

Reasonable Accommodations in FET

The need for strategic efforts to achieve consistent support for disabled learners

Good progress has been made in introducing a universal-design approach to the further education and training (FET) sector, but significant gaps remain in the provision of more individualised support services for disabled learners. This article shares the findings of research by AHEAD and ETBI on reasonable accommodations in FET and explores a programme of work to address the recommendations made.

Introduction

Further education and training (FET) is acknowledged as an important pathway into employment and further study, in particular for marginalised groups such as disabled learners (DFHERIS, 2022). Across the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which enrol almost 200,000 learners annually (SOLAS, 2023b), 6.8% of the learner population disclosed a disability through the Programme for Learner Support System in 2021/22 (SOLAS, 2023a). If rates of non-disclosure of disability are like those in higher education (AHEAD, 2024a), it's likely that the real proportion of disabled FET learners is more than twice that figure.

The FET Strategy 2020–24 states that 'addressing the needs of people with disabilities will be a primary focus' and commits to providing 'consistent learner support' (SOLAS, 2020). To achieve this, the *Learner Support in Further Education and Training* framework (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024) proposes a three-tiered model of support (Figure 1).



Dara Ryder
CEO, AHEAD



Dr Richard Healy
Research and Policy Officer, AHEAD



Fergus Craddock
Inclusion Manager, Education and
Training Boards Ireland

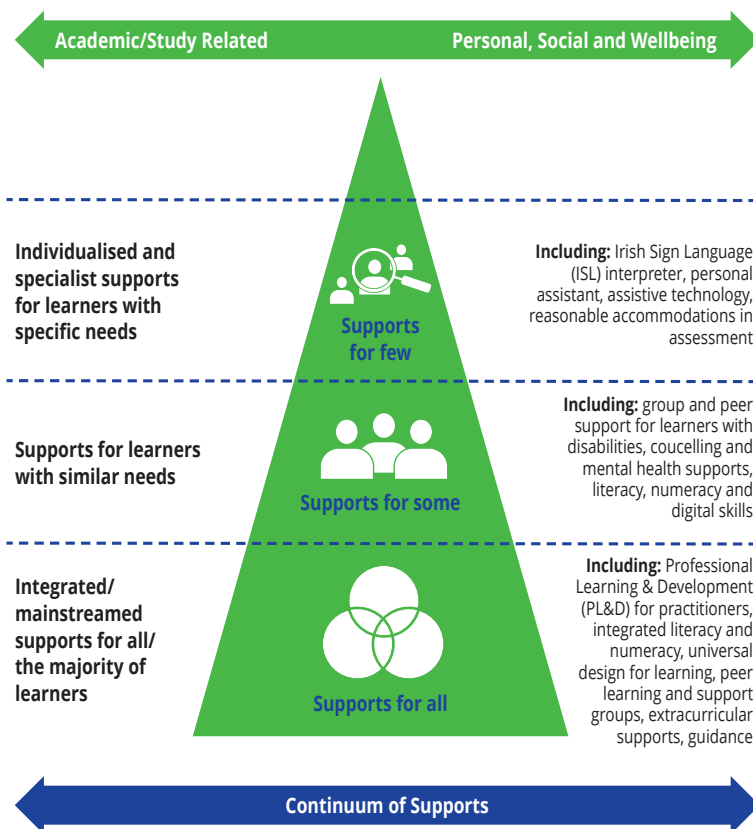


Figure 1: FET learner support pyramid (SOLAS & ETBI, 2024)

At the base layer, 'supports for all' are driven by universal design (UD) and mainstreaming inclusion initiatives, ensuring that the mainstream learner experience is as inclusive and accessible as possible. In the upper layers, more individualised supports are provided to smaller cohorts of learners with specific needs.

Under the Equal Status Acts, disabled learners have a legal right to these supports, which are known as 'reasonable accommodations' and are designed to level the playing field for them. Examples of common accommodations include assistive technology, extra time in exams, learning support, and personal assistants or interpreters.

Good progress has been made in promoting a UD approach in tertiary education in the base layer of the pyramid, particularly in the area of increasing professional development (Healy et al., 2023). However, reviews of Youthreach, the Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Specific Skills Training, and post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes have all highlighted

inconsistency in provision of individualised disability supports (Indecon, 2020a, 2020b; McGuinness et al., 2018).

That's why AHEAD and ETBI, with support from SOLAS, joined forces to conduct research to better understand the systemic issues acting as barriers to consistent learner support, and plan to address them.

