

AHEAD/ETBI

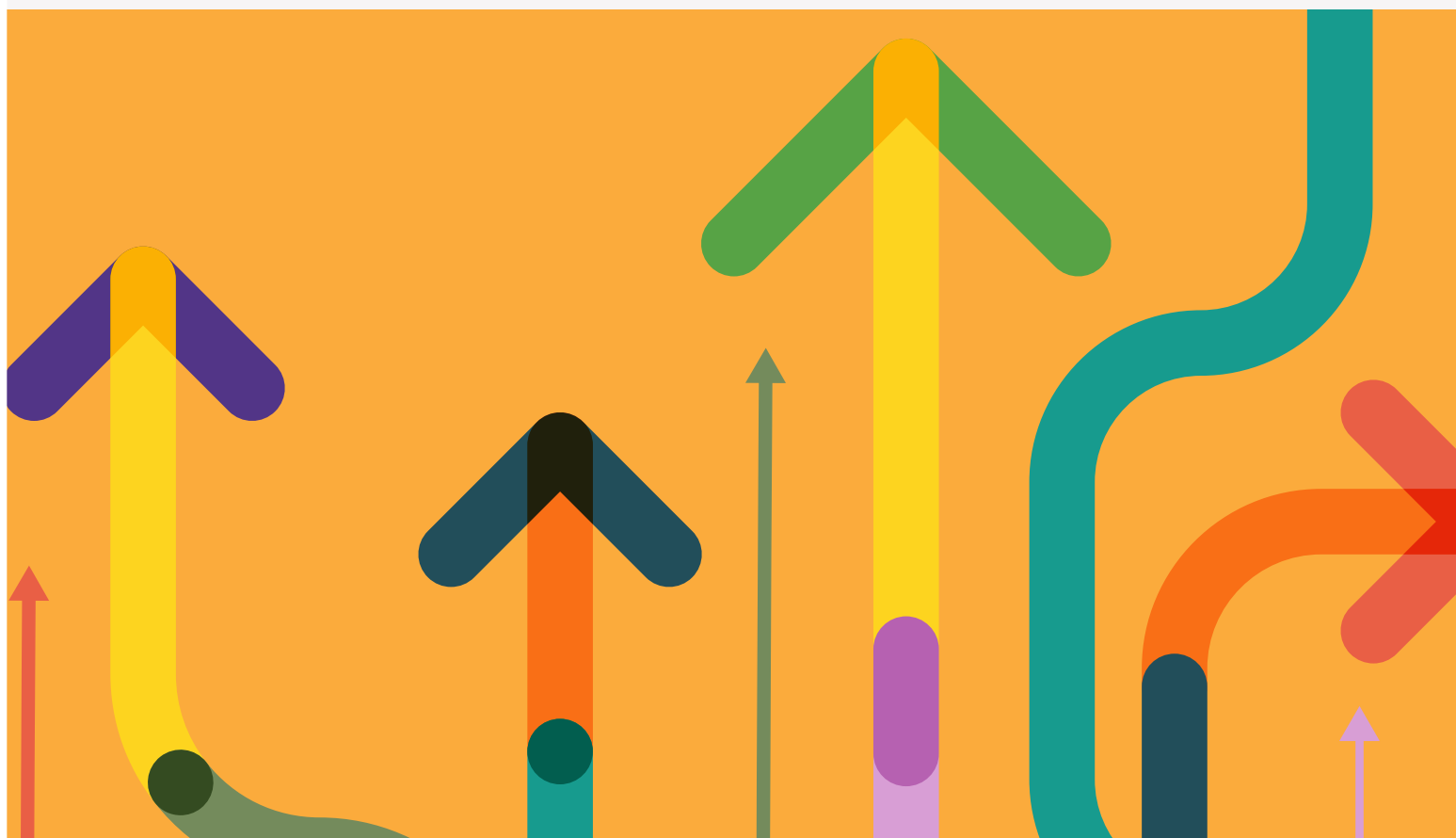
# Maturity Model

for the ETB Provision of FET  
Disability Support Services

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## A User Guide

A self-review and improvement planning  
tool for Centralised ETBs



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## for the ETB Provision of FET Disability Support Services

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### A User Guide

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Centralised ETBs



#### Policy & Strategy

Does ETB Policy and Strategy clearly support high quality delivery of reasonable accommodations at a regional and local level?



#### Infrastructure & Resources

Does the ETB have informed plans to improve the accessibility of its physical and digital infrastructure, and is universal design embedded?



#### QA & Comms

Do Quality Assurance and other key processes strategically ensure that learners are well informed about supports, and that support provision is of a high quality?



#### Staffing & Development

Does the ETB have trained and qualified staff coordinating the provision of disability supports across the ETB, and guiding local staff to support quality?

SOLAS provides AHEAD with core funding to promote the inclusion of disabled learners in FET, without which this development would not have been possible.

