

National Learning Network

Investing in People, Changing Perspectives



Submission to the Joint Committee on Disability Matters

Overview/Summary

This submission seeks to give voice to issues affecting students with disabilities in the further education sector so that when setting its terms of reference and work-plan, the Disability Matters Committee considers these issues.

We are most anxious that the challenges faced by National Learning Network students do not get lost between the work of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters and the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science or indeed other committees with one Committee assuming that the others are considering these challenges.

We feel that the Disability Matters Committee could be a great voice for people with disabilities who are in further education, and we are keen that the Committee would examine key issues affecting people with disabilities in this setting.

About 7,000 students attend National Learning Network (NLN) each year. This includes people who have experienced a life setback, had an accident, have a mental health condition, autism, a long-term illness or have a disability. Students are between the ages of 16 and 65. (Please see Appendix for more details on National Learning Network).

On behalf of these students, there are three key areas that we would like to emphasise in this submission

(i) The need to address the ongoing digital divide being experienced by many students with disabilities,

(ii) the unacceptable high rates of social exclusion and unemployment among people with disabilities in Ireland, and

(iii) the need to provide better support for specialist training services for people experiencing disadvantage and disability

We would therefore like the terms of reference of the Committee to explore all aspects of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities to ensure that it is implemented across all Government Departments. In that vein, we would like to see the terms of reference of the Committee extend to all Government Departments and relevant agencies, and for the Committee to devote some time in its work-plan to issues faced by students with disabilities.

We would particularly like to see an emphasis in the terms of reference and in the work-plan of the Committee on Article 24 (Education), Article 27 (Work) and Article 28 (Adequate Standard of Living & Social Protection) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

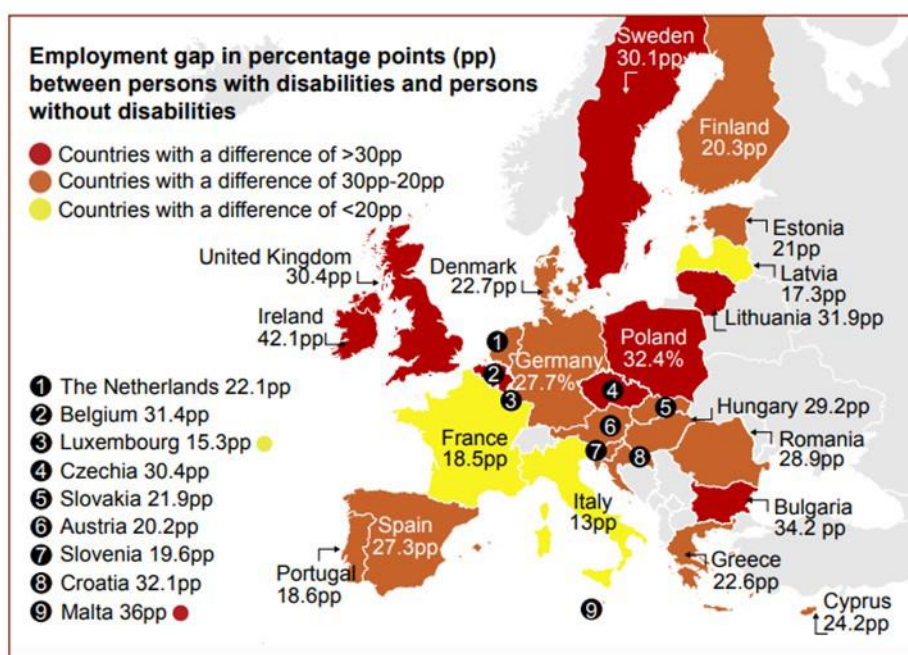
Context:

The overall context for many people with disabilities in Ireland is stark.

Two out of five people with disabilities in Ireland struggle to afford basic necessities.¹

Ireland has the highest “at risk of poverty” rate for people with disabilities of any western European country.²

And as the chart below shows, Ireland has the worst employment record in the EU for people with disabilities.³



All of this has major implications for opportunities, quality of life and the level of social exclusion faced by people with disabilities on a daily basis.

As we mentioned above, about 7,000 students attend National Learning Network each year. The profile of students includes people who have experienced a life setback, had an accident, have a mental health condition, autism, a long-term illness or have a disability.

¹ Figure 3.2

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/psilc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2019/povertyanddeprivation/>

² https://mcusercontent.com/865a5bbea1086c57a41cc876d/files/ad60807b-a923-4a7e-ac84-559c4a5212a8/EDF_HR_Report_final_tagged_interactive_v2_accessible.pdf

³ https://mcusercontent.com/865a5bbea1086c57a41cc876d/files/ad60807b-a923-4a7e-ac84-559c4a5212a8/EDF_HR_Report_final_tagged_interactive_v2_accessible.pdf

Each year, along with the people who use our services in RehabCare, our Advocacy Team hold focus groups with these students and conduct an extensive survey to establish the main challenges they are facing. This year we also conducted a specific survey of NLN students. In particular, we ask them about the issues that they would like to see covered in each year's Budget. The findings from these surveys give a good insight into the types of issues facing students, including some of the issues they have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Digital Divide

There is very strong evidence from our students on the digital divide in our country.

