Reasonable Accommodations in FET

Scoping Survey Report

ahead

etbi
Education and Training Boards Ireland
Boird Oideachais agus Oiliúna Éireann

ISBN No: 978-1-916836-02-0

Published by:
AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall
UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock
Co. Dublin
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The core funding received by AHEAD for its further education activities on fostering inclusion is provided by SOLAS. The views expressed in the report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of SOLAS.

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Using Interchanging Language

In this publication, the terms **"persons with disabilities"** and **"disabled people"** are used interchangeably. AHEAD recognises that different terminology is prevalent and culturally dominant in different regions and spaces, and we respect the right of individuals and communities to self-determinate.

The term **"disabled people"** is recognised by many within the disability rights movement in Europe to align with the social and human rights model of disability, as it is considered to imply that people with an impairment are disabled by barriers in the environment and society as opposed to their disability. However, we also recognise that others prefer the term **"persons with disabilities"** to indicate that they are first and foremost human beings and are therefore entitled to enjoy human rights.

This also reflects the language used in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Finally, we recognise that some people who fall under the legal definition of a disabled person do not identify as being disabled.

The interchanging language in this publication is intended to be inclusive and respectful of all.

Executive Summary

About this Research

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 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, 2020a). Outcomes will be fed as recommendations to ETBs and relevant state agencies, and inform a proposed body of work by AHEAD, with support from ETBI, to develop resources and training for the sector.

A quota sampling survey methodology was utilised, and all 16 ETBs were invited to participate alongside a select number of colleges and centres under their jurisdiction. Responses were sought and garnered from two pre-defined strata:

- ETB strata: 20 respondents directly representing 13 (81%) of the 16 ETBs.
- College/Centre Strata: 77 respondents representing colleges/centres based in 14 (88%) of the 16 ETBs.

Between the ETB and College/Centre strata, at least one response was received from a respondent based in every ETB region.

Summary of Findings & Key Recommendations

The findings highlighted that a significant majority of respondents had a reasonable accommodations policy in place, surfaced existing pockets of good practice in the provision of reasonable accommodations, and identified a general supportive culture within FET. However, they also highlight significant areas of improvement required to meet the FET Strategy goal of consistent learner support.

Some of the areas of improvement can be directly supported by the planned body of work conducted by AHEAD with support from ETBI and SOLAS, while others highlighted were more systemic issues which may need to be closely considered by SOLAS, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and ETBs over the medium term.

The findings are summarised below, with recommended areas for improvement explored below in further detail.

Staffing and Contracted Professional Supports

A majority of respondents at the ETB (60%) and college/centre (65%) level reported having a dedicated staff contact to field queries and coordinate the provision of disability support, but a significant minority did not. At the college/centre level, dedicated roles such as 'Disability Support Officer' were more evident in PLC colleges than in other areas of FET, with college/centre size seemingly an important factor in whether dedicated staff were reported. Where a dedicated staffing resource was not present, a huge range of roles at ETB and college/centre level were referenced as coordinating the provision of disability supports, including in some cases outsourced external providers.

When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, the lack of dedicated staffing and resources was the most cited challenge, with 52% of respondents. A lack of a clarity and strategic investment to prioritise the inclusion of disabled learners, as well as structural and contractual inconsistencies were seen as directly related to the absence of dedicated staff. The goal of delivering consistent and quality learner support will be difficult to achieve without the presence of dedicated, trained staff at the ETB level and the majority of college/centres in each ETB.

Respondents also cited significant challenges related to poor availability of contracted professional support workers such as Personal Assistants and ISL Interpreters, whether hired as staff members or through external agencies. Several respondents cited poor pay and working conditions as two of the principal factors that contributed to this shortage of key support staff.

Recommendation: As part of the plan outlined in the FET Strategy to develop a Future Staffing Framework, an important FET Strategy Commitment, SOLAS, DFHEIRS and other key stakeholders should consider a more coherent approach to the resourcing of disability support staff within and across ETBs. Stakeholders leading this process should further investigate and discuss the contractual barriers and incentives raised by respondents in this report to ensure that unintended systemic barriers to providing consistent learner support are removed.

Recommendation: A cross departmental response from DFHEIRS and the Departments of Education and Health should be considered to address the low availability of qualified external professional support workers such as personal assistants and sign language interpreters.

Training and Capacity Building

An evident training gap was identified in the responses. Less than half (45%) of colleges/centres stated that training was provided to relevant staff on the provision of reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities. Where training was provided, a broad range of relevant training by AHEAD and other agencies was cited. Several respondents highlighted the difficulty of maintaining a quality professional development plan with the limited resources available to them.

When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, challenges related to the need for more guidance and training in the area were the second most cited challenge, with 47% of respondents. A significant lack of clarity and understanding about the rights of disabled learners to access reasonable accommodations, and what support was 'reasonable' and appropriate was evident in the responses. Some respondents felt there was a need for more awareness about the application of reasonable accommodations to all facets of the learner experience, not just in assessment where it was frequently seen as better understood.

The lack of widely available practical training and good practice resources specifically on the provision of reasonable accommodations, and the needs assessment process, was highlighted as a challenge by a significant number of respondents. Respondents highlighted a preference for visual and multimedia resources rather than wholly text-based guidance, and the ongoing training need referenced suggests an on-demand approach would be most-effective.

Respondents expressed a desire for a strong practical focus to any outputs developed to support the sector, such as real-life examples of effective services and supports, and practical templates which can be adapted and utilised in daily practice. Other strong suggestions included the development of greater networking opportunities for staff involved in the process, and for the involvement of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) in the development/endorsement of resources.

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider development of on-demand training in the area of needs assessment and reasonable accommodation, and the production of accompanying web-based multimedia resources to support the sector.

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider development of a suite of good-practice case studies and practical forms/ templates which can support the sector in achieving consistent learner support.

Coverage of Reasonable Accommodation Policies/ Procedures

A positive finding is that a significant majority of respondents identified the existence of a reasonable accommodations policy, but between 21% (colleges/ centres) and 25% (ETBs) either had no policy or were unsure if one existed.

Furthermore, a significant number of respondents highlighted that their existing policies only covered accommodations for assessment, and not supports for the wider learning context. Findings suggest this is because many policies were developed in response to accrediting/examining body requirements, rather than legal or moral obligations. The legal right to reasonable accommodation covers access to the full learning experience, not just the assessment phase, so a more holistic policy response from the sector is required.

Notably, of those who had a policy in place, only 47% at the ETB level and 74% at the college/centre level outlined a procedure for the needs assessment of disabled learners, a key tool in arriving at an appropriate support plan. When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, challenges related to the lack of clear national/regional policies and procedures around the provision of reasonable accommodations was the third most cited challenge (29%).

Many respondents highlighted the need for more clarity with systems and procedures about what is appropriate and how to process support needs of learners. The lack of a clear national and regional approach was argued by some respondents to lead to inconsistency in the level and quality of support provided across different regions and programme types. Greater collaboration and cohesion of policy/procedures and training delivery within ETBs and nationally was seen by several respondents as important in addressing the issue.

Recommendation: AHEAD with support from ETBI, should consider how greater consistency and coverage in policy development can be supported within the planned outputs being developed to support the sector to fully meet its legal obligations e.g., creating policy development checklists, sample policies, and clear multimedia information on the legal context.

Recommendation: ETBs should review their reasonable accommodations policies and procedures to ensure that appropriate reasonable accommodations are provided to learners across all programme types, and across the full learner lifecycle. Greater collaboration and resource sharing across colleges and centres within ETBs would support this goal, and the development of communities of practice around the topic may facilitate this collaboration.

Recommendation: SOLAS should consider how greater policy coverage for the provision of reasonable accommodations across the full learner lifecycle can be promoted through the Strategic Performance Agreements and Overarching Funding Requirements.

Funding of Supports

Funding sources for reasonable accommodations appear to be very different from college to college and centre to centre, and the level of support for which funding could be accessed also appeared to vary significantly. Various routes to fund reasonable accommodations were utilised depending on the ETB and the programme type/level. In other cases, there was a lack of awareness if any funding could be accessed to provide reasonable accommodations, and/or indications that no funding had been accessed in the past.

When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, challenges related to the availability of funding streams was the fourth most-cited challenge (17%), including the inconsistent eligibility of learners in differing levels/programme types, and the burden on learners to provide specific medical evidence to receive support. It was highlighted by some respondents the need for specific medical evidence was out of step with the model of support now in place in post-primary, and that this disconnect left some learners unfairly and unexpectedly unsupported in the transition.

If the sectoral goal of consistent learner support across the FET sector is to be achieved, a more consistent approach across ETBs and programme levels/types to funding the provision of reasonable accommodations should be considered. Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris announced in his speech to the Teachers Union of Ireland Congress 2023 that the Fund for Students with Disabilities will be extended to all students with disabilities in FET in 2024, (Harris, 2023).

The findings highlight the importance of realising this commitment, ensuring the Fund is bolstered with sufficient levels of funding to cover supports for newly eligible learners. They also highlight the opportunity to prioritise this area in the development of the New Funding Model for FET, (DFHEIRS, 2022).

Recommendation: SOLAS and DFHEIRS should follow through on Minister Harris' commitment to widen the Fund for Students with Disabilities to the whole of FET in 2024, with clear published eligibility guidelines and clear contacts identified at the ETB level to direct queries. In conducting this process, consideration should be given to the barriers posed by the specific medical evidence funding criteria, exploring how barriers to accessing support can be reduced and smoother transition from post-primary to FET facilitated.

Recommendation: SOLAS should ensure the funding of disability supports and related staffing are adequately considered and prioritised in the development of the New Funding Model.

Medical Evidence Requirement

Comments across multiple questions cited the need to provide costly medical evidence of disability to receive support (led by funding requirements) as a significant barrier to equity of access to support. It should be noted that the legislation concerning reasonable accommodations makes no reference to a requirement for medical evidence to be eligible for the right. It was reported that moves towards a general allocation model in post-primary meant that the FET medical evidence requirements were now out of step with that sector. This was reported as causing confusion, misplaced support expectations for students transitioning to FET, and in some cases, caused learners to have to drop out or acquire costly specific medical evidence.

Recommendation: In following through on Minister Harris' commitment to widen the Fund for Students with Disabilities to the whole of FET, consideration should be given to the barriers posed by the specific medical evidence funding criteria, exploring how barriers to accessing support can be reduced and smoother transition from post-primary to FET facilitated.

Communication/Visibility of Available Supports

Only half of respondents at the ETB and college/centre levels confidently stated that their website contained clear information about the kind of support available to disabled learners, with fewer than half reporting their website contained information on how support could be accessed. This represents a clear communication gap which should be urgently addressed.

Recommendation: ETBs should review their own website content concerning disability support information and consider working with colleges and centres in their region to deliver consistent, positive messaging on public platforms about the availability of supports for the full learner life cycle and the process involved in obtaining them.

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider how the proposed body of work can support ETBs in this process e.g., by providing a disability information web content checklist for self-reflection.