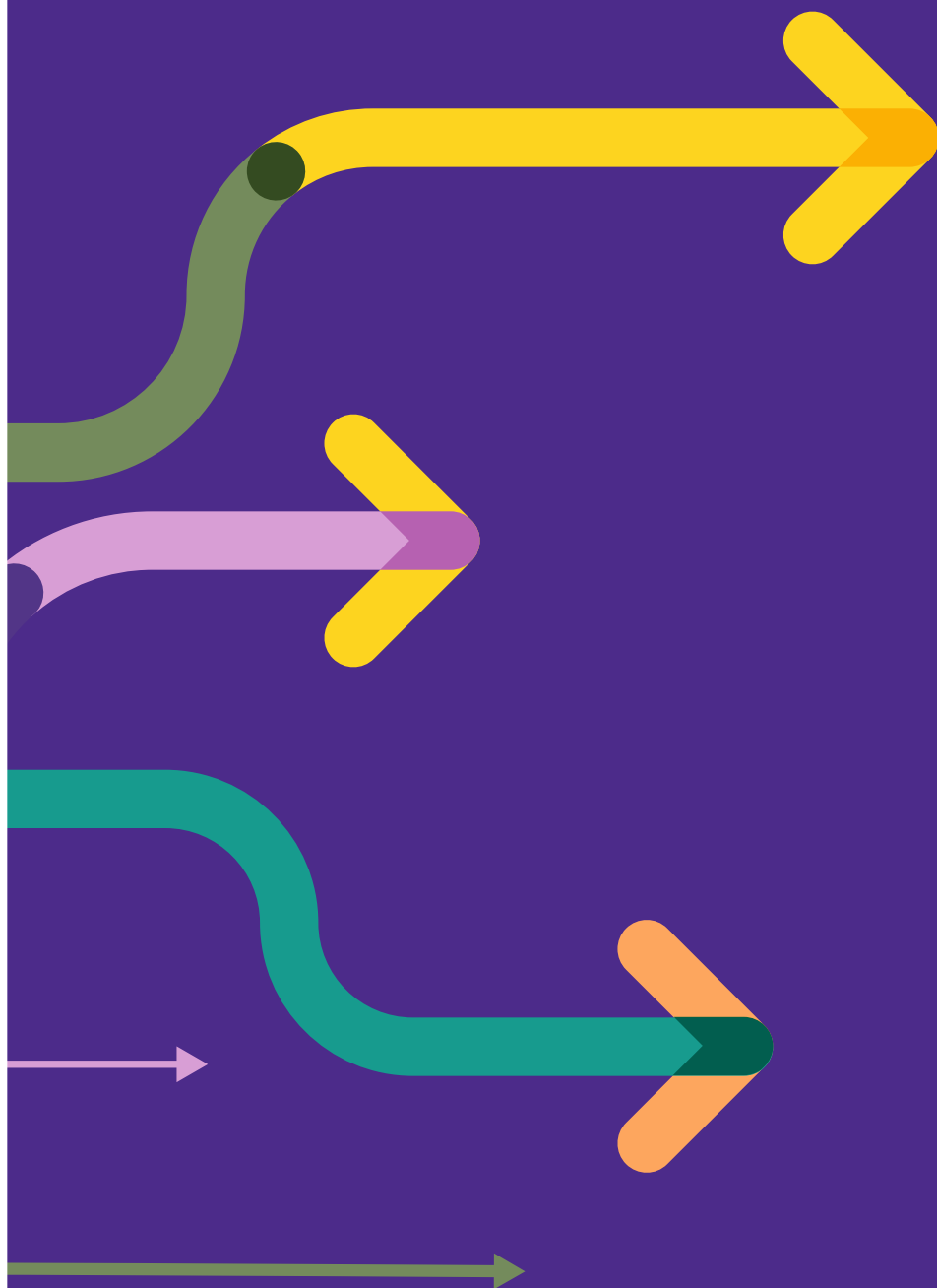
This tool was produced by AHEAD and ETBI, with support from the Reasonable Accommodations in FET Feedback Group, made up of practitioners nominated by FET Directors from across Ireland – see appendix for group membership.

It is important to point out, that this tool is aimed at centralised ETBs, rather than at individual colleges and centres, and the language within it reflects that. However, it may be useful for individual colleges and centres to review it and reflect on how the policy and practice in their centre plays a role in supporting quality and consistency in the delivery of FET disability supports within the ETB more broadly.

Special thanks to the team in AHEAD who drove this development, and to Aobhan Haverty (Chair of the Reasonable Accommodations in FET Feedback Group) and Ann Heelan (External Reviewer) for their significant input.

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# Background to the development of this tool



In recent years, reviews of Youthreach, VTOS, Specific Skills Training and PLC programmes have highlighted the inconsistency in the provision of tailored individualised supports for FET learners, in particular people with disabilities, (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020a; Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020b; McGuinness et al., 2018; Smyth et al., 2019). In 2023, AHEAD in collaboration with ETBI conducted a [scoping survey concerning the provision of reasonable accommodations in FET](#) in order to identify strengths in the system and areas for improvement in the provision of more individualised disability supports.

The primary objective of this research was to gain insight from the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and colleges/centres in their regions on current policies, practices, and challenges regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities. The report identifies a general culture of inclusion in FET, and notable pockets of good practice in disability support, but also finds significant structural gaps and barriers to the provision of quality, consistent support in a range of areas.

The outcomes of the research are intended to support greater consistency and quality in the provision of reasonable accommodations, supporting the Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy goal of providing consistent learner support, (SOLAS, 2020).

As well as making national/systems level recommendations for consideration by SOLAS and DFHEIRS, the report also contained recommendations for regional ETBs, and for the development of resources and training materials by AHEAD to support ETBs to act on the recommendations and provide a more consistent and quality experience for disabled learners seeking support.

To support progress on the ETB level recommendations, AHEAD and ETBI collaboratively developed the Reasonable Accommodations in FET Feedback Group, made up of practitioners nominated by FET Directors from across Ireland – see appendix for group membership. The role of the group was to provide feedback and guidance to AHEAD on the development of a series of outputs to support the sector to address the gaps identified in the research over time.