Our 2020 survey revealed that two in five did not have full-time access to their own computer, and worryingly, 20% had no access to a computer at all. Almost half of the recipients struggled with connectivity issues because of patchy broadband, particularly in rural locations. 20% had no broadband access at all. Issues around accessibility, affordability and digital literacy were also raised.

Some of the comments from students included:

"My signal is terrible very difficult to work at home..."

"I don't have access to a computer and due to my health condition, it is not advised for me to have too much screen time."

"...I have a stutter and I find it very difficult online. I also have bad eyesight and I don't know if anybody is listening to me because I couldn't see the eye contact."

"I'm not very good with technology and I prefer to see the work in black and white."

"I work my laptop from my phone – getting broadband in would mean an extra bill in the household."

"I can't afford broadband and only get 50GB data on WiFi. My phone only has 20GB data and that uses up quite quickly."

In August this year the Government announced a new fund of €15m to address the digital divide. It was very welcome but so far less than 30 National Learning Network students have been able to access it. To put that in context, NLN applied for support for 1,500 students. Unfortunately, the scope of the scheme is insufficient to meet demand.

In November 2020, we are submitting applications to each Education and Training Board under the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage Fund in efforts to bridge this divide for students within Specialist Training Provision in Ireland. Hopefully, this will yield some funding but we await the outcome of this process.

We would very much welcome the Committee focusing on all aspects of the digital divide issue for students with a disability, including accessibility, affordability and literacy.

Income Supports

The second main area we have received strong feedback on from NLN students is income supports. As we outline above, Ireland has some of the highest rates of social exclusion for people with disabilities in western Europe. Time and again NLN students highlight the issue of income adequacy.

Some of the comments we receive include:

“Something as simple as getting my hair done or buying some new clothes can be a huge struggle.”

“Not much left over after the rent is paid to go to cinema, pub, etc.”

“I sometimes have to go without heating in the winter time...Disability allowance is a good payment, but needs to be increased.”

According to the survey, people living independently were twice as likely to say that it was difficult or very difficult to live on the income they had. They were three times more likely to tell us that prescription charges were a significant burden. And they were three times more likely to have high weekly transport costs.

Indeed, a general theme in our survey is the extent to which people who use our services are dependent on families and especially parents.

All this means that the cost of independence is very high, the barriers to independence are considerable, and the burden and costs pushed on to families and carers is significant.

Rehabilitative Training Allowance:

Another issue for NLN students is the loss of the Rehabilitative Training Allowance (RTA). RTA is a training support to help students meet the costs of participating in further education. In 2019, the Government decided to no longer pay that allowance to anyone starting a new course.

The withdrawal of that allowance, worth €31.80 per week, has already hit some students and will begin to hit many more as they complete their current courses and move on to new ones. It makes little sense that students with disabilities or disadvantages will lose such a key activation measure. In many cases, the loss of the allowance will mean that the cost of participating will largely use up any income support participants receive, leaving participants dependent on family for other expenses or unable to participate at all.

Importance of Specialist Services for Disability in Further Education

The overwhelming feedback from students of NLN is that they place a very high value on the service they receive.

Some student comments include:

- "I can't say it enough, Choices is just fantastic. I was suffering from depression when I started the course, but the instructors and other students were so supportive. I've made real friends here and realised that I'm a people person, I love the social interaction. The course has built my confidence and now I'm hoping to go on and work with Women's Aid."
- "Before I started Access I didn't speak to people or go anywhere. It took me a while, but I came out of my shell and was able to make friends and joke around. In fact, being with my friends is now the best part of my day. It helped me build my confidence so much that now I have gone on to student Vocational Skills Foundation at NLN in Swords too."
- "When I was made redundant, I didn't have any formal qualifications, I didn't even have a CV. NLN is the place I got back on track. Now, I've got the training and the self-confidence I need to go on and be everything that I know I can be."
- "I was housebound for six years, I couldn't travel but because NLN is local I was able to get there. I loved the Fresh Start course, it completely changed my life. I got a job from my second work experience and now I'm busy, my life is completely different to where it was a year ago."

Comments made by students of their experience of lockdown also highlight how much they value these services:

- "All of the staff with whom I have phone contact have been excellent. They make the experience very pleasant."
- "It is always great to be able to keep connected whilst the NLN has been closed. You need to be able to keep in touch for class work being up to date and also for your mental health in these challenging times it is essential to keep your mind active."
- "It's been like a life-line for me. Essential for my mental health's sake and I'm very grateful to all the staff for their genuine professional concern."
- "Brilliant. It has been extremely important to me and I loved getting video calls and meeting once a week for a social distancing walk."
- "Brilliant as it provided me with support during the lockdown and helped manage my mental health."