Other Factors

Other factors highlighted as significant challenges include:

Inaccessibility of Older College/Centre Buildings: When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, 6% of respondents highlighted challenges related to the lack of accessibility in buildings/learning spaces in their college/centre.

Recommendation: SOLAS and DFHEIRS should ensure that accessibility and universal design are core criteria in all capital funding provided for new builds and building upgrades in FET. The department should consider introducing a dedicated capital funding stream to support the conducting of accessibility audits and the upgrading of buildings for the specific purpose of improving accessibility for disabled learners.

Time to Put Supports in Place: When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, 6% of respondents highlighted challenges related to the short window of time to organise supports on short programmes, and the lack of timely disclosure of disability. Reported as contributing to the already short window of opportunity, was the delay in learners disclosing their disability for a variety of reasons. Timely disclosure and implementation of support was seen by some as directly linked to the ease of transition for disabled learners.

Volume of Learners: When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, 4% of respondents highlighted challenges related to the increased volume of learners requiring supports and the pressure that was bringing on services. The increased demand for supports was considered to be particularly challenging in the context of the previously outlined lack of dedicated staffing and resources. The increased volume of learners with additional need substantiates the recommendation to review how staffing and resources are allocated to ensure the increasing demand is met and consistent learner support is provided.

Managing Expectations: When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, 3% of respondents highlighted challenges related to managing the expectations of parents and learners. These primarily related to communications with learners about the higher level of support in schools than that available in their college/centre.

Background & Objectives

The FET Strategy 2020-24 highlights that "addressing the needs of people with disabilities will be a primary focus" and makes a key commitment to provide "consistent learner support", (SOLAS, 2020a). To achieve this consistency, a staged approach to fostering inclusion is required, consisting of a universal design approach which reduces barriers at the point of delivery and introduces more flexibility for all in mainstream provision, coupled with consistent and considered structures to identify, fund and apply quality individualised supports for disabled learners who require them, known in legislation as reasonable accommodations.

The Inclusive Education Pyramid represented in stage 1 of the *Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for the Irish Further Education and Training Sector*, reminds us that a UDL approach supports varying needs of all learners - not just those who have a disability, but that learners require differing levels of support, with some requiring individual reasonable accommodations in level 3 and 4 of the Pyramid – over and beyond the Universal Design approach, (SOLAS, 2020b).

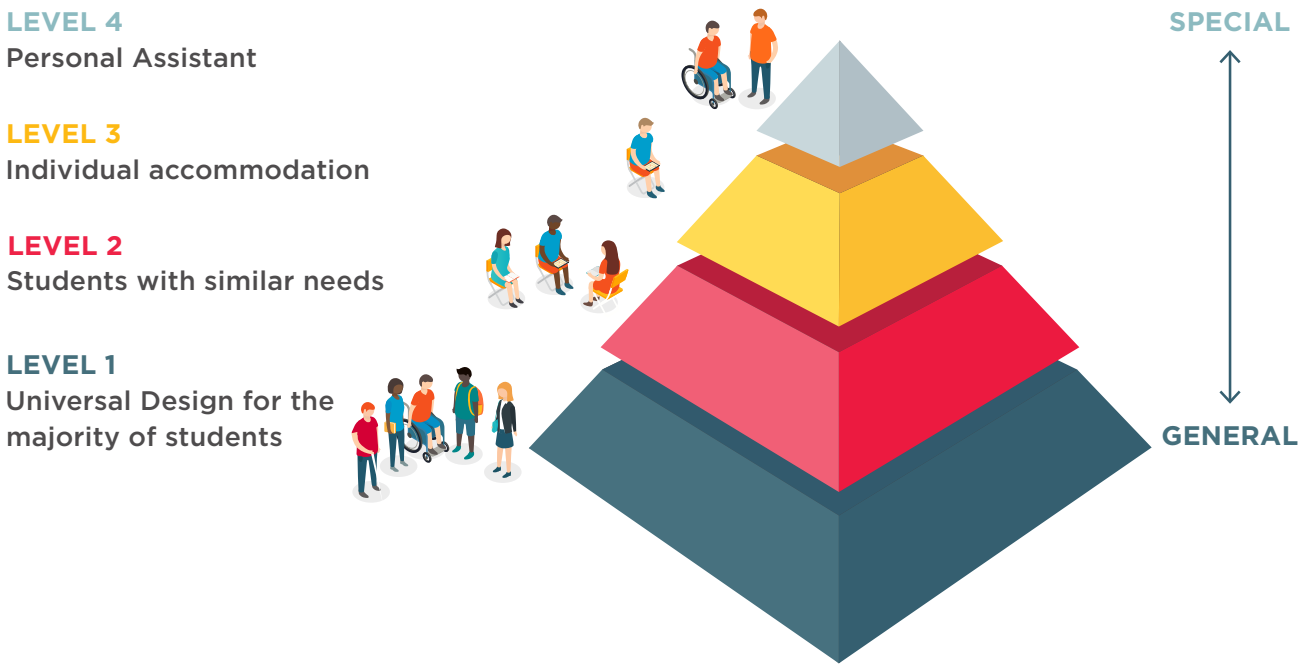


Figure 1 - Inclusive Education Pyramid - Conceptual Framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for the Irish Further Education and Training Sector

The FET Strategy itself recognises the importance of this staged approach. Firstly, it highlights the need for "adopting a universal design for learning (UDL) approach in shaping future provision" to support all learners in Level 1. 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" for individuals requiring individualised reasonable accommodations situated further up the pyramid, (SOLAS, 2020a).

Thanks to the work in partnership of AHEAD, ETBI, individual ETBs and SOLAS, notable strides have already been made in lowering barriers in the mainstream (Level 1) through the significant early adoption of UDL approaches by FET practitioners in ETBs across the country, and increased engagement with the AHEAD/UCD UDL badge professional development programme.

However, the reviews in recent years of Youthreach, VTOS, Specific Skills Training and PLC programmes have highlighted the inconsistency in the provision of more tailored individualised supports for learners, in particular people with disabilities, (Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020a; Indecon International Economic Consultants, 2020b; McGuinness et al., 2018; Smyth et al., 2019). The Evaluation of PLC Programme Provision for example, showed that only 6 in 10 PLC schools and colleges offered disability services and supports, and that despite considerably higher SEN prevalence rates among PLC entrants than higher education entrants, proportions accessing learning supports and disability support services were comparable.

This marries with AHEAD's experience engaging with learners and providers that suggest the quality and consistency of needs assessing learners and providing reasonable accommodations is varied across the sector, with issues such as staffing/funding arrangements, lack of guidance/training on best practice in providing supports, and a lack of awareness about the legal responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations cited frequently as important factors.

AHEAD, in discussion with ETBI and SOLAS, have identified the need to begin to build on the success of increased UDL implementation at Level 1 of the Inclusive Practice Pyramid, by conducting a programme of work to explore and support quality and consistency of policy and practice concerning the delivery of individual accommodations at the upper Levels of the Inclusive Education Pyramid.

In the Spring of 2023, AHEAD and ETBI collaborated on the development and dissemination of a survey of ETB staff and college/centre leaders in FET to determine what practices and processes are currently prevalent in the sector, and what needs to be addressed within the programme of work planned for 2023-2024.

This report details the outcomes of the survey, which enable us to better understand current practices across the sector, identify where gaps exist, and where greater support is required from AHEAD, ETBI, SOLAS and DFHEIRS to improve delivery.

In 2023 and 2024, AHEAD with support from ETBI, will use the outcomes of this work, and the scoping report arising from it, to inform the development of outputs to support ETBs, colleges, and centres to implement good practice in the provision of reasonable accommodations.

All outputs will be developed in consultation with ETBI and key sectoral stakeholders.

What are Reasonable Accommodations?

'Reasonable Accommodations' are in essence, 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. We provide reasonable accommodations to ensure learners with disabilities have the best platform for success on our courses, and so we can meet our moral and legal obligations.

Under a range of legislation, disabled people have a legal right not to be discriminated against in accessing and fully participating in education and employment. 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. Key pieces of legislation setting out this legal right include:

- the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 (ESA) – of particular concern for FET providers regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations to learners on their programmes. FET institutions fall under the definition of providers of goods and services under the act.

- the Employment Equality Acts 1998 – 2021 (EEA) – of particular concern to FET providers regarding the provision of accommodations to staff members in their role as employers, and to learners on apprenticeships, or courses with a work placement component.

The definition of disability contained within the acts is broad and wide-ranging, and includes physical, intellectual, learning, cognitive, emotional, or medical conditions. Although specific conditions are not named within the acts, case law has established that the definition includes, for instance, depression, epilepsy, claustrophobia and agoraphobia, alcoholism, facial scarring, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, HIV infection, diabetes, and dyslexia, (IHREC, n.d.).

Section 4 of the ESA states that its definition of "discrimination includes a refusal or failure by the provider of a service to do all that is reasonable to accommodate the needs of a person with a disability by providing special treatment or facilities, if without such special treatment or facilities it would be impossible or unduly difficult for the person to avail himself or herself of the service", (Irish Statute Book, 2000). The same section states that a failure to accommodate in such a way "shall not be deemed to be reasonable unless such provision would give rise to a cost, other than a nominal cost, to the provider of the service in question."

Case law has established that "nominal [cost] may not be the same for every employer or enterprise and the term may be interpreted in a relative sense. What is nominal cost for a large enterprise employing thousands of people will not be the same as that of a small business with two or three employees", (The Equality Authority, n.d.).

So, it is safe to presume that when deciding on what constitutes a nominal cost, ETBs should consider the significant resources of the organisation in arriving at a decision.

Common Accommodations on FET Programmes

While some supports can incur a significant cost, the majority of reasonable accommodations required are no-cost or low-cost interventions. In the employment context for example, data from AHEAD's WAM programme shows that two thirds of accommodations put in place do not incur any cost to the employer, (McGrotty, 2020). Most involve relatively simple changes to work practices, and many that do incur a cost are readily available within the organisation already (e.g., software).

In FET, common examples of reasonable accommodations include:

- Assistive technology such as writing support software, text to speech and speech to text applications.
- Extra time in exams and/or alternative exam venues.
- Alternative Assessments which assess the same learning outcomes through a different mode.
- Learning and study support.
- Flexibility in deadlines.
- Ensuring classes are scheduled in accessible parts of the building.
- Ability to complete a course over a longer period than typical.
- Learning materials in alternative formats.
- Provision of a Personal Assistant (PA).
- Irish Sign Language interpreter and/or captioning service.
- Accessible transport provision.

It should be noted that there is a relationship between how universally designed and accessible an environment, course or programme is, and the number of accommodations which are required. While some learners with disabilities will always require reasonable accommodations, the need for many accommodations is reduced through a well embedded universal design/UDL approach.

For example, if all students have a choice in assessment mode in line with a UDL approach, the possible need for alternative assessment formats is dramatically reduced.

Equally, if all parts of a building are accessible and universally designed, there is no need to consider where a wheelchair user's classes are scheduled.