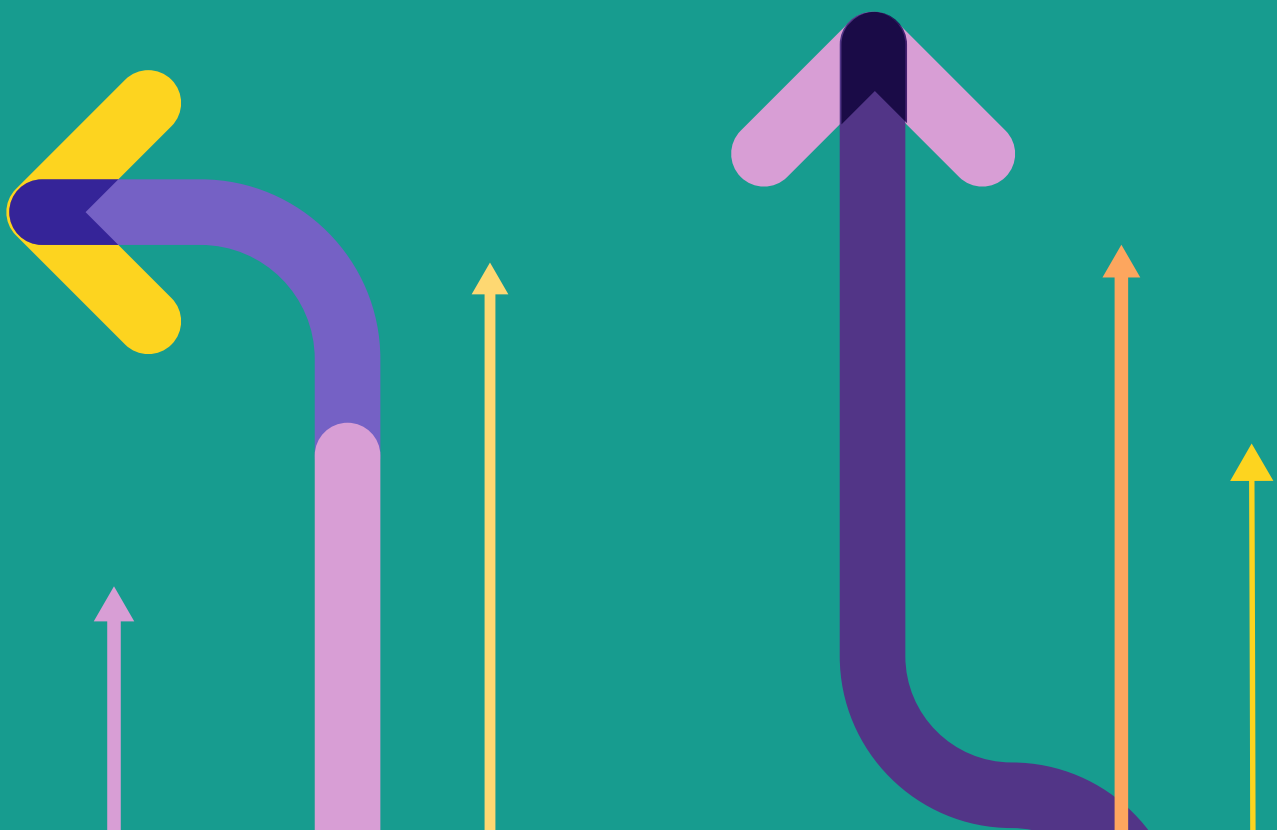
This Maturity Model is one of the series of outputs developed. Its development is based on the aforementioned scoping research, AHEAD's deep understanding of national and international research and practice in the field of disability support provision, and the expert guidance and lived experience of the practitioners in the Feedback Group.

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# What is a Maturity Model?

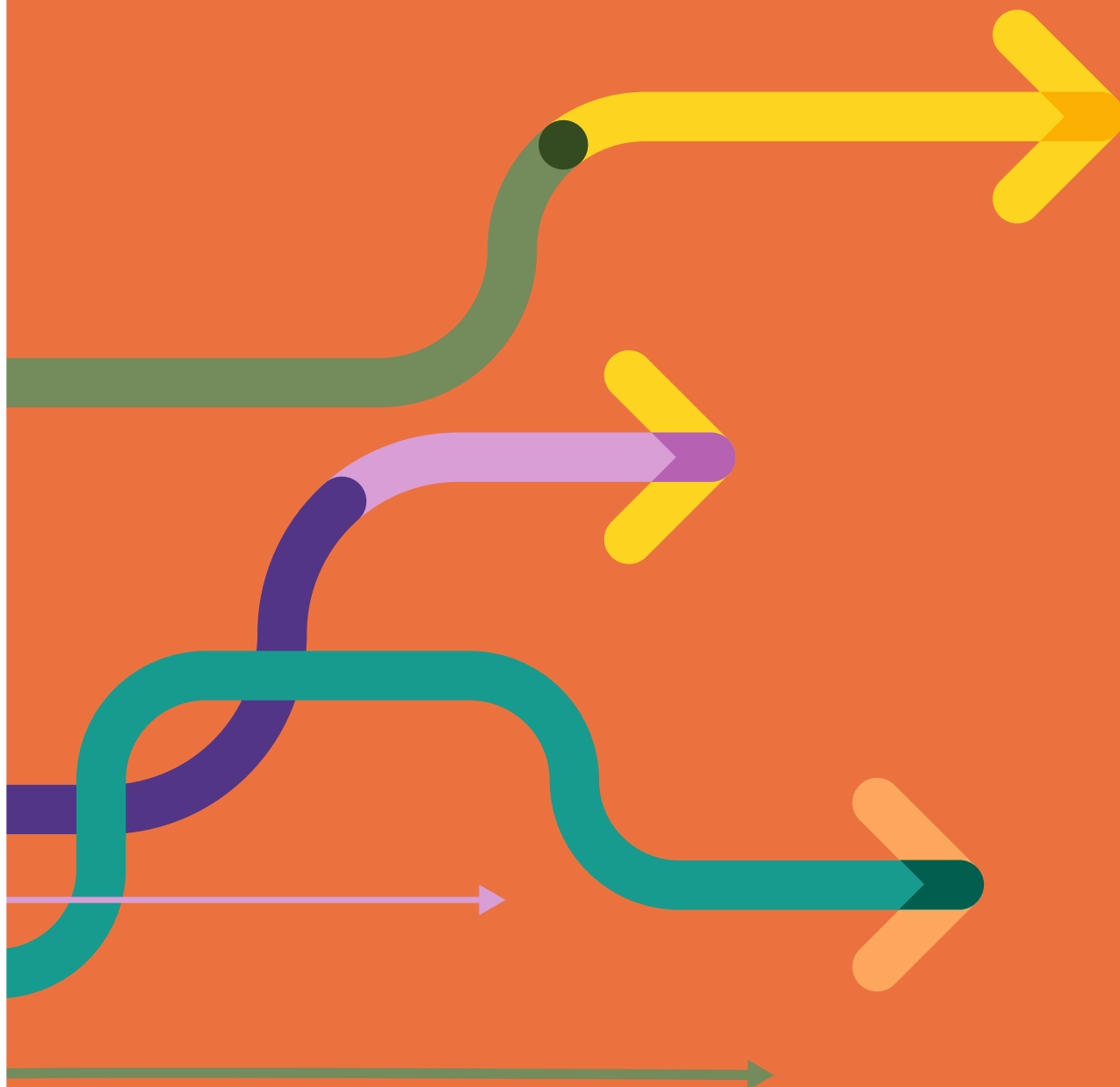
A maturity model is a tool designed to help organisations reflect on their current practices and identify strengths and areas for growth and improvement. Rather than serving as a strict standard or compliance measure, it encourages self-reflection, self-improvement, and continuous growth. By using this model, ETBs can collectively evaluate their provision of disability support from different perspectives, identify strengths, and plan for future enhancements.