In particular, there is a very high value placed on having specialist services for disability in further education:

Some typical feedback we get from students' experience include:

- “It was too crowded in school and I found it was hard to calm myself down. The teachers would send me out of the classroom but I didn’t know what was wrong. I’ve made progress in NLN. The instructors here know If I need to go for a walk. it’s okay, I can do that, and come back in when I feel calm again. My instructor understands. **Cian, Kilkenny**
- I used to be scared of being myself in school, I was scared of being bullied. In NLN, I’m not afraid of being myself. Everything is tailored for each one of us; it all depends on what works for the person. I’m not shy anymore; I’m making more progress in my life and I can be myself now. **Liam, Waterford**
- My agoraphobia got worse, I’d barely laugh, I’d barely smile and I’d barely speak. I felt like it took away everything about me. I had always had such a fierce lust for life but now it was gone. I had become a shell of the person I once was. National Learning Network help people get back to work. I started to get my life on track. That place made me feel safe again, I made new friends and I had a routine. It provided me with the building blocks to rebuild my life again. **Ruth, Bray**

The thrust of public policy on disability at the moment is to “mainstream”. For the most part this is very welcome - mainstreaming breaks down barriers for people with a disability and addresses social exclusion. However, mainstreaming will not suit every person with a disability and should not be the sole focus of further and third level education policy for people with disabilities.

People come to NLN for a variety of reasons and their needs often change with us. People with disabilities are not an homogenous group – each person we meet has a unique set of challenges but more importantly, a unique set of capabilities that they can discover with us. We work with people who experience health conditions, illness, disability, mental health difficulty, trauma, recovering from addiction, economic isolation or challenging life circumstances. Time and time again we meet individuals who failed to thrive in a mainstream educational setting - people who, had they not come to NLN, may never have found a path to employment, an apprenticeship, further education or even third level.

While mainstream education is a vital route for people with disabilities, it does not suit everyone. Often students choose to move into specialist education because of the inadequate physical accessibility of their mainstream educational setting, the quality of disability services available to them and/or their previous experiences whilst in mainstream school. Educational placement for students with disabilities should be a matter of choice depending on the physical, academic and emotional needs of the individual. Every individual has an equal right to educational provision, which will enable him or her to participate in all aspects of economic, social, cultural and political life, to the fullest extent of his or her potential. The unique needs of the individual person must be the paramount consideration when decisions are being made concerning the appropriate provision of education for that person.

So specialist training services play a key enabling role without which many people with disabilities would simply not be able to make progress. If specialist services are not adequately supported, the most vulnerable people with disabilities will be left behind. So there also needs to be proper consideration for the role of specialist services.

Currently, little attention is given to this area in further and third level policy. The neglect of this area is most transparent in the funding system. It is simply not fit for purpose with just some of the problems listed below:

- The funding mechanism for NLN courses is based on an historic per capita fee for service basis. Funding is only paid when students attend – unlike almost all other parts of the education system. This means that there is no funding guaranteed to cover on-going core costs.
- No funding for pay restoration has ever been provided by Solas/ETBs.
- The funding for Rehabilitative Training has also decreased, and it is insufficient to cover the full core costs of service provision.
- There is currently no capital fund available to Specialist Training Providers such as National Learning Network through Solas/ETBs. (The HSE does provide some capital investment for school leaver services).

We would strongly urge the Committee to set clear terms of reference that allows them to examine these issues in full so that people with disabilities, wishing to exercise their rights under the UNCRPD, are not left behind.

Conclusion

We have set out above some of the main issues affecting the lived experience of students with disabilities who attend National Learning Network.

We have emphasised that there is a need for an Oireachtas Committee that examines disability issues across all Government Departments. For too long, disability issues have been treated as niche issues across Government Departments and failed to receive priority within individual Government Departments.

We believe the terms of reference for the committee should be clearly set so that any disability issue in any Government Department or agency can be examined. We also believe the committee should be able to call in any officials or Ministers that work on any aspect of disability policy or implementation, regardless of which Department or agency they work in.

In this submission we have highlighted some of the main issues that NLN students face. We have emphasised the inadequate income support, the ongoing problems with the digital divide and significant funding issues for specialist training and education services that are very highly valued by those who avail of them. We would ask the Committee set some time aside in its work-plan to examine issues for people with disability at third and further education level.

Submitted to the Disability Matters Committee on behalf of National Learning Network by Paul Cassidy, Public Affairs & Advocacy Manager and Aoife Kirk, Public Affairs & Advocacy Assistant

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Appendix - What is NLN and what do we do?

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 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, or have a mental health condition.

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).

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.