance support was a popular idea amongst participants. All participants expressed that they would like, and would feel more comfortable with, guidance counsellors who had specific training and experience of disability. Some participants expressed that they had attended a guidance counsellor who didn’t seem confident in delivering the information due to the fact they had a disability, with some being told they “would have to go and find out which option” would facilitate their disability best.

In other circumstances participants were not told to source their own information but were given what they felt was conflicting and confusing guidance. Participants outlined that they had attended school guidance and private guidance but were actually “more confused afterwards” and described it as conflicting information. A standardised and regulated approach to guidance would encourage a scenario where those delivering the information are prepared to support a person with a disability with a more direct approach depending on the disability.

Rehab asks:

- Guidance regulation to give greater structure and consistency of advice and services.

Pillar 3 Access and Inclusion

This pillar is looking at how we can ensure inclusive lifelong guidance counselling/ career guidance services are available to all (those with a disability/ newcomers/ students/ unemployed/ employed/ retirees/ migrants/career changers)

In order to ensure inclusivity of lifelong guidance it may be necessary to implement lifelong guidance counselling which specialises in these subset areas; counsellors who specialise in disability, people who have experienced mental health difficulties, migrants etc. That would not limit those counsellors from giving guidance more generally also but would provide a

person with a disability a more nuanced source of guidance without having to use up some of their limited guidance time to describe every detail of their disability.

Having to summarise elements of their disability can be demeaning for someone with a disability. Participants expressed that the guidance counsellors they had attended didn't seem fully equipped to advise them as they were not apt at understanding the symptoms or complications of their disability. Having to explain those details to their counsellor left them lacking confidence in their counsellor, as well as feeling embarrassed and demoralised.

A guidance counsellor who specialises in disability would also have a greater understanding of the opportunities available for people with disabilities and would be less blinkered by the stereotypical barriers to progression. This would also improve the students' belief in guidance supports:

They need to believe in supporting people with disabilities and that they deserve the same chances in life as everyone else

Being able to access a disability specific guidance counsellor would make participants feel more comfortable and less apprehensive and ensure that lifelong guidance as a whole would be more inclusive.

Participants also pinpointed other areas to ensure that lifelong guidance is inclusive to all. As with many areas of society people with a disability may be prevented from accessing guidance due to usual barriers such as cost and transport. Participants suggested that if availability of both digital and face-to-face sessions were offered it would make it more accessible to those with transport difficulties. A highlighted campaign coupled with easy read promotional material would also ensure a greater level of inclusivity.

Rehab asks:

- Access to guidance counsellors who specialize in disability.
- The option to access either digitally or in person information.
- Free guidance services

Pillar 4: Lifelong guidance, career management skills and career mobility

Under this pillar we are looking at the actions needed to support everyone to develop the career management skills required to facilitate lifelong access to training, education, upskilling and reskilling opportunities; mobility opportunities; self-employment; and the labour market.

Overall the participants of our focus groups admitted to having poor or very poor career management skills and that they would require a lot of help in that regard. They didn't know

what to do and would struggle to even access relevant and accessible information on how to achieve career management skills.

While the internet would be the first port of call for the majority to access information on career management skills, the sheer amount of information and its variety would make it completely overwhelming. Some participants did list a citizen information office or intro offices as sources of this type of information but also raised concerns that the information officers may not be in touch with their disability. Often these offices are open and not conducive to students disclosing deeply personal details regarding their disabilities.

All participants agreed that this sort of information should be taught in school. The overall belief of participants with regards career management and lifelong guidance was that there is too great an emphasis placed on third level education. Some participants suggested there is a sense of snobbery associated with third level education.

I feel frustrated by being steering into courses when I really want to know what kind of different options I could have

They feel this snobbery limits the scope of the counsellors' guidance and that there should be a greater openness to the possibilities, available to, and the potential of, people with disabilities:

they need to understand what's like living with a disability but not limit their thinking to disability specific services.

A career management course in school may also improve students' self belief of their own progression possibilities. Much of the hesitancy towards third level education was exacerbated by the difficulties people with a disability face in accessing employment afterwards:

we struggle with the thought of spending four years doing a degree programme and then maybe not getting employment.

Rehab asks:

- Introduce a career management course in schools.

Recommendations:

- Easily accessible pathways to guidance support.
- Provision of both digital & face to face guidance support. This will ensure a balance is struck in an age of greater digital usage.
- Provision of free independent guidance support. In order to ensure affordable and unbiased guidance
- Highlighted advertisement campaign. Promotion of guidance services so people will become aware that supports exist outside of secondary school.
- Guidance regulation to give greater structure and consistency of advice and services.
- Access to guidance counsellors who specialize in disability.
- Introduce a career management course in schools.

About National Learning Network

National Learning Network (NLN) provides a range of **flexible training courses** for people with a disability, mental health issues, illness or additional support needs. We are the largest private provider of personalised education, training and employment services in Ireland. We meet you where you are and get you where you want to be. We deliver our programmes through blended learning, which means a mixture of on-site and off-site training.

Our training programmes span many disciplines, including Art, Administration, Sports and Recreation, Graphic Design, Culinary Skills, Computing and Horticulture. We work with people who experience health conditions, illness, disability, mental health difficulty, trauma, addiction, economic isolation or challenging life circumstances. We support people to make successful transitions, whatever their stage in life.

We can help transition from school to the adult environment with access to vocational training, support with getting a job, recovery and wellness, improving people's health, enhancing the quality of life and achieving successful inclusion in the community. NLN's services are aligned with international best practice social and vocational rehabilitation models. You can talk to our experienced staff today about which course best suits your needs. You may want training to find a job, learn some new skills or go on to further education or apprenticeship. Call us today and learn to change your story.

Our programmes include work experience and offer nationally recognised qualifications, including **QQI**, **ECDL**, and **City and Guilds**. **These nationally recognised qualifications** ensure students are ready to get a job or further education. NLN provides personalised training, education, employment and community-based rehabilitation supports and services to people who need additional specialist support to progress their education, training or life plan.