



National Learning Network

Think *Possible*

Information Pack

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science

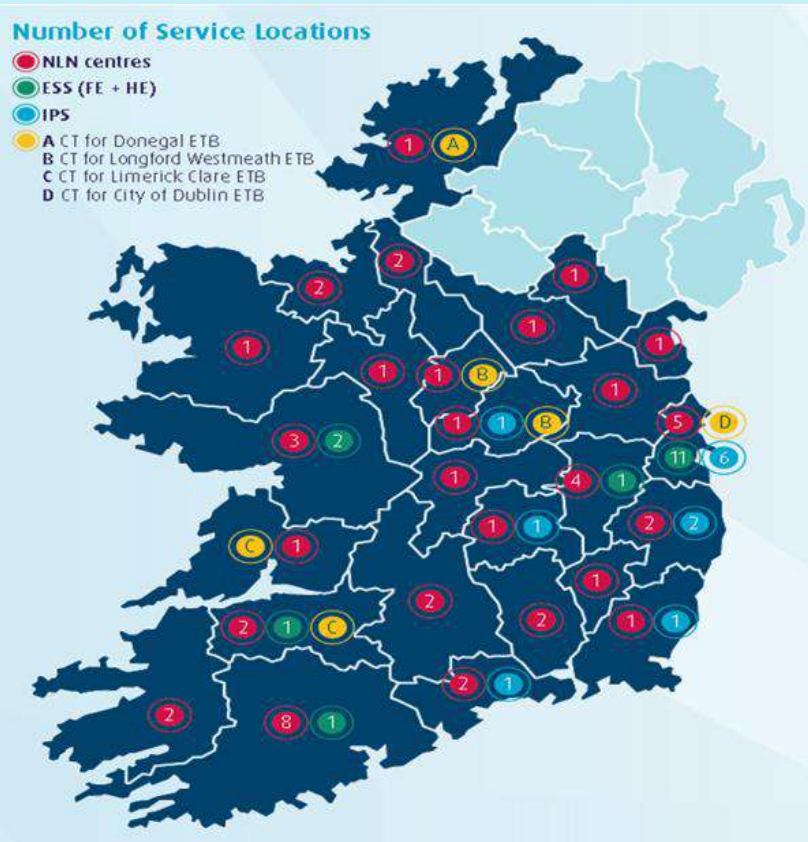
23 April 2024

The Role of NLN within an Evolving FET Ecosystem

- The signing and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018 has highlighted the need for disability inclusive educational options for all.
- Population needs are changing as young adults with disability are now presenting with higher levels of communication and interaction needs, cognition and learning difficulties, social, emotional and mental health difficulties, and sensory and physical needs, often on a concurrent basis.
- Disability is not homogeneous, many with the same diagnosis present with very different support needs. Many will require significant one-to-one inputs and specialists' interventions, personalised education, specialist equipment, fit-for-purpose accommodation, transport and health and personal care supports, to enable engagement with accredited educational and training programmes.
- NLN provide mainstream outcomes for people with disabilities in a supportive trauma-informed environment that is highly attuned and adaptable to meet their needs. The tapestry of supports provided, ensures that each individual becomes the best version of themselves and progress to meet the ambitions they have set for themselves.
- Current post second level provision for students with disability is insufficient to meet all needs, is fragmented, geographically disparate and hard to access.
- As the Further Education and Training sector moves forward with a new growing eco-system, it is important that people with disabilities are not left behind.

- National Learning Network is a progressive leader in delivery of personalised education, training, and development opportunities for people with disabilities or people with health challenges.
- NLN is a Primary pathway for students who need individualised supports to engage and thrive in further education and training.
- All programmes provide individual assessment of need, planning and supported learning coupled with accredited (Levels 1-5) and non-accredited training.
- Our courses offer people choice to follow their unique pathway to training, further and higher education, apprenticeships, or jobs.
- National Learning Network provides blended learning opportunities. This includes centre-based, employer-based and community-based options to learn.
- With our own e-learning platform, students can also learn remotely at different times of the day and engage in self-directed learning relevant to their course.
- Our learning environments are designed to foster a sense of belonging that respects diversity and promotes student success.
- Each person engages in learning in a way that best meets their needs, at that time in their life.
- All provide pathways to higher levels of Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE) and jobs.

Scale and Scope of NLN Operations



- Providing courses in 84 locations across 33 centres throughout Ireland in every county
- Funded primarily by the HSE