Methodology and Sample

About the Methodology

Objective: The primary objective of this was survey was to gain insight from the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) on the following key questions:

1. How common are specific policies on the provision of reasonable accommodations across the FET sector?
2. How are disability supports funded across different aspects of FET provision?
3. Are the availability of disability supports and how they are accessed, clearly communicated to learners on college/centre/ETB websites?
4. Are there dedicated staff members within colleges and centres responsible for coordinating disability supports?
5. Is appropriate training provided for staff members to ensure quality in the assessment of need and delivery of reasonable accommodations?
6. What are the biggest challenges the sector faces in delivering quality and consistency in the delivery of reasonable accommodations?
7. What outputs from the planned programme of work would support the sector to achieve greater quality and consistency in this area?

Scope: All 16 ETBs were invited to participate alongside a select number of colleges and centres under their jurisdiction.

Methodology: Quota Sampling

Leveraging the strong relationship, between AHEAD and ETBI, a Quota Sampling methodology was selected to ensure input from a broad range of regional voices and college/centre types.

1. **Defining the Population**: The total population consisted of all 16 ETBs and the colleges and centres within their region.

2. **Stratification**: For this survey, the strata were defined as:
   - The ETBs themselves.
   - Selected Colleges and Centres within each ETB.

3. **Quota Establishment**: This survey was split into two distinct respondent types based on the strata defined: those working direct in a regional ETB, and those (managers or practitioners with knowledge of the area) representing a local college/centre. The quotas established to derive a representative sample considering time and resources restraints were:
   - A minimum of 75% (12) of ETBs represented by respondents working directly within a regional ETB.
   - A minimum of 50 responses from those representing a local college/centre, with at least one response from a college/centre in 75% (12) of ETBs.

4. **Selection Procedure**:
   - ETBs: All ETBs
   - Colleges and Centres: Call to participate disseminated to all ETBs by ETBI through the FET Directors Network, with a call to circulate to colleges/centres in their region, encouraging a manager or practitioner with sufficient knowledge of the area to respond on behalf of the college/centre.

5. **Data Collection Tools**: A structured questionnaire was developed on the SurveyMonkey platform, which included sections on informed consent and demographic data, as well as enquiries related to the research questions, split into two distinct pathways relating to the strata of the respondent (12-15 questions each).

6. **Distribution**: Call to participate disseminated to all ETBs by ETBI through the FET Directors network, with a call to nominate a respondent within their ETB and forward the survey details to them. They were also asked to circulate to colleges/centres in their region, encouraging a manager or practitioner with sufficient knowledge of the area to respond on behalf of the college/centre. Initially a one-month response window was offered, with a one-week extension added to bolster response rate. The strong relationship between ETBI and AHEAD leveraged to encourage strong response rate.

7. **Data Analysis**: Data from the survey was analysed using a mix of:
   - Descriptive analysis, to explore the quantitative data collected.
   - Thematic analysis, and to a lesser extent, narrative analysis in order to gain a rich understanding the qualitative responses provided.

8. **Potential Limitations**:

   - To preserve a sense of a respondent's anonymity, and to foster an environment of openness and confidentiality, the names of centres/colleges were not collected. Instead, only the ETB jurisdiction they resided in was collected, to ensure the quota was met. Therefore, it is possible that some colleges/centres may have entered more than one response, causing response bias.

   - Within various ETBs, responses rates and incentives to respond may have been influenced by:
     i. The varying level of effort/focus placed on disseminating the survey by individual ETBs based on a variety of local factors present during the survey window.
     ii. The commitment to/understanding of this area in the colleges and centres contacted through ETBs.
     iii. Individual workloads of potential respondents contacted during the survey window.
     These factors may have potentially caused response bias.

   - The distribution method is reliant on which colleges and centres ETBs contacted with the call to respond, which introduces some randomness to the response.

Conclusion: This survey aims to provide insights into the policies and practices implemented by the FET sector in delivering reasonable accommodations to disabled learners, and the challenges faced in doing so. By employing a quota sampling methodology, with stratification into respondents representing ETBs and those representing colleges/centres, we intend to achieve a broad yet largely representative sample of FET provision in the regions covered by the 16 ETBs.

Sample Collected

Respondents who only completed the informed consent and demographic parts of the survey without answering the core questions were deemed incomplete and removed from the dataset.

Once incomplete responses were removed, the sample analysed included 97 responses, including:

- ETB strata: 20 respondents representing 13 (81%) of the 16 ETBs.
- College/Centre Strata: 77 respondents in colleges/centres based in 14 (88%) of the 16 ETBs.

Between the ETB and College/Centre strata, at least one response was received from a respondent based in every ETB region.

In some cases, the same questions were asked to respondents in both strata, where other questions in the survey path diverged. Where data is analysed by strata in this report, we refer to them as ETB respondents (ETB strata) and College/Centre respondents accordingly.

Findings

The analysis of the findings in this report is broken down into the following sections:

1. Reasonable Accommodation Policies
2. Funding of Supports
3. Communication/Visibility of Available Supports
4. Staffing and Staff Training
5. Biggest Challenges for the Sector in Delivering Quality and Consistency
6. Views on the Programme of Work Proposed

1

Reasonable Accommodation Policies

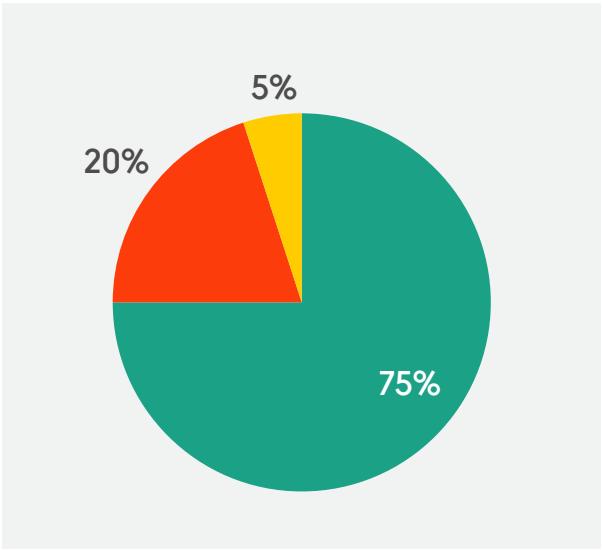
The first set of survey questions for both strata focused on whether a Reasonable Accommodations Policy was in place.

Existence of Policies

A significant majority of respondents confirmed that a reasonable accommodations policy was in place at both the ETB level (75%) and the College/Centre level (79%).

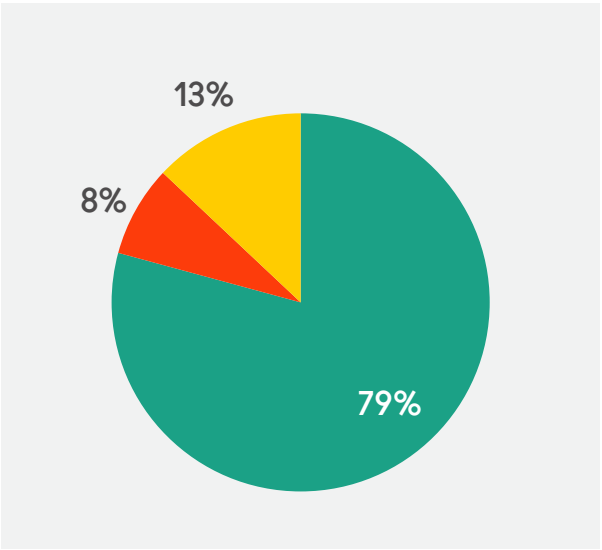
ETB Respondents

Does your ETB have a policy on the provision of reasonable accommodations?



College/Centre Respondents

Does your college/centre have a policy or procedure around the provision of reasonable accommodations?



Yes No Unsure

Figure 2 - the percentage of respondents at ETB and College/Centre level who have a Reasonable Accommodations policy in place.

While the overall picture is positive, it is worth highlighting that around one quarter of respondents at the ETB level (25%) and one fifth at the college/centre level (21%) either stated they had no policy or were unsure if one existed – still a sizeable cohort considering the provision of such accommodations is a legal obligation.

Furthermore, the qualitative data highlighted interesting insights about the nature of the existing policies, and pointed to gaps which could be addressed.

Several respondents at the ETB level who answered yes to having a policy in place, went on to state in the comments that the scope only covered reasonable accommodations in relation to assessment, and not other aspects of the learning experience.

> "There is a policy in development for reasonable accommodations for assessment and examinations. There is a need for a policy on the provision of reasonable accommodations for overall learning." (ETB respondent)

This finding was echoed at college/centre level, where a significant number of respondents responded similarly. The qualitative data suggests that this may be because in many cases, the development of the policy was directly linked to requirements by the examining/accrediting body (QQI, ICDL, or ITEC were referenced for example).

In some cases, where policies were drafted in this way as a direct response to examining body requirements, rather than as part of a consistent response across the ETB to address learner needs, it was considered problematic.

> "The reasonable accommodations granted can differ from each examining body and this can cause confusion for students." (college/centre respondent)

The finding that a portion of the existing reasonable accommodations policies in place only address the assessment phase and not other aspects of learning, highlights a significant area of improvement the sector can focus on to improve consistency, meet its legal obligations, and provide a more equitable learner experience.

General staff awareness of policies was not directly explored in this section, but the data returned made it evident that in some cases there was confusion amongst respondents about the existence of policies. In one example at the ETB level, where three responses from the ETB in total were recorded, the three individuals answered 'yes', 'no' and 'unsure' respectively to this question.

This was echoed in some comments at the college/centre level.

> "There probably is one, but it's not advertised." (college/centre respondent)

If there is confusion amongst staff about the existence of a reasonable accommodation policy, it is unlikely that said policies can be effectively executed and there is a danger that this has a negative impact on the learner experience. It also represents a liability risk for ETBs given the legal status of the right to reasonable accommodations. A greater effort to communicate and raise awareness about policies and the roles and responsibilities of staff concerned would likely result in a greater number of learners ultimately getting the supports they need to participate equitably.

Some respondents at the college/centre level took the opportunity to comment of the effectiveness of existing policies and questioned whether the written policies/ procedures that were in place were truly followed.

> "It's just lip service." (college/centre respondent)

Conversely however, other respondents at the college/centre level who reported having no existing policy, suggested that a strong culture of supporting students was still followed.

> "We have an unwritten ethos of accommodating all users to the best of our ability. " (college/centre respondent)

Needs Assessment Procedures

Respondents who responded positively to the question of whether a Reasonable Accommodation policy was in place, were further asked if the policy contained a procedure for undertaking a needs assessment for disabled learners in order to determine appropriate reasonable accommodations to support their needs.

If 'Yes', does the policy contain guidance for centres on the process of assessing the needs of learners with disabilities in order to determine what supports are required?