It supports quality assurance by helping teams map out their journey towards better policies and practices, focusing on continuous development rather than meeting fixed benchmarks.



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# Why was this Maturity Model produced?





One of the challenges which emerged from the research was that issues existed in many areas of national policy and the ETB service provision which impacted on the quality and consistency of disability support for learners on the ground. The complexity of the ETB environment meant that interlinking challenges were identified in areas such as:

- How strategy and policy within ETBs can be fully optimised for the provision of consistent learner support and actively drive it.
- How accessible or otherwise the physical and digital infrastructure of the ETB is, and how both improvements in infrastructure, and the general delivery of support services are funded.
- How the Quality Assurance process drives improvements in disability support provision, and how supports are communicated to learners across the ETB.
- How disability support services are staffed and resourced in the ETB, and what professional development drives are required to support quality in the area.

In discussions between ETBI, SOLAS and AHEAD, a Maturity Model was proposed as a useful tool to support ETBs to reflect on these not as isolated issues, but a set of interconnected challenges that intertwine to shape the learner experience of disability support. By doing so, ETBs can plan for improvement in a more strategic way that recognises the roles of all involved in making progress.

## Who is the Maturity Model for and what is its purpose?

The Maturity Model is a tool aimed at centralised ETBs, rather than at individual colleges and centres. Its primary purpose is to support self-review and improvement planning in the provision of FET disability support services within the ETB. Think of it as an important tool in quality assuring and future-proofing FET provision for disabled learners, providing the ETB with a clearer picture of strengths and areas for improvement. The tool can support the design of annual service plans and future strategic performance agreements, as well as informing applications for funding, such as funding for new staffing posts, or capital funds to support accessibility of infrastructure improvements.

The tool should be used as part of a collaborative review and improvement planning process. In other words, no single professional in the ETB should be tasked with its completion. Rather, the Director of FET should ensure that a range of professionals with knowledge and understanding of different aspects of ETB provision contribute to its use, for example staff in:

- Senior Management
- Disability/Learner Support
- Organisational Support and Development, in particular staff with responsibilities for Buildings, ICT, Finance and Procurement
- Quality Assurance
- Communications
- Professional Learning and Development

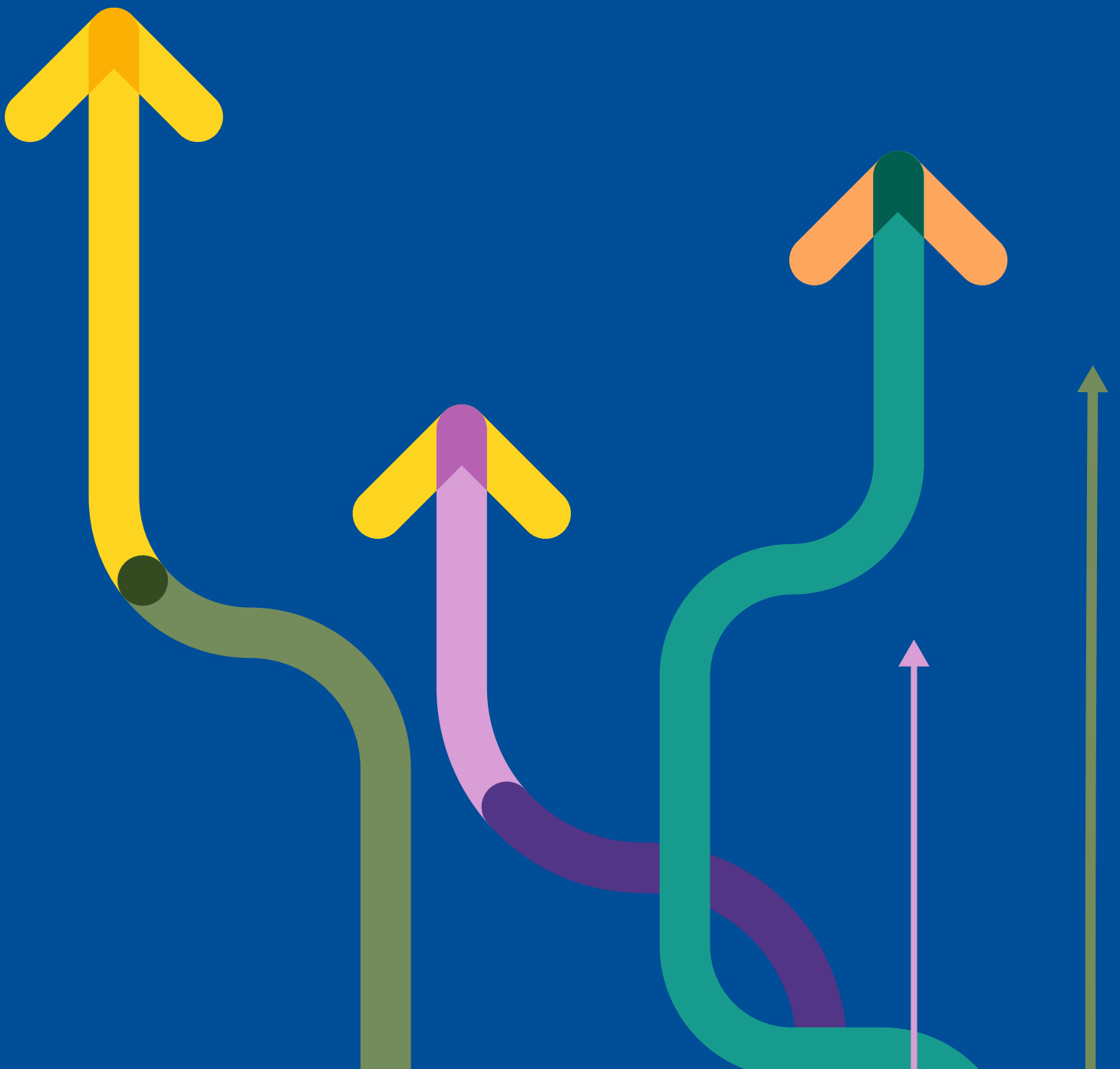
Equally, it is likely that reach-out to local colleges and centres to map the support services provided across the ETB may be required to gather a full picture of related information and use the tool strategically.

Before beginning to use this tool within the ETB, it's useful to consider whether existing committees or working groups with ETB structures could provide a useful forum to discuss and action its use, for example committees set up to implement the Public Sector Duty.

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# How should ETBs use this tool?

For a practical introduction and explainer on how to use this tool, read this section and watch the short video tutorial which accompanies this guide.



## How is it structured and how do ETBs self-score?

Firstly, the Maturity Model is in the format of an excel file which looks at four Domains within the ETB, and how they specifically relate to the provision of disability supports:



Each Domain is further broken down into five 'Areas', and in each Area, users are invited to compare the progress they believe the ETB has made against a set of descriptive statements describing four Stages of progression in the Area and score themselves between 1.0 and 4.0 accordingly. Users self-score based on which description most sounds like the current state of play in their ETB.

The Stages can be described and scored as follows:

Stage	Early	Building	Mature	Class-leading
<b>What it means:</b>	The ETB is in the very early stages of development in this Area and has lots of opportunity for improvement	Some good work has led to notable progress in the ETB in this Area, however more improvements have been identified to make these efforts more consistent across the ETB and more strategic over time.	The strategic progress achieved in this Area is impressive and efforts are now becoming more consistently embedded and strategic, but some areas for improvement remain.	The progress achieved in this Area is exemplary and means the ETB may be seen as a leader in this Area nationally.
<b>If the descriptor of this stage within the area sounds like where their ETB is at, users should:</b>	<b>Apply a score of 1.0 – 1.4</b> depending on whether no or some progress has been made in this area.	<b>Apply a score of 1.5 – 2.4</b> depending on whether only some aspects of the progress outlined in the descriptor have been achieved, or all of them.	<b>Apply a score of 2.5 – 3.4</b> depending on whether only some aspects of the progress outlined in the descriptor have been achieved, or all of them.	<b>Apply a score of 3.5 – 4.0</b> depending on whether only some aspects of the progress outlined in the descriptor have been achieved, or all of them.

Note, that use of decimal numbers is encouraged to reflect different levels of progress or adherence to a progress statement within a Stage. Area statements of progress often contain a number of elements, and users are encouraged to use their own judgement in landing on a score within an identified Stage. For example, in the ‘Building Accessibility’ Area of the Infrastructure and Resources Domain, the ‘Building’ Stage is described as:

**“Some centres within the ETB have begun to address building accessibility, with some audits conducted and initial efforts made to identify areas of concern. However, these actions are not yet consistent across the ETB and not yet part of a broader strategic effort. Universal design/accessibility is somewhat considered in procurement for building works, but it is not yet a standard practice across the ETB.”**

Imagine your ETB has indeed conducted audits on a number of buildings in the ETB and identified areas of concern, reflecting the first part of the statement. However, perhaps no consideration has yet been given to how universal design is considered in the procurement process at all, so you may feel you have more to do to align with that aspect of the statement.

In this case, you might look at the ‘Building’ score range of 1.5 - 2.4 and decide to score a 2 in the middle of the range, because you strongly align with one part of the statement and not with the other. It is not scientific, because compliance is not the goal of the tool.

Rather, it is about improvement planning, so it is more important to document a rationale for your score and use the future plans fields accordingly (see below).

At the bottom of each Domain tab, and average score for the Domain is automatically calculated, and a Stage associated with the overall Domain is automatically assigned based on that average.

The model also provides a Self-Evaluation Summary tab which pulls average scores from each Domain, giving you a high-level picture of where the ETBs strengths lie, and where the most focus for improvement is warranted.

## Using the Evidence/Rationale and Future Plans fields

The Evidence/Rationale field associated with each Area allows users to document why they have given the ETB the score that they have, listing policies, initiatives, or practices introduced which evidence how the ETB aligns with the Stage selected. Using the example of the 'Building' stage of the 'Building Accessibility' Area in the 'Infrastructure and Resourcing' Domain highlighted above, an example of a user input might be:

“Scored us 2 in the middle of the 'Building' range as we align with some areas of the statement and not in others:

- Audits conducted on A and B buildings in 2024 and X and Y buildings in 2025, but 5 centres remain unaudited.
- But no action has been taken to ensure Universal Design is considered in the procurement process as of yet – something we need to look at.”

A 'Notes and Future Plans' field is provided where users can make notes relating to things they wish to document relating to the Area, and to propose Future Plans for Improvement. An example following from the use case above might be:

- | **“Plans have been put in place to tap in X funding stream to audit remaining 5 centres between 2025 and 2026.”**
- | **“Next review of Procurement Policy is due in Q2 of 2026. Proposal to be brought to senior team to use this review cycle to embed universal design in procurement process for the ETB.”**

Documenting a clear rationale for scoring and clear notes and ideas on improvement is particularly important since the tool is designed to be used collaboratively.

## Important Notes on Use of the Tool

Before we start, here is some important points to remember when approaching use of the Maturity Model:

- 1. The tool aims to support improvement planning at the ETB level** – its not specifically designed for use in local colleges and centres, although some input from them may be required to gather information which informs the ETB wide self-review process.
- 2. The tool should be used collaboratively** – no individual in an ETB will have all of the insight and information needed to accurately self-review all the Areas in each domain. It requires the collaborative insight and input of the cross-functional team within the ETB to add strategic value. It may be useful to see how existing committee/group structures could be tapped into to engage with the tool, for example committees tasked with reviewing/implementing the Public Sector Duty, and/or those tasked with implementing the ALTITUDE Charter.
- 3. The tool is not scientific** – do not get hung up on the numbers! The tool is not designed to be a rigorous compliance standard to hold your ETB up against and is largely for internal use to support continuous improvement. Do not get too hung up on what exactly to score yourself in a particular area – just use your best judgement, provide the rationale for your choice, and most importantly, propose and implement improvements. Its useful to sense-check scores you have given with others in the ETB to find consensus on the validity of the score proposed.



- 4. The tool is designed for ongoing use** – do not leave it on the shelf! Like all maturity models, this tool is designed to support continuous improvement over time, which means periodically adding new evidence, revising your scores, checking in on progress and making new improvement plans! This can be done periodically as part of annual reporting and planning cycles, or in whatever other way is most useful to the ETB.
- 5. The tool is adaptable** – add to it or edit it if its useful! For example, you may want to add additional free text columns such as one which assigns responsibility for future improvements in each Area to a particular staff member. The tool is offered under a creative commons license which means you are free to adapt it with attribution to AHEAD and ETBI.

## Top Tip! – Track Your Progress Over Time

As well as its key function to support self-review and improvement-planning, the scoring mechanisms built into this tool makes it ideally placed to help you track the impact of your interventions over time.

This can simply be done by saving the completed review file at the end of each review cycle with the date of completion embedded in the filename.

Later, you can easily copy the scores and dates from multiple review cycles into an excel file to visualise your improving provision over time via your increasing scores in various domains.

## Supporting Checklists

Implementation of actions arising from ETB engagement with the Maturity Model is supported by two checklists also developed as part of the Reasonable Accommodations in FET project:

- **Communicating Disability Support Information Checklist:** this checklist supports centralised ETB staff with responsibilities in communications, learner supports, and ICT/Web design to ensure that they are communicating clear and accessible information about the availability of FET disability supports within the ETB, and how learners can access them.
- **ETB Reasonable Accommodations in FET Policy Review Checklist:** this checklist supports centralised ETB staff tasked drafting/reviewing/updating the ETBs Reasonable Accommodations in FET policy to ensure that the policy adheres to good practice guidelines and is consistent with legal obligations and quality standards.

### How to Use the Supporting Checklists

Unlike the Maturity Model, the self-review process for the ETB's reasonable accommodations policy and disability support communications rely on a simple completion rating for individual actions. Reviewers simply enter:

- **'Incomplete'** if no action has been taken on the item.
- **'Partially Complete/In Progress'** if only some of the action has been addressed in the description of the item, or if actions are in progress but not yet fully complete.
- **'Complete'** if the reviewer is satisfied that the description of the item reflects the current status, and the action is complete.

The completion summaries in each checklist show you at a glance what percentage of actions in various areas have been marked fully complete and which areas require further attention.

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# Alignment with national and international initiatives, strategies, and legislation



Using this tool can support your ETB in working towards the goals of a range of national and international strategies, meet legislative and regulatory requirements in a strategic and learner centred manner and create strong alignment with implementation of other national initiatives such as the ALTITUDE Charter.

**Examples of how use of this tools aligns with various strategies and legal/regulatory requirements is provided below:**

## **FET Strategy 2020-2024**

[The FET Strategy 2020-24](#) places ‘fostering inclusion’ as one of three key strategic priorities for FET, highlighting that “addressing the needs of people with disabilities will be a primary focus” and making a key commitment to provide “consistent learner support”.

Firstly, it highlights the need for “adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping future provision” to support all learners. But it also reinforces the legal obligations of the sector and the need for collaborating providers to “have in place, policies and procedures for the provision of reasonable accommodation,” which relates to the provision of more individualised disability supports. The subsequently released Learner Support Framework strengthens these commitments (see below).

This Maturity Model particularly supports ETBs to address the needs of learners with disabilities and provide a higher quality and more consistent experience for them.

# SOLAS and ETBI Learner Support Framework

The [Learner Support in Further Education and Training Framework](#) released in 2024 proposes a three-tiered pyramid model of support for FET learners to ensure ‘consistent learner support’.

