
The Active Inclusion Network: Changing mind-sets

If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed?

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Overview

On a sunny Friday morning on 22nd September 2017 in Little Island, Cork, a group of staff working in some of the largest Post-Leaving Certificate Colleges in Cork met, largely unknown and unsure of one another. This was to be the first of many meetings of the group who came on board to form the Active Inclusion Network, the pilot project of Cork Education and Training Board (ETB) and AHEAD.

The network was a pilot to support staff working across Further Education Colleges in Cork ETB by creating reflective spaces for staff to explore Universal Design for Learning as a positive solution to including diversity in their own work.

The pilot finished in September 2018, with a report due out in December this year. This article outlines the overarching learning from this experience.

Background

The Further Education and Training (FET) Sector have experienced significant structural change since 2012 including;

- The formation of Quality and Qualifications Ireland responsible for the external quality assurance of further and higher education and training.
- The establishment of SOLAS who are responsible for the strategic co-ordination and funding of the further education and training sector.
- The merging of the previous FÁS training centres and Vocational Education Committees into the 16 Education and Training Boards who are responsible for implementing The FET Strategy at a local level where it related to quality assured education and training provision.
- The National Further Education and Training Strategy was introduced in 2014 to provide the underpinning visionary direction of these new public bodies in relation to further education and training for the future, the first national strategy on this topic in the history of the state.

The National Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 provided a plan 'to deliver a higher quality

learning experience leading to better outcomes for all those who engage in FET' (SOLAS, p.3, 2014). As part of this aim, SOLAS committed to increasing the level of underrepresented groups in FET as an integral part of higher quality education provision (SOLAS, 2014, 2018).

We understand from our own research in AHEAD that the number of students with disabilities, a group that has been historically underrepresented in higher education, perhaps even third-level education overall, has started to increase year on year (latest figures from our research indicates 5.7% of student population are students with disabilities). With this in mind, along with the understanding that the area of social inclusion has been a larger focus in FET than higher education (O'Sullivan, 2018) anecdotal evidence from this pilot suggests that there has been an increase in the number of students with diverse needs also registering in FET. This increase in underrepresented groups, in line with the FET Strategies vision, means that the student population needs are diversified and education provision for this populace must adapt in order to deliver quality outcomes for all.

In response to a growing demand for training from educators to respond to the ever increasing needs of students in FET, John Fitzgibbons, the Cork ETB Further Education Director, endorsed this pilot which would propose a standardised framework of inclusive practice to support all students, in particular students with disabilities. AHEAD, as partners of the project with CETB, worked with the members of the Active Inclusion Network group, sharing with them our expertise and external collaboration on inclusive education for all students.

The staff involved in the pilot were provided time to participate in this project by their Principals and their contributions and concerns of how to best support the needs of their students ultimately shaped the journey of the pilot. As educators, working on the ground with students each day, their input and practice is critical to implement SOLAS' vision for learners and it was clear from our work with these educators that there was a need for resources, such as time to collectively network and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to achieve this vision.

The pilot raised a larger systematic issue experienced by all colleges, which was the lack of clarity around the role of a disability support staff in Further Education and Training with some teachers giving the impression that this role was largely ad-hoc and there was little expertise on the ground to support learners increased learning and support needs. As highlighted in the FET Strategy there is little known data collected on the CPD required for educators however (SOLAS, 2014),

SOLAS intends, in partnership with the ETBI and ETBs, to systematically collect data around the current qualification and skills profile of FET staff with a view to developing and implementing an effective CPD strategy (SOLAS, 2014).

A key recommendation we have raised from this pilot is to address the need for a disability officer role in addition to equipping staff with CPD on inclusive learning practices, in order to ensure that they are all legally compliant and informed on best practice for engaging a more diverse group of learners.

In order for colleges to be legally compliant they must ensure that learners with a registered disability are provided with adequate supports to access and participate in education (Equal Status Act 2000; Disability Act 2005; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2012; UNHRPD, 2007) and therefore it is imperative that colleges are adequately equipped to do so.

The members of this network are now all well acquainted and enthusiastic to carry on their work together going forward, post-pilot. It is clear that since their time on the pilot they have a new confidence and drive to circulate their expertise on how to provide their learners with a 'higher quality' of education which is legally compliant and moving towards a more standardised approach. Their commitment to universal design for learning as an inclusive practice model is enriching and hopefully contagious. Their voices must be heard.

The video below was created to capture the essence of the Active Inclusion Network Pilot; the background of the project and ultimately its impact on the educators involved. The report on the work of the pilot will be launched in The Cork Training Centre in Cork ETB in December. This report will provide further details on the Active Inclusion Network model and some key recommendations for the future, including review of the need for a disability officer role in FET. We hope the recommendations and work of the group going forward will be considered for the future development of this sector, as detailed in the report, their work is critical to achieving higher quality provision for all their learners.

If you have any further queries about the Active Inclusion Network Pilot please feel free to contact me on 01 716 4397 or at Christine.hynes@ahead.ie

References

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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