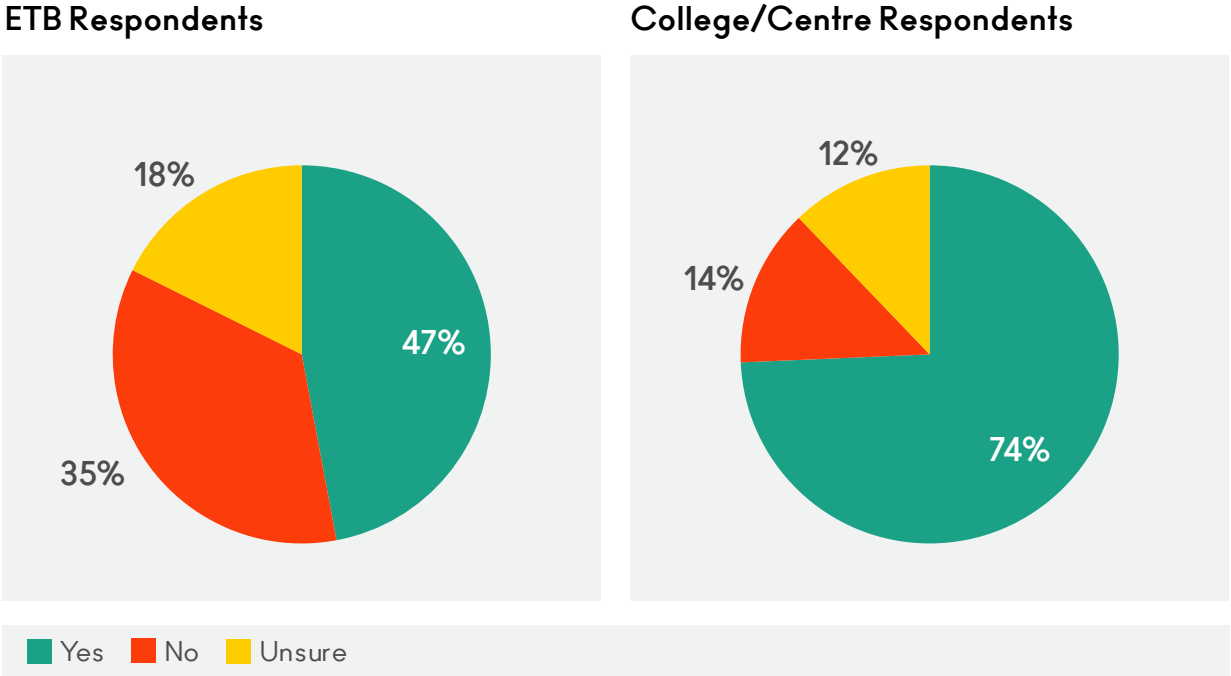


Figure 3 - the percentage of respondents at ETB and College/Centre level whose reasonable accommodation policy contained a procedure for needs assessment of learners.

Less than half of respondents at the ETB level stated that their Reasonable Accommodation policy outlined a process or procedure for the needs assessment of learners, in comparison to almost three quarters at the college/centre level. Perhaps this reflects a more practical focus within local policies and procedures, where they would be understandably by more likely to outline concrete steps to accommodate learners rather than just the need to provide them.

Some respondents at the ETB level indicated that they had no policy which outlined a needs assessment process but rather relied on guidance from other sources for this.

> "ETB does not have a policy on the process of assessing learners' needs but are guided by both SOLAS guidelines and the SEN initiative in Youthreach." (ETB respondent)

Others indicated the presence of well-established ETB level policies and processes.

> "We introduced a robust Needs Assessment Application Form in 2022 (based on the AHEAD model), and there is a clear process in situ." (ETB respondent)

Given the centrality of a quality needs assessment as a tool to arrive at an appropriate support plan for learners, plus its specific reference within the legislation, the findings highlight that this is another area where consistency of provision and practice can be improved.

Other respondents at the ETB and college/centre levels highlighted that there were inconsistencies in provision of needs assessments across programmes, which were often driven by external requirements for funding.

> "The PLC colleges would have clearer guidelines as opposed to the rest of the FET provision given their experience delivering the Fund for Students with Disabilities." (ETB respondent)

> "Yes, within the FSD (Fund for Students with Disabilities) guidelines there is a process in place." (college/centre respondent)

This perhaps indicates a lack of awareness of the importance of a needs assessment in delivering on the legal right to reasonable accommodation, and/or highlights that in some cases the provision of an assessment was dictated by funding obligations rather than legal or moral ones.

This stresses the need to raise greater awareness about the full legal context on the right to reasonable accommodation, and the position of needs assessment within the legal framework.

Where a process was in place, some respondents took the opportunity to explain the process further, demonstrating the many different approaches used by ETBs/centres.

> "Active Inclusion Learning Hub Adult Educators are trained on this process individually and as a team." (ETB respondent)

"We carry this out individually with learners in the centre." (college/centre respondent)

"This centre relies on visiting FET staff to have completed a Needs Assessment." (college/centre respondent)

Where processes were described, the need for students to provide medical evidence to register for supports was often referenced.

> "For reasonable accommodation we are guided by the report from the doctor/ education psychologist/another expert." (ETB respondent)

"Learners requiring accommodations need to have a written medical report." (college/centre respondent)

It should be noted that equality legislation makes no mention of a requirement for medical proof of disability in order to instigate the obligation to reasonably accommodate. As in the initial question about reasonable accommodations policies, the analysis highlights inconsistency in the scope of what accommodations can be provided, with some procedures only offering accommodations for assessment, and others for the wider learner experience.

> "(The process) assesses needs getting to college, physical needs, supports in class and with assessments." (college/centre respondent)

> "Reasonable accommodations are limited in what we can provide - such as a reader/scribe/ extra time in exams and so on. It doesn't include additional support for the learner." (ETB respondent)

Given the legal right to accommodation relates to all aspects of access to the educational experience, this represents a significant area where progress can be made to positively impact on equity of access for disabled learners.

2

Funding of Supports

Respondents were asked to briefly describe the process colleges/centres follow to access funding for the provision of reasonable accommodations in their ETB (ETB respondents) or within their college/centre (college/centre respondents).

At the ETB level, different sources of funding for supports were highlighted.

> "Much of reasonable accommodations are funded from ETB's own FET funding." (ETB respondent)

> "The PLC Colleges apply directly to SOLAS for the FSD. Other Services e.g., Adult Education, Training Services and YouthReach can access funding through the Learning Support Office. There is a Learner Support budget which is part of the Global FET budget." (ETB respondent)

Funding sources appeared to be very different from college to college and centre to centre. Various routes to fund reasonable accommodations were utilised depending on the ETB and the programme type/level.

> "Fund for Students with Disabilities." (college/centre respondent)

> "This centre has sourced funding through CARA (external organisation)." (college/centre respondent)

> "Community Education mainstream (budget)." (college/centre respondent)

> "More a case of using centre budget to acquire equipment for learners with additional needs." (college/centre respondent)

In other cases, including some where the respondent identified themselves as a senior manager within a college/centre, there was a lack of awareness if any funding could be accessed to provide reasonable accommodations, and/or indications that no funding had been accessed in the past.

> "We don't (access funding for accommodations) and I am unsure if we can access funding for this purpose. I will need to consult the FET Director." (college/centre respondent)

"In the last 5 years in my role we have not received any funding. We have managed with in house staff." (college/centre respondent)

"We have never done this". (college/centre respondent)

This lack of awareness and consistency in whether/what funding was available and accessed, is a problematic finding which raises the need for a more consistent approach across and within ETBs to support funding and provision.

It was also evident that even within some single colleges/centres, different approaches to funding supports were utilised depending on the programme the learner was enrolled on and other factors.

"No single, standardised approach to Reasonable Accommodations. Believe it's a mixture". (college/centre respondent)

"Different for different programmes". (college/centre respondent)

In some cases, timelines for external funding stream applications were identified as a barrier to effective use of the funding, for example within the Fund for Students with Disabilities.

"It would make much more sense if the funding model was on academic rather than calendar year."

If the sectoral goal of consistent learner support across the FET sector is to be achieved, a more consistent approach across ETBs and programmes to funding the provision of reasonable accommodations should be considered, ensuring learners in all programme types can be facilitated. A single national fund covering the whole of FET, with clear published guidelines and clear contacts identified at the ETB level to direct queries would support greater consistency and clarity.

Minister of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Simon Harris announced in his speech to the Teachers Union of Ireland Congress 2023 that:

> "The Fund for Students with Disabilities will be extended to all students with disabilities in 2024. This will mean all learners – Apprentices, trainees, adults engaging in literacy courses – will benefit from the fund", (Harris, 2023)

It is essential that this commitment is realised, ensuring sufficient levels of funding to cover supports for newly eligible learners.

The New Funding Model for FET currently being developed, (DFHEIRS, 2022), also offers a timely opportunity for stakeholders to ensure that funding for disability supports is prioritised in the structure and delivery of the model.

A body of work should also be devised to raise awareness about the availability of funding and the types of support it covers, stressing the availability of accommodations for the full learner lifecycle.

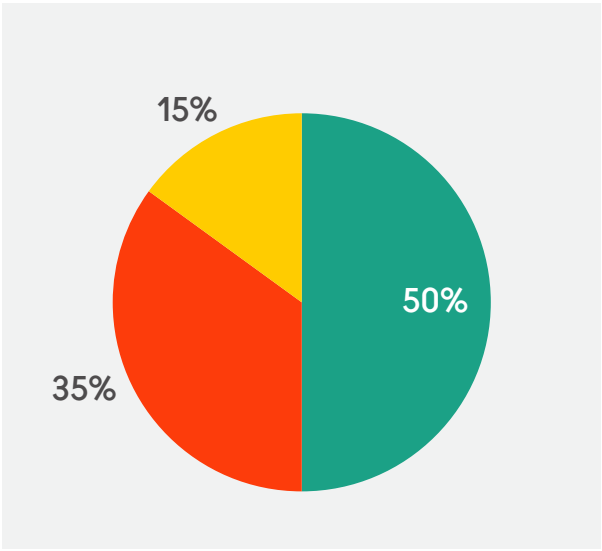
3

Communication/ Visibility of Available Supports

Respondents were asked if there was information published on their ETB (ETB respondents) or college/centre (college/centre respondents) website about the kinds of support students with disabilities can access.

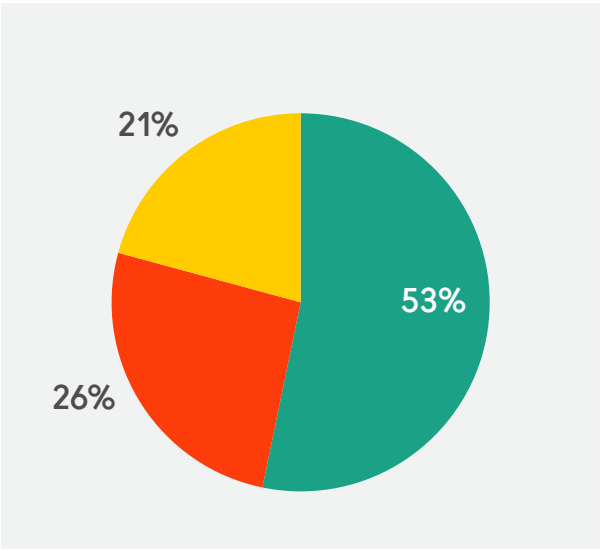
ETB Respondents

Is there information published on your ETB website about the kinds of support students with disabilities can access?



College/Centre Respondents

Is there information published on your college/centre website about the kinds of support learners with disabilities can access?



Yes No Unsure

Figure 4 - the percentage of ETB and college/centre respondents whose websites contained published information about the kinds of support students with disabilities can access.

Furthermore, respondents were asked if there was information published on their ETB (ETB respondents) or college centre (college/centre respondents) website about what learners should do to access disability supports.

ETB Respondents

Is there clear information published on your website about what learners in your ETB should do to access disability supports?

College/Centre Respondents

Is there clear information published on your website about what learners in your college/centre should do to access disability supports?

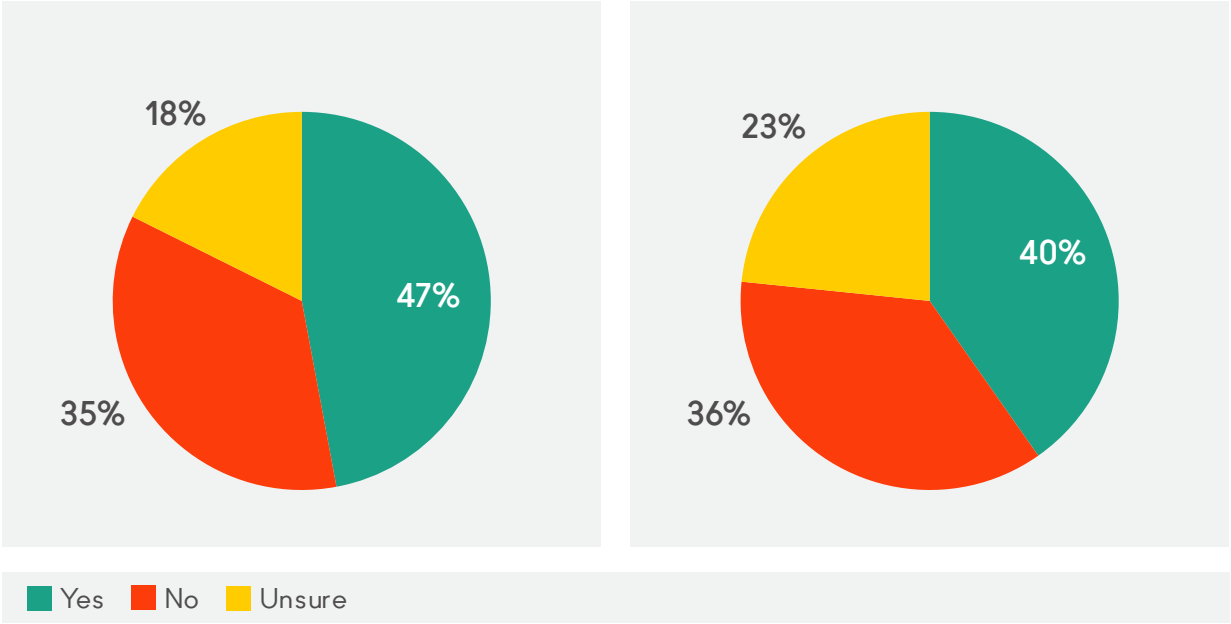


Figure 5 - the percentage of ETB and college/centre respondents who had clear information on their website about how learners can access disability supports.

The results of this section highlighted a clear information gap for learners and prospective disabled learners about what kinds of supports might be available, and how they can go about accessing them. This gap was apparent at both the ETB and college/centre level, with approximately half of respondents at both levels highlighting that they either did not have information published on the website or were unsure if their website contained such information.

Less than half of respondents confidently stated that their ETB or college/centre contained clear information for learners about how they could access support.

> "There is not clear information published on our website on what learners should do to access disability supports." (ETB respondent)

Where information was present, some respondents felt it was not sufficient or not easy to find and understand.

"Very little." (college/centre respondent)

"The information is available but not very accessible. Needs plain English and be easier to read and locate." (college/centre respondent)

The inconsistency in the provision of information between colleges and centres within the same ETB was also highlighted by a number of respondents.

"Some colleges have better information than others. Some have no information available and there is no centralised information source for (the ETB)." (college/centre respondent)

Some who had no information available on their public websites however, alluded to information being available to learners/staff through other internal means.

"Yes, (on) Staff Hub/ We need to review the information (available) to (the) public." (college/centre respondent)

On a more positive note, respondents also provided lots of links to ETBs/colleges/centres demonstrating good practice in the use of their website to clearly communicate what supports were available and how to access them. These examples will provide valuable exemplars to be showcased in the proposed AHEAD/ETBI body of work which emerges from this report.

In order to encourage a greater diversity of students to apply to FET programmes and to increase retention and success of disabled students, a positive disclosure environment should be fostered. Central to achieving this is the clear and transparent communication of the benefits of disclosure at multiple stages of the learner journey including:

- Availability of support.
- Types of support available.
- Eligibility criteria and the process for registering.
- Confidentiality of process.
- Sharing of sensitive information on a 'need to know' basis only.

ETBs should review their own website content concerning disability support information and consider working with colleges and centres in their region to deliver consistent, positive messaging on public platforms about the availability of supports for the full learner life cycle and the process involved in obtaining them. AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider how the proposed body of work can support ETBs in this process e.g., by providing a disability information web content checklist for self-reflection.

4

Staffing, Staff Training

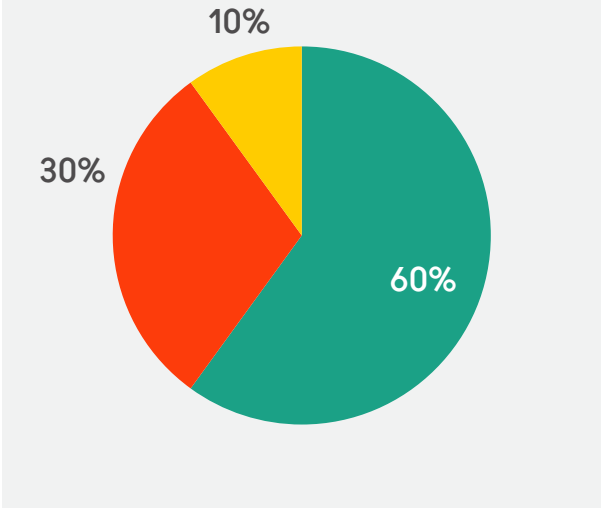
Respondents were asked a number of questions about the existence of dedicated disability support staffing, and the provision of specific training on the provision of reasonable accommodations. Note that the 'Challenges for the Sector' section in this report also contains valuable insights about staffing.

Dedicated Staffing

Respondents at both the ETB level and the college/centre level were asked about the existence of dedicated staff contact points regarding the provision (ETB level) and coordination (college/centre level) of disability supports.

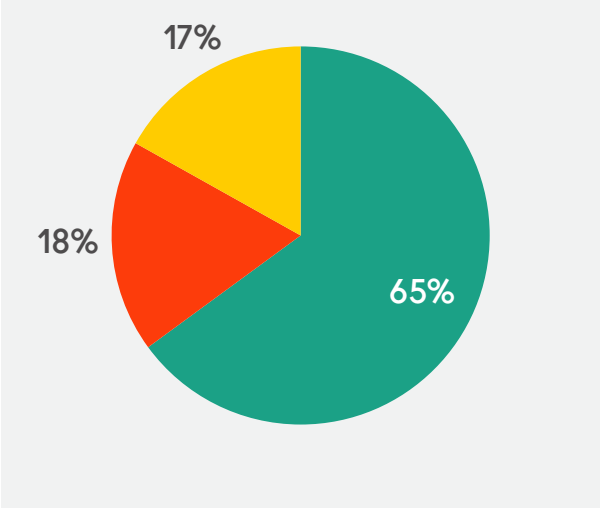
ETB Respondents

Is there a dedicated contact point /resource in your ETB for learners/staff to ask questions about the provision of disability supports?



College/Centre Respondents

Is there a dedicated contact point in your college/centre responsible for coordinating disability supports?



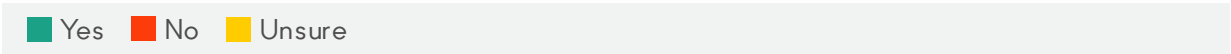


Figure 6 - the percentage of respondents at the ETB and college/centre level reporting the existence of a dedicated staff contact point regarding the provision (ETB level) and coordination (college/centre level) of disability supports.

60% of respondents at the ETB level confirmed the existence of a dedicated contact point/resource where learners or staff could ask questions about the provision of disability support, with 40% stating they either did not have such a resource or were unsure if they did. Similarly at the college/centre level, 65% of respondents confirmed the existence of a dedicated contact point within the college/centre responsible for coordinating the local provision of supports, with 35% stating that they either did not have such a resource or were unsure if they did.

While it is positive that the majority of at both the ETB and college/centre level reported the existence of dedicated staffing with responsibilities concerning disability support, it is worth highlighting that a significant minority did not.

At the ETB level, the relatively recent move to appoint a 'Learner Support Officer', 'Learner Support and Inclusion Officer' or 'Learner Support and Well-Being Officer' in many ETBs was highlighted as a positive development, but again a significant number of ETBs stated that no dedicated contact point for the ETB existed.

> "There is a Learner Support and Inclusion Officer. This is a fairly new position." (ETB respondent)

> "No direct person." (ETB respondent)

In some cases, it was evident that colleges/centres had a dedicated staff member assigned to coordinate disability support activities, or more broadly, general learner support. Usually, this was evident in the job titles provided by the respondents of those who had responsibility in their college/centre:

> "Disability Support Officer" (college/centre respondent)

> "Disability Coordinator" (college/centre respondent)

> "Access and Inclusion Officer". (college/centre respondent)

This type of dedicated role was more evident in PLC colleges than in other areas of FET. Understandably given the very small nature of some FET centres, centre size was mentioned by several respondents as a factor in whether a dedicated role/ contact point existed.

"Yes, for the larger colleges, but not for the smaller centres."

Where a dedicated staffing resource was not present, and in some cases where it was, a huge range of roles were referenced as being involved in the coordination of disability supports in different colleges and centres offering different FET programme types, some working within centres, and some at the ETB level.

"This is not uniform at this point. There is a point of contact at PLC's and Apprenticeships, we are supporting Adult Educators and capacity building at point of entry to train for supports." (college/centre respondent)

"The service is coordinated through our TEL/PD coordinator in conjunction with our student support workers." (college/centre respondent)

"This responsibility lies with the Community Education Facilitator." (college/centre respondent)

"Centre Co-ordinator would generally deal with these queries." (college/centre respondent)

"As Centre Manager, the requests come to me." (college/centre respondent)

"Programme Coordinator has responsibility for provision of supports for all learners." (college/centre respondent)

In other cases, the role of disability support coordination was outsourced to providers external to the college/centre, such as the National Learning Network. In these cases, it was referenced that the provider would visit the college/centre periodically, for example being present on site one or two scheduled days per week.