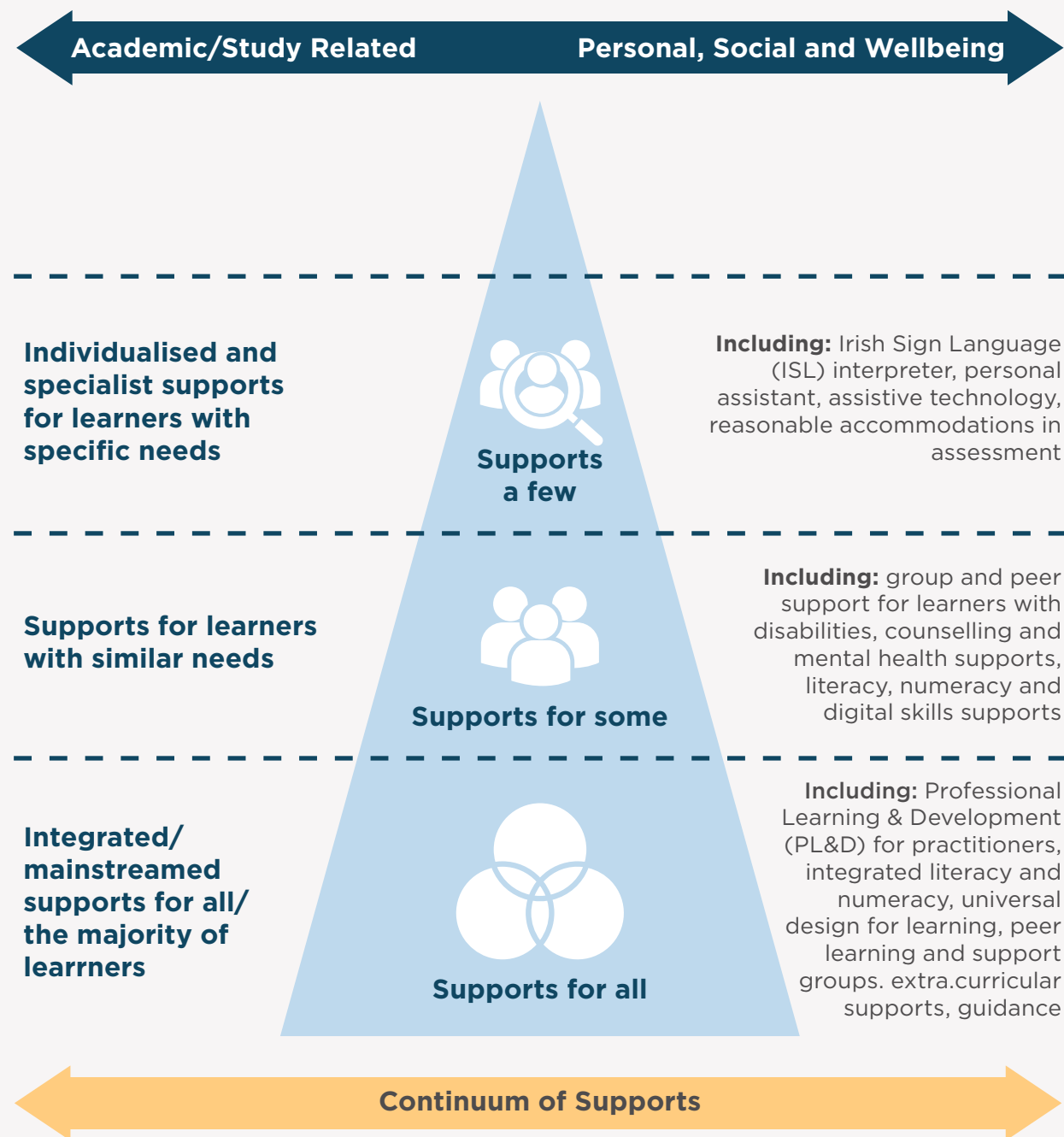


Figure 1 - FET Learner Support Pyramid

At the base layer of the pyramid, ‘supports for all’ are driven by universal design and mainstreaming initiatives, ensuring the learner experience is as inclusive and accessible as possible through proactive, inclusive design.

Moving up to the next layer of the pyramid, a number of ‘supports for learners with similar needs’ are provided to a smaller number of learners who need them, such as learning support, counselling and mental health supports, and literacy supports.

At the apex of the pyramid in its top layer, more reactive and individualised specialist support services are provided to a smaller cohort of learners with disabilities with more specific and individualised needs.

This Maturity Model places a strong focus on supporting ETBs to improve their support provision at the top layer of the Learner Support Pyramid and helps them to strategically connect efforts to do this with ongoing work in the ‘supports for all’ and ‘supports for some’ layers.

## Equality Legislation and the Public Sector Duty

Under a range of equality legislation, disabled people have a legal right not to be discriminated against in accessing and fully participating in education and employment. Key examples include the [Equal Status Acts](#) and the [Employment Equality Acts](#). Underpinning this right is the legal obligation of education providers and employers to provide ‘reasonable accommodations’ to disabled people to enable their full participation on an equitable basis.

‘Reasonable Accommodations’ are the legal term for what can be described in FET as the supports we put in place to enable disabled learners participate equitably on a course or programme.

[The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, established as part of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014](#), establishes a responsibility on public bodies to take a more proactive approach to establishing policies and procedures which eliminate discrimination and promote equality of opportunity.

Using this Maturity Model can support ETBs to ensure policies, procedures and resources are in place to deliver on the right to reasonable accommodations, and the commitments of the Public Sector Duty, in a way which is both learner-centred and strategic, and which minimises legal risk for the ETB. In particular, the ‘Assess, Address and Report’ approach to implementing the Public Sector Duty advocated by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is clearly aligned with the use of the Maturity Model.

## **Web Accessibility Directive and forthcoming European Accessibility Act**

In 2020, [the EU Web Accessibility Directive](#) was transposed into Irish law. This legislation obliges the websites, learning platforms and apps of public sector bodies to meet specific technical accessibility standards. The forthcoming [European Accessibility Act](#) expected to be introduced in 2025, will strengthen compliance obligations with these standards and widen application of the law to new areas.

Utilising this Maturity Model can support ETBs to consider the accessibility of their physical and digital environments, and more intentionally include related actions for improvement in their annual service plans and strategic performance agreements.

## Alignment with Other International Strategies, Conventions and Standards

Using this tool will ensure your ETB aligns and supports Ireland to meet its strategic goals under a range of international strategies and conventions including, but not limited to:

- **[The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)** (ratified in Irish law) which contains a range of articles which can be supported by ETBs through utilisation of the Maturity Model e.g. article 9 which focuses on accessibility of environments and services provided, and article 24 which focuses on equitable access and participation in Education.
- **[UN Sustainable Development Goals](#)** which under goal 4 establishes the objective to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and ensure “equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities”.
- **[European Disability Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)** 2021-2030 which under section 5.3 establishes a range of objectives and actions under the area of ‘Inclusive and accessible education’.