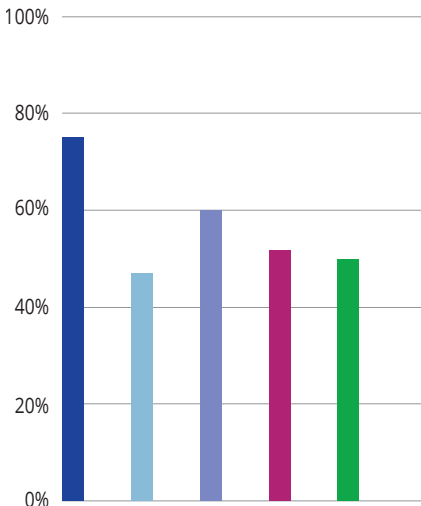
Scoping survey

This research, designed by AHEAD with support from ETBI, used a quota sampling methodology to gather data from ETBs and colleges/centres, exploring the delivery of disability supports from a systems perspective. While the *Reasonable Accommodations in FET* report (AHEAD, 2024b) presents findings at both regional ETB and local college/centre level, this article focuses on ETB-level findings, and implications for national policy.

The research highlighted a general culture of inclusion in FET, but also identified significant gaps in provision of consistent learner support across the sector. See Figure 2 for key quantitative findings at ETB level.

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Reasonable Accommodations in FET - Key ETB Level Findings



Reasonable Accommodations Policy

75% have a reasonable accommodations policy

Needs Assessment Procedures

47% of policies contain guidance/procedure for Needs Assessment

Dedicated Staffing

60% have dedicated contact point re provision of disability support

Resourcing/Funding Challenges

52% cited resources for dedicated staffing as biggest challenge to providing consistent support

Communicating Supports

50% have info about disability supports published on website

Figure 2: Key quantitative ETB findings (AHEAD, 2024b)

Policies and procedures

While 75% of ETBs reported having a policy on reasonable accommodations, significant inconsistencies were identified in what the policies covered. For example, just 47% contained a needs assessment procedure, a process widely considered central to developing an appropriate support plan for disabled learners. Qualitative data showed that many existing policies are limited to covering supports provided in assessment, omitting the wider 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

Staffing and professional development

At college/centre level, dedicated staff members were more likely to exist in PLC colleges than other centres.

The presence of dedicated staff acting as a contact point in ETBs to coordinate the provision of disability supports varied, with 60% reporting they had such staff. For those that did report a position, their titles varied significantly.

At college/centre level, dedicated staff members were more likely to exist in PLC colleges than other centres. Where none existed, myriad roles were reported as having responsibility to coordinate supports, including external contractors. Just over half (52%) of ETBs cited a lack of resources for dedicated staffing as the biggest challenge to providing consistent learner support.

Just 45% of ETBs reported that training was provided to relevant staff on provision of reasonable accommodations, and where it was provided, it was sometimes deemed insufficient:

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

Funding of supports

Inconsistent coverage of the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD), which only covers learners in PLC courses, was widely reported as a barrier to providing consistent support. Respondents reported this leading to different support outcomes for students with similar needs, depending on the FET programme they were undertaking.

The different sources and methods of funding often led to confusion or lack of clarity in colleges/centres about whether and how accommodations were funded:

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

Communication of supports

Only 50% of ETBs reported having information about the kinds of disability supports that learners can access, and how to access them, on their websites.

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

Recommendations and next steps

Key recommendations of the report at national level are shown in Figure 3:

DFHERIS/SOLAS	ETBs	AHEAD
Review and bolster disability support staffing as part of FET Staffing Review.	Implement/review and update ETBs Reasonable Accommodations Policy.	Develop guidance/on-demand training for support staff in FET.
Expand the FSD across all levels of FET to offer consistent access to all FET learners who need it.	Review ETB web communications - provide clear, consistent information on disability support.	Gather and share good-practice case studies across the sector.
Reducate barriers to accessing funding, e.g. examine FSD requirement for medical evidence or verification.	Develop communities of practice and foster collaboration between individual colleges/centres on support provision.	Create ETB self-review tools for reasonable accommodations policies and communication of supports.

Figure 3: Key recommendations (AHEAD, 2024b)

Following publication of the report, AHEAD and ETBI formed the Reasonable Accommodations in FET Feedback Group, consisting of 28 representatives from AHEAD, ETBI, SOLAS, and ETBs across Ireland. Its role is to advise AHEAD on the development of outputs supporting ETBs to self-review and to address ETB-level recommendations in the report. Examples of outputs include a maturity model for ETB disability support services, a reasonable accommodations policy review checklist, a communication of supports checklist, and a self-directed short course for support staff.

Conclusion

With the next FET Strategy 2025–2029 in development, the time is right to embed clear goals in it which drive improvements in the quality and consistency of disability supports across FET. Education and Training Boards across the country are ready to play their part in creating a better FET for learners with disabilities, and AHEAD is ready to support them!

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