The assessment of needs and delivery of appropriate accommodations requires training, knowledge and understanding of disability and its impact, as well as understanding of the college/centre and courses it provides. The goal of delivering consistent learner support will be difficult to achieve without the presence of dedicated staff at the ETB level and the majority of college/centres in each ETB. Where colleges and centres are too small to warrant the appointment of dedicated staffing, ETBs should consider working with them to plan how resources can be shared with other larger centres in the region or devise alternative plans to ensure appropriate support can be provided by trained and knowledgeable professionals. Consideration should also be given to how the quality assurance of support services is conducted across the ETB.

Staff Training

Furthermore, college/centre respondents were asked if any training was provided to relevant staff on the provision of reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities.

Is any training provided to relevant staff in the area of providing reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities?

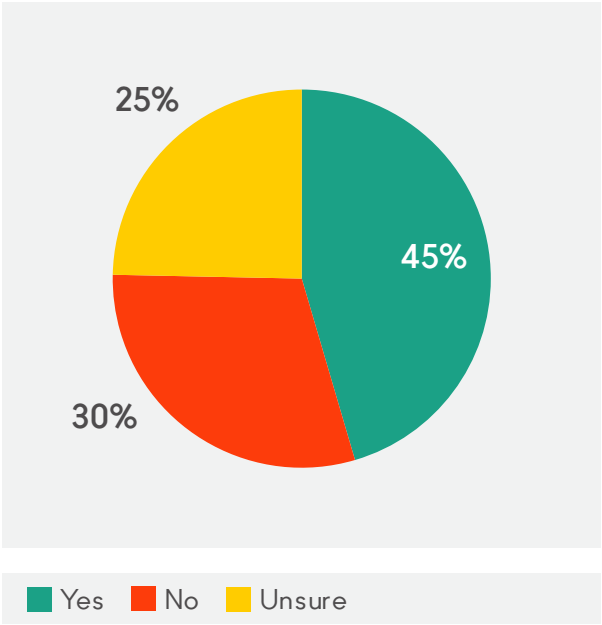


Figure 7 - the percentage of college/centre staff who reported that training was provided to relevant staff on the provision of reasonable accommodations.

Just 45% of college/centre respondents confidently stated that training was provided to relevant staff in the provision of reasonable accommodations, highlighting an area where significant improvement can be made in providing quality and consistent disability support services in FET. 55% stated they either did not provide training or were unsure if they did.

Some respondents who did report providing training took the opportunity to highlight some of the training types they did offer to relevant staff, or those which they planned to offer.

"We're encouraging more of our staff to undertake the AHEAD start programme." (college/centre respondent)

"DCU - SEN course." (college/centre respondent)

"Training provided thus far related to accessible activities." (college/centre respondent)

"I attended a two-day training course in April with the Dyslexia Association of Ireland which was very good. I would like to attend the AHEAD 3-month Training Course." (college/centre respondent)

"Not yet, we ask all staff to take UDL AHEAD training but will be doing internal training (on reasonable accommodations)." (college/centre respondent)

In some instances, even where training was provided, respondents felt it was inadequate given the changing demographics of the FET population. Others highlighted the difficulty of maintaining a quality professional development plan with the limited resources available to them.

"Yes, we do provide training, but it is totally inadequate for the needs now facing staff in the college. Need a much more comprehensive CPD plan." (college/centre respondent)

"Management would say there is, but it is just used to fill in time at the beginning of the year." (college/centre respondent)

"If time and funding afford, we attempt to keep aspects of inclusion and service delivery as live as possible, but it is extremely difficult within a self-financing model." (college/centre respondent)

As referenced above, the assessment of needs and delivery of appropriate accommodations requires training, knowledge and understanding of disability and its impact. The aim of delivering consistent learner support will be difficult to achieve without appropriate training offered to professionals coordinating the delivery of reasonable accommodations at the ETB and college/centre levels. This is perhaps an area where agencies working to support professionals in FET such as AHEAD, can work with the Professional Development Coordinators within ETBs to ensure appropriate training is readily available and accessible by all who need it.

5

Biggest Challenges for the Sector in Delivering Quality and Consistency

Respondents at the ETB and college/centre level were asked what they saw as the biggest challenges for their ETB (ETB level) or college/centre (college/centre level) in delivering quality and consistency in the delivery of reasonable accommodations to disabled learners.

Eighty-nine open responses were received across both strata, and a thematic analysis was conducted on the combined responses which were then disaggregated by theme. The reported biggest challenges were assembled into 9 overlapping themes emerging from the qualitative dataset:

- **Staffing/Resources: 52%** of respondents cited big challenges related to a lack of dedicated staff and/or resources to provide accommodations and a quality support service.

- **Capacity Building: 47%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the need for more guidance and training in the area.

- **Inconsistent Approach: 29%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the lack of a clear national/regional policy around reasonable accommodations, leading to inconsistent approaches across centres.

- **Funding Stream Issues: 17%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the available funding streams, including the inconsistent eligibility of learners in differing levels/programme types, and the burden on learners to provide specific medical evidence to receive support.

- **Professional Support Shortages: 8%** of respondents cited big challenges related to poor availability of professional support workers such as Personal Assistants and ISL Interpreters.

- **Inaccessible Buildings: 6%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the lack of accessibility in buildings/learning spaces in their college/centre.

- **Time: 6%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the short window of time to organise supports on short programmes, and the lack of timely disclosure of disability by learners.

- **Volume of Learners: 4%** of respondents cited big challenges related to the increased volume of learners requiring supports and the pressure that was bringing on services.

- **Managing Expectations: 3%** of respondents cited big challenges related to managing the expectations of parents and learners who may have had a higher level of support in school than that available in their college/centre.

Staffing/Resources

52% of all respondents cited big challenges related to a lack of dedicated staff/ resources to provide accommodations. The lack of dedicated staffing was highlighted as a particularly important issue by many respondents at the ETB and college/centre levels.

"Disability Officer with support staff is needed for every Service/Centre to conduct Needs Assessment and organise the reasonable accommodations." (ETB respondent)

"Lack of a dedicated contact point to coordinate resources and staffing." (ETB respondent)

"We have been promised a trained Disability Officer, but it has never materialised." (college/centre respondent)

"(One of biggest challenges is a) lack of dedicated, trained support staff in centres to support learners and educators to implement RA (reasonable accommodations)." (ETB respondent)

"A dedicated role is needed within the ETB, like Disability Officers in third level." (college/centre respondent)

The lack of dedicated staffing and resources was highlighted as a particular challenge when considered in the context of an increased number of learners requiring additional support.

"Lack of resources/staffing is the biggest issue in the context of an increasing number of learners presenting with identified needs and experience of being supported at second level as is their right." (college/centre respondent)

A lack of a clarity and strategic investment to prioritise the inclusion of learners with disabilities was seen as directly related to the absence of dedicated staff by some respondents.

"Lack of clarity, investment, and prioritising of disability support. We are an organisation of 750+ staff with no disability officer... There is a lack of systemic planning and structuring for the delivery of supports." (college/centre respondent)

In a significant number of cases, structural and contractual issues/inconsistencies were cited by respondents as a significant barrier to the hiring and retention of both quality dedicated staff, and external support professionals.

"No allocation for LS (learning support) staff - hours paid from Disability Fund are casual and less attractive to teachers." (college/centre respondent)

"Big staff contract issues." (college/centre respondent)

"Bad staff terms making recruitment difficult." (college/centre respondent)

"The role of disability support may be an AP1 or AP2 post within the college, or it may simply fall on someone to do this role in addition to their job." (college/centre respondent)

There is a need for a more coherent approach to the resourcing of disability support (staffing and resources) within and across ETBs, supported by SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). Consideration could be given to how this can be achieved by SOLAS, DFHEIRS and other key stakeholders as part of the work to develop the Future Staffing Framework, an important FET Strategy Commitment, (2020a).

Stakeholders leading this process should further investigate and discuss the contractual issues referenced by respondents to ensure that unintended systemic barriers to providing consistent learner support are removed. Consideration should be given to what incentives can be created to encourage greater interest in disability/learning support positions, and the retention of experienced staff.

Capacity Building

47% of respondents cited big challenges related to the need for more guidance and training in the area.

A significant lack of clarity and understanding about the rights of disabled learners to access reasonable accommodations, and what supports were 'reasonable' and appropriate was evident in the responses.

"Lack of clarity as to what constitutes reasonable accommodations and also how to put accommodations in place, what's required precisely etc." (college/centre respondent)

"(Need information on) what is appropriate or available, lack of training/...awareness as to what is allowable." (college/centre respondent)

"Unsure of who needs support and what support is needed."

"Lack of clarity for all staff (outside of guidance) of what learners rights are, clear visual guidance on this would be useful." (college/centre respondent)

"Lack of clarity on what is appropriate or available. Lack of knowledge/understanding of issues faced and appropriate intervention and support of the ever-increasing prevalence of applicants presenting with disability." (college/centre respondent)

"Lack of...knowledge on what is available and how to go about requesting it, in an organised manner." (ETB respondent)

Consistent with the earlier finding that many existing reasonable accommodations policies only cover their application in assessment and not the whole learning experience, some respondents felt there was a need for more awareness about the application of reasonable accommodations to all aspects of the learner experience.

"(Need to address) confusion between provisions of RA (reasonable accommodations) to support learning and provision of RA for Assessment which is more readily understood." (college/centre respondent)

The lack of widely available training and good practice resources specifically on the provision of reasonable accommodations, and the needs assessment process was highlighted as a challenge by a significant number of respondents.

"Lack of clarity on what is appropriate or available, lack of knowledge and understanding and lack of training. I would suggest a specific training course for...this." (college/centre respondent)

"Development of exemplars/reference points (are needed)." (ETB respondent)

"Need...in-depth training in needs assessments." (college/centre respondent)

"(Lack of) training on the purpose and need for reasonable accommodations for learners." (college/centre respondent)

"Creating more awareness is needed." (college/centre respondent)

Several respondents highlighted the need to manage expectations around the take-up of any training developed, citing that time and patience was required to train large organisations and put new procedures in place.

"(Need) information and training for staff and time to put systems / procedures in place." (college/centre respondent)

"Staff training is another challenge. While we have been very proactive in providing a range of upskilling opportunities for staff in the area of disability and inclusion and have seen considerable uptake from staff, we are a large organisation, and this will take time to address." (ETB respondent)

"Staff upskilling, which is ongoing and requests for same increasing, but will take time." (ETB respondent)

A clear training and information gap regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations has been highlighted, and it is recommended that this is addressed within the AHEAD/ETBI proposed body of work on the topic. In particular, there is an evident need to provide information, exemplars and/or training regarding:

- Learner rights and college/centre legal responsibilities.
- Exploring reasonable accommodations across the learner life cycle – not limited to assessment.
- What is 'reasonable' and appropriate, balancing learner needs and academic integrity.
- Sample procedures and case studies of good practice processes already in place.
- The process of needs assessment.