## The ALTITUDE Charter

[The ALTITUDE Charter – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education](#), is an extensive cross sectoral collaboration involving six national agencies, fifteen higher education institutions (HEIs) and six Education and Training Board (ETB) representatives nominated by all Directors of FET to represent the FET sector. ALTITUDE focuses on placing human diversity at the heart of tertiary education design and fostering student success for all.



Its launch marked the start of a national conversation about how the sector can more strategically embed a Universal Design (UD) approach and provides a roadmap for institutions who to do this under the four key pillars of the Charter:

- Teaching & Learning
- Supports, Services & Social Engagement
- Physical Environment
- Digital Environment

When considering how the ALTITUDE Charter and this Maturity Model relate and compliment each other, it is useful to think about their differing focuses in relation to the aforementioned Learner Support Framework and associated Learner Support Pyramid:

- By adopting and implementing the ALTITUDE Charter, ETBs can make sustainable progress on embedding a universal design approach to all areas of its provision. In the context of the Learner Support Framework, this relates mostly strongly to supporting strategic efforts to improve ‘Supports for All’ – the base layer of the pyramid.
- By utilising this Maturity Model, ETBs can over time provide greater consistency and quality in the delivery of the supports provided in the ‘Supports for Some’ and most strongly, the ‘Supports for Few’ upper layers of the pyramid. The model also supports ETBs to connect the strategic efforts undertaken in the upper layers of the pyramid to universal design initiatives in the base layer, with an aim to reduce the reliance on more individualised supports over time.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 - Supporting Resources

### Training Courses

[AHEAD Start](#) – an 8-week online course on supporting students with disabilities in tertiary education.

[ARK](#) – a suite of free, 2-hour, self-directed and on demand short courses, in a range of topics including reasonable accommodations and needs assessment, disability awareness, digital accessibility, universal design for learning and reasonable accommodations and needs assessments.

[As I Am](#) – offering a range of resources and training on the inclusion of autistic learners and the development of autism-friendly environments.

[Diversity and Inclusion in Further Education and Training \(P. Grad. Cert.\)](#) – a 1-year, level 9 course, accredited by Trinity College Dublin. The course aims to help participants develop innovative professional ideas and practice to support learners with diverse educational needs in a range of settings.

[Dyslexia Ireland](#) – offering a range of courses on Dyslexia in education, including programmes covering the conducting of an assessment and interpreting psychological reports.

[UDL Badge](#) and [UD Beyond the Classroom Badge](#) – two free, 25-hour, 10-week digital badges offered by AHEAD in partnership with UCD and the National Forum. Typically run Oct – Dec annually.

## Guidance

[About the Web Accessibility Directive](#) – an FAQ resource from AHEAD outlining the legal implications of the Directive for FET and higher education institutions.

[Plain English Campaign](#) – UK-based organisation offering resources and training opportunities in the creation of Plain English materials.

[Roadmap for Disability Support in Higher Education](#) – a suite of outputs, templates and resources produced by AHEAD and the Disability Advisors Working Network. Outputs include:

- [Position Paper: A road map for disability support in HE](#) - This position paper outlines the benefits of taking an inclusive approach to catering for diversity in higher education - one based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.
- [The Role of the Disability Officer and the Disability Service](#) - This publication recognises that students with disabilities must be included in all aspects of college life, and while this activity is often negotiated by the staff of the Disability/Access Office, supporting these students is everyone's job.
- [Inclusive Learning and the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations](#) - This document focuses on several key areas relating to the provision of supports in Higher Education campuses - both direct to individuals or as part of a college wide inclusive education approach.

[UDL for FET Practitioner Guidance and Resource Hub](#) – featuring guidance for practitioners on the implementation of UDL, video case studies, and self-reflective tools.

## Related Initiatives

[ALTITUDE – the National Charter for Universal Design in Tertiary Education](#)

## Appendix 2 – Reasonable Accommodations in FET

### Feedback Group Membership

Name	Position	Organisation
Ann Heelan	N/A	External Reviewer
Aobhan Haverty (Chair)	Adult Education Officer	LCETB
Aoife Bulfin	Communications Rep	ETBI
Carol Murphy	Training Centre Manager	MSLETB
Ciarán Kennedy	Learner Support Officer	Tipperary ETB
Clare Kennelly	Active Inclusion Support Service	Cork ETB
Colm Richardson	Assistant TCM/Quality Council Rep	Donegal ETB
Danielle O'Rourke	Digital Media & eLearning Officer	AHEAD
Dara Ryder	CEO	AHEAD
Dónal Walsh	AEO, Head of Inclusion	GRETb
Elaine O'Connor	ALO and Manager of Admissions Unit	Kerry ETB
Erica Meslin	Education Manager	AHEAD
Fergus Craddock	Inclusion Manager	ETBI
Gemma Brady	Learner Support Officer	CMETB
James McCawley	Further Education and Training Assistant Staff Officer	ETBI
Joanne Doyle	Learner Support & Well Being Coordinator	KCETB
Kelvin Harvey	AEO	LMETB
Liz Moynihan	Tramore Road Campus, Principal	Cork ETB
Lorraine Gallagher	Information & Training Officer	AHEAD
Marcella O'Dowd	QA Officer	DDLETB
Niamh Clancy	Inclusion Development Officer	ETBI
Richard Healy	Research and Policy Officer	AHEAD
Robert McCulloch	Project Officer, Learner Support Unit	SOLAS
Rosalind Threadgold	Access and Inclusion Officer	WWETB
Sheila Bradley	Inclusion Officer	KWETB
Sheila O'Brien	Disability Officer	LOETB
Sorcha O'Toole	FET Centre Manager	GRETb
Tracey Anderson	TEL & PLD Co-Ordinator	LWETB