The wide and ongoing training need identified suggests that an on-demand approach to any course development may be the most effective and sustainable method of reaching the number of staff required to improve consistency of support. Several respondents highlighted a desire for "visual" or multimedia resources which should be considered in the delivery of outputs to address the knowledge gap.

Inconsistent Approach

29% of respondents cited significant challenges related to the lack of clear national/regional policies and procedures around the provision of reasonable accommodations, leading to inconsistent approaches across centres. Some of these inconsistencies were seen by respondents as being related to funding criteria (further explored in detail in the next section) and some due to a lack of a strategic approach to reasonable accommodation provision.

Many respondents highlighted the need for more clarity with systems and procedures about what is appropriate and how to process support needs of learners.

"Our system and procedures need to be clarified, so that programme coordinators know what they can expect... It needs to be made clear to them how they access funding for accommodations and how to ensure that the necessary accommodations happen when it comes to exams." (college/centre respondent)

"No clear protocols developed for best practice in FE." (college/centre respondent)

"Lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibility in this area." (college/centre respondent)

As evidenced earlier in this report, the lack of a clear national and regional approach was seen to lead to inconsistency in the level and quality of support provided across different regions and programme types.

"(Biggest challenge is that) each programme area operates independently, and the process is not the same across the board." (college/centre respondent)

"(Biggest challenge is the) disparity between the supports readily accessed by PLC learners and the funding provided for non-plc." (ETB respondent)

Greater collaboration and cohesion of policy/procedures and training delivery within ETBs and nationally was seen by several respondents as important in addressing the issue.

> "Uniform approach and collaboration required throughout the various centres." (college/centre respondent)

"We need a policy that outlines what is appropriate and training." (ETB respondent)

Considering this, ETBs should review their reasonable accommodations policies and procedures to ensure that appropriate reasonable accommodations can be provided to learners across all programme types, and across the full learner lifecycle. Greater collaboration and resource sharing across colleges and centres within ETBs would support this goal, and the development of communities of practice around the topic may facilitate this collaboration. AHEAD in collaboration with ETBI should consider the development of a policy review checklist within the proposed body of work to support greater consistency of coverage/approach within policy development/review.

Funding Stream Issues

17% of respondents specifically cited significant challenges related to the available funding streams, including the inconsistent eligibility of learners in differing levels/ programme types, and the burden on learners to provide specific medical evidence to receive support.

The differing levels of access to additional funding streams across different colleges and centres offering different programme types was highlighted as a major challenge to delivering an equitable approach, and a consistent level of support for learners with additional needs.

> "At FE level, the only process for provision of supports is through the SOLAS Fund for Students with Disabilities. There is a lack of systemic planning and structuring for the delivery of supports." (college/centre respondent)

> "Limitations regarding the FSD (Fund for Students with Disabilities) and type of provision is a considerable challenge. While we have funded a Disability Support Service in FE colleges for over 20 years (this has recently been extended to all FE colleges) and have recently expanded the range of supports available in those colleges, we now need to look at what supports can be provided in other FET settings to ensure an equitable approach for learners." (ETB respondent)

> "Consistency in access to funding across all of FET (is required)." (ETB respondent)

> "No resource or learning support funding given to Youthreach to support those with disabilities." (college/centre respondent)

> "(The biggest challenges are a) lack of standardised systems and procedure... (and lack of) unified access to funding to support additional needs." (ETB respondent)

The need for learners to provide specific medical evidence of disability in order for colleges/centres to access funding for their reasonable accommodation, was seen by several respondents as inequitable and a barrier to providing consistent learner supports. Some respondents cited confusion about whether they could or should support learners who could not meet the medical evidence requirements.

"Lack of funding and lack of paperwork from the learner on their disability." (college/centre respondent)

"Students not being able to afford diagnosis earlier in education lifecycle." (college/centre respondent)

"Lack of guidance on students who do not have or who do not supply supporting documentation." (college/centre respondent)

It was highlighted that this approach was out of step with the general allocation model of support now in place in post-primary, and that this disconnect left some learners unfairly and unexpectedly unsupported in the transition.

"Students coming from post-primary who accessed support under the general allocation model, do not have the necessary paperwork to access FSD (Fund for Students with Disabilities)." (college/centre respondent)

"Only funding available is FSD. We need consistency of funding with post-primary system, that is: SEN (Special Educational Needs) provision, SNA provision. Current we employ PAs on short-term, casual contracts for near minimum wage and employ part-time teachers for learning support - these teachers provide a great service but are not SEN teachers. The whole system needs to be revised to take account of students who are entitled to support in post-primary but who are not eligible for FSD." (college/centre respondent)

"Learners not carrying their supports with them from second level or other services to FET." (ETB respondent)

However, while the inconsistency in provision between post-primary and FET was widely recognised, it was not always thought that the higher levels of support evident in post-primary were optimal, with some expressing that this had led some learners to be unprepared for the transition.

"Some students not prepared to work independently - been too closely minded in second level." (college/centre respondent)

"Students and parents not prepared for change in support structures from Second level to FE." (college/centre respondent)

DFHEIRS and SOLAS should consider implementing a single and consistent approach to the funding of reasonable accommodations in FET. This could include:

- Expansion of eligibility for the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) to cover all areas of FET, bolstering the Fund to ensure it can meet the needs of learners across all programmes.

- Examination of the medical evidence funding criteria, exploring how barriers to accessing support can be reduced and smooth transition from post-primary to FET facilitated.

- Providing clear guidance on what can and should be providing through core ETB funding and what supports can be covered through additional streams like the FSD.

Professional Support Shortages

8% of respondents cited significant challenges related to poor availability of professional support workers such as Personal Assistants and ISL Interpreters, whether hired as staff members or through external agencies.

"It is proving incredibly difficult to source external professional supports, e.g., ISL interpreters etc which has impacted on our ability to provide supports in a timely way." (ETB respondent)

"The biggest challenge, this academic year in particular, is staffing when it comes to high-support students... Full-time support personnel such as PAs and Academic Support Workers have been next to impossible to find, leading some students having to share such resources, do without this support for some classes, drop out of their course after a few months or not be able to start the course at all." (college/centre respondent)

"Accessing supports such as PAs, Interpreters etc. is almost impossible in some cases as the designated agencies/preferred suppliers do not have a sufficient supply of suitable staff." (college/centre respondent)

The poor pay and conditions of staff in these roles was cited by several respondents as a significant contributing factor to this shortage.

"Contracts and pay for PAs are poor and therefore there is a shortage in this area." (college/centre respondent)

"Lack of staffing e.g., PAs, note takers and readers due to terms and conditions of employment. They are paid less than SNAs at second level and don't get paid during the Summer. Should never have changed the title from Special Needs Assistant to Personal Assistant." (ETB respondent)

"Lack of support staff e.g., Personal Assistants/ Note-takers due to poor employment terms and conditions i.e., no payment when college closed its difficult to attract and retain these staff members." (college/centre respondent)

This issue has been anecdotally raised with AHEAD on a consistent basis as a major challenge in both further and higher education settings. A cross departmental response from DFHEIRS and the Departments of Education and Health may be necessary to address to low availability of qualified external professionals such as personal assistants and sign language interpreters referenced in this section and earlier in the report.

Inaccessible Buildings

6% of respondents cited significant challenges related to the lack of accessibility in buildings/learning spaces in their college/centre.

> "The main issue I have encountered over the years, is not the supports but the venue, (my college/centre) has limited space downstairs for classrooms with people with disabilities." (college/centre respondent)

"Old building so difficult for physical disability students." (college/centre respondent)

One respondent highlighted the needs to develop new spaces to meet the changing needs of an ever-diversifying FET learner population.

> "(Need) access to capital funding to develop bespoke learner spaces i.e., hubs, quiet spaces, sensory friendly (spaces)." (ETB respondent)

SOLAS and DFHEIRS should ensure that accessibility and universal design are core criteria in all capital funding provided for new builds and building upgrades in FET. The department should consider introducing a dedicated capital funding stream to support the conducting of accessibility audits and the upgrading of buildings for the specific purpose of improving accessibility over the medium-term.

Time

6% of respondents cited big challenges related to the short window of time to organise supports on short programmes, and the lack of timely disclosure of disability.

"The greatest challenge is trying to put proper supports in place in a timely manner with such a short window of opportunity for students." (college/centre respondent)

"Huge time pressure in September to get Needs Assessments completed in timely manner so staff have information and students feel supported. 100+ needs assessments in a few weeks." (college/centre respondent)

Reported as contributing to the already short window of opportunity was the delay in learners disclosing their disability for a variety of reasons.

"Timely notification of a learner's needs (learners can be slow to highlight early in order for supports to be organised early)." (ETB respondent)

"Students availing of supports when it is too late despite/fail to inform us (due to stigma, extenuating circumstances etc.)." (college/centre respondent)

Timely disclosure and implementation of support was seen by some as directly linked to the ease of transition for disabled learners.

"Knowing what accommodation is needed before the students start can help to make the transition into a new learning environment much smoother." (ETB respondent)

As per the findings re communication and visibility of supports outlined earlier in this report, ETBs should review their own website content concerning disability support information. They should consider working with colleges and centres in their region to deliver consistent, positive messaging on public platforms about the availability of supports for the full learner life cycle and the process involved in obtaining them. Creating a positive disclosure environment with multiple opportunities in the learner journey for disclosure proactively communicated to learners (at pre-entry, application, enrolment, assessment, ongoing) would support more timely disclosure and provision of support.

Volume of Learners

4% of respondents, all at the college/centre level, cited big challenges related to the increased volume of learners requiring supports and the pressure that was bringing on services.

> "Huge increase in numbers of students with difficulties coming into courses. Huge increase in students with ASD (Autism) diagnosis. How to support them all." (college/centre respondent)

Increasing demand for supports was seen as being particularly challenging in the context of the previously outlined lack of dedicated staffing and resources.

> "Lack of resources/staffing is the biggest issue in the context of an increasing number of learners presenting with identified needs and experience of being supported at second level as is their right." (college/centre respondent)

As referenced previously in the report, there is a need for a more coherent approach to the resourcing for disability support (staffing and resources) within and across ETBs, supported by SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The increased volume of learners with additional need adds significant weight to the argument to review how staffing and resources are allocated to ensure the increasing demand is met and consistent learner support is provided.

Managing Expectations

3% of respondents cited big challenges related to managing the expectations of parents and learners. These primarily related to communications with learners about the higher level of support in schools than that available in their college/centre and managing expectations about a learner's ability to participate on a given course.

> "Students and parents not prepared for change in support structures from Second level to FE." (college/centre respondent)

> "Learners are used to a high level of support in secondary schools i.e., sensory homes, home school liaison, full-time SENCO, autism unit. The same designated support is not available in FE." (college/centre respondent)

> "Communicating that some courses are not accessible to all given the specific requirements to achieve learning outcomes (e.g., Mountain Skills for some)." (ETB respondent)

The earlier recommendations in this report regarding the need for clear and consistent public information about the type/level of support available, coupled with the provision of clear and equitable pre-entry criteria for FET courses, should support colleges/centres to better manage learner/parent expectations.

6

Views on the Programme of Work Proposed

In relation to the proposed body of work by AHEAD with support from ETBI, respondents at both the ETB and college/centre level were asked what kind of outputs they thought would support the sector to deliver more consistent provision of quality reasonable accommodations. The following five options were offered as suggested tick boxes, with the ability to add comments provided:

- National Guidance/Approach
- Sample policies and procedures
- Templates - e.g., forms
- Good practice examples
- Other (please specify)

What kind of outputs from AHEAD do you think would support the sector to deliver more consistent provision of quality reasonable accommodations?

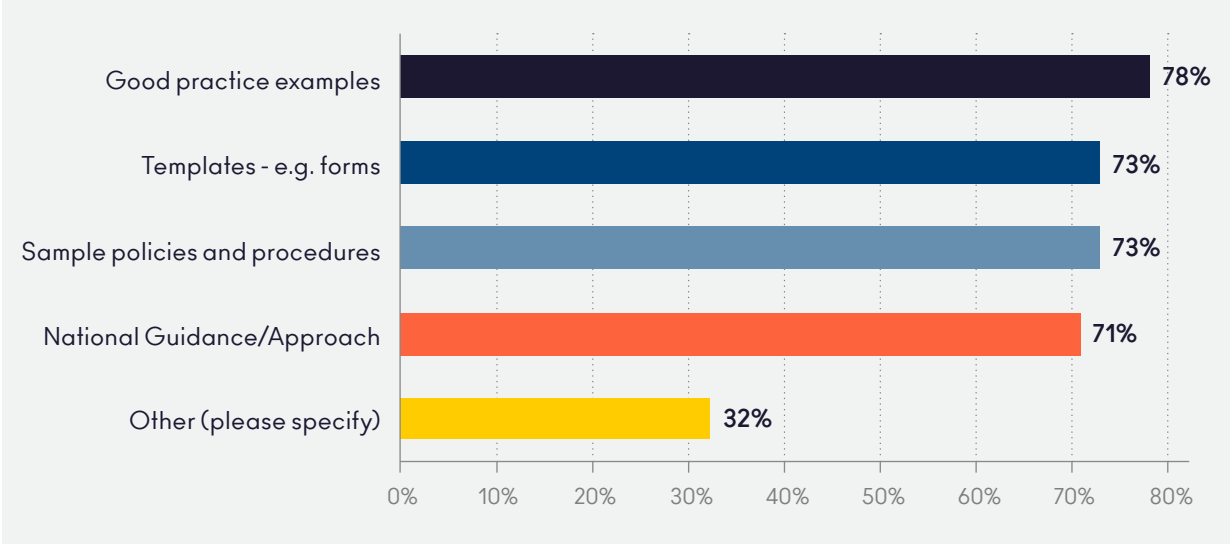


Figure 8 - the percentage of respondents who thought various proposed outputs would support consistency and quality in the provision of reasonable accommodations.

Since both strata were asked an identical question here, the responses from ETB and college/centre respondents were combined for analysis. The most popular response was 'good practice examples' with 78% of respondents selecting it. This was followed by 'templates – e.g., forms' (73%), 'sample policies and procedures' (73%) and 'national guidance/approach' (71%). Approx. one third (32%) of respondents selected the 'other' option, with examples of suggestions included further below.

While all the four pre-defined options offered scored highly, the order of priority suggests there is a desire for a strong focus in the outputs on real-life examples of effective services and supports, and practical outputs and training offerings which can be utilised and implemented in daily practice.

> "Something that's not about ticking boxes or unnecessary use of IT adding to workload for teachers."

> "Less emails, publications for staff, more practical workshops etc."

The comments revealed a strong desire for online multimedia resources and training content.

> "Some short online videos to support the process."

> "Infographics, webinars/video explainers etc."

> "Training in ICT solutions"

> "More roll out of the AHEAD start programme. Give teachers more time to be involved in these initiatives outside of their Croke Park hours."

A variety of alternative 'other' suggestions were proposed for consideration.

Several respondents highlighted the need for networking and knowledge-sharing opportunities for professionals coordinating and/or implementing supports.

> "Tutor forum."

> "Networking opportunities would be great too."

Several respondents highlighted the involvement of accrediting/examining bodies in the development of outputs, noting their importance in quality assuring accommodations made.

"Input from examining bodies such as QQI."

One respondent suggested the collation of a centralised list of support providers where external supports could be sourced from e.g., personal assistants, ISL interpreters, assistive technology providers etc.

"A schedule of where supports can be sourced from."

Although not directly prompted in this question, others took the opportunity to call for more structural and systemic changes, relating to the removal of the need for medical evidence to access support, and the overhaul of staffing and resources for disability support.

"Inclusive system for those with diagnosis and those who do not!"

"Resources to factor in staff and time - managed centrally and not left to individuals to make key decisions."

"Designated personnel in large FE centres with responsibility for this area & a review of the SOLAS Reporting requirements - a 'tool' is needed to support the financial reporting requirements in my opinion."

"Plans on how to centralize certain aspects of provision e.g., staff recruitment, finance, and testing. This would then allow for a more defined/specific role for the Disability Officers."

Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings highlighted that most respondents had a reasonable accommodations policy in place, surfaced existing pockets of good practice in the provision of reasonable accommodations, and identified a general supportive culture within FET.

However, they also highlight significant areas of improvement required to meet the FET Strategy goal of consistent learner support. Key findings regarding notable areas for improvement include:

- A majority of respondents at the ETB (60%) and college/centre (65%) level reported having a dedicated staff contact to field queries and coordinate the provision of disability support, but a significant minority did not. More than half of respondents cited a lack of dedicated, trained staff as one of the biggest challenges in providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations.

- An evident training gap was identified. Less than half (45%) of colleges/centres confidently stated that training was provided to relevant staff on the provision of reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities. When asked about the biggest challenges to providing quality and consistency in reasonable accommodations, challenges related to the need for more guidance and training in the area were the second-most cited challenge, with 47% of respondents.

- While the vast majority of respondents identified the existence of a reasonable accommodations policy in their ETB/college/centre, between 21% (colleges/centres) and 25% (ETBs) either had no policy or were unsure if one existed. Furthermore, a significant number of those who responded positively highlighted that their existing policies only covered accommodations for assessment, and not supports for the wider learning context.

- Funding sources appear to be very different from college to college and centre to centre, and the level of support for which funding could be accessed appeared to vary significantly.

- Comments across multiple questions cited the need provide costly medical evidence of disability to receive support (led by funding requirements) as a significant barrier to equity of access to support.

- Only half of respondents at the ETB and college/centre levels confidently stated that their website contained clear information about the kind of support available to disabled learners, with fewer than half reporting their website contained information on how support could be accessed. This represents a clear communication gap to be addressed.

- A lack of clarity about learner rights and the level of support which should be offered, plus a lack of consistency in approach to disability support between and across ETBs were key themes which emerged in responses across all parts of the survey.

Some of the areas of improvement identified can be directly supported by the planned body of work conducted by AHEAD with support from ETBI and SOLAS, while others highlighted were more systemic issues which may need to be closely considered by SOLAS and DFHEIRS over the medium term.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were devised.

Staffing

Recommendation: As part of the plan outlined in the FET Strategy to develop a Future Staffing Framework, an important FET Strategy Commitment, SOLAS, DFHEIRS and other key stakeholders should consider a more coherent approach to the resourcing of disability support staff within and across ETBs. Stakeholders leading this process should further investigate and discuss the contractual barriers and incentives referenced by respondents in this report to ensure that unintended systemic barriers to providing consistent learner support are removed.

Contracted Professional Supports

Recommendation: A cross departmental response from DFHEIRS and the Departments of Education and Health should be considered to address the low availability of qualified external professional supports such as personal assistants and sign language interpreters.

Training and Capacity Building

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider the development of on-demand training in the area of needs assessment and reasonable accommodation, and the production of accompanying web-based multimedia resources to support the sector.

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider development of a suite of good-practice case studies and practical forms/templates which can support the sector in achieving consistent learner support.

Coverage of Reasonable Accommodation Policies/ Procedures

Recommendation: AHEAD with support from ETBI, should consider how greater consistency and coverage in policy development can be supported within the planned outputs being developed to support the sector to fully meet its legal obligations e.g., creating policy development checklists, sample policies, and clear multimedia information on the legal context.

Recommendation: ETBs should review their reasonable accommodations policies and procedures to ensure that appropriate reasonable accommodations are provided to learners across all programme types, and across the full learner lifecycle. Greater collaboration and resource sharing across colleges and centres within ETBs would support this goal, and the development of communities of practice around the topic may facilitate this collaboration.

Recommendation: SOLAS should consider how greater policy coverage for the provision of reasonable accommodations across the full learner lifecycle can be promoted through the Strategic Performance Agreements and Overarching Funding Requirements.

Funding of Supports

Recommendation: SOLAS and DFHEIRS should follow through on Minister Harris' commitment to widen the Fund for Students with Disabilities to the whole of FET in 2024, with clear published eligibility guidelines and clear contacts identified at the ETB level to direct queries. In conducting this process, consideration should be given to the barriers posed by the specific medical evidence funding criteria, exploring how barriers to accessing support can be reduced and smoother transition from post-primary to FET facilitated.

Recommendation: SOLAS should ensure the funding of disability supports and related staffing are adequately considered and prioritised in the development of the New Funding Model.

Medical Evidence Requirement

Recommendation: In following through on Minister Harris' commitment to widen the Fund for Students with Disabilities to the whole of FET, consideration should be given by stakeholders leading the process to the barriers posed by the specific medical evidence funding criteria, exploring how barriers to accessing support can be reduced and smoother transition from post-primary to FET facilitated.

Communication/Visibility of Available Supports

Recommendation: ETBs should review their own website content concerning disability support information and consider working with colleges and centres in their region to deliver consistent, positive messaging on public platforms about the availability of supports for the full learner life cycle and the process involved in obtaining them.

Recommendation: AHEAD, with support from ETBI, should consider how the proposed body of work can support ETBs in this process e.g., by providing a disability information web content checklist for self-reflection.

Other Factors

Recommendation: SOLAS and DFHEIRS should ensure that accessibility and universal design are core criteria in all capital funding provided for new builds and building upgrades in FET. The department should consider introducing a dedicated capital funding stream to support the conducting of accessibility audits and the upgrading of buildings for the specific purpose of improving accessibility.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Original Survey Questions

The survey split respondents into two paths based on whether they worked directly for the regional ETB, or in a local college/centre. You can view the questions for staff working directly in an ETB here, and questions for staff working in a local college/centre here.

Reasonable Accommodations in FET - Scoping Survey Report

Conducted by

ahead

etbi
Education and Training Boards Ireland
Boird Oideachais agus Oiliúna Éireann

ISBN No: 978-1-916836-02-0

Published by:
AHEAD Educational Press
East Hall
UCD
Carysfort Avenue
Blackrock
Co. Dublin
Tel: (01) 7164396
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Authors: Dara Ryder & Dr Richard Healy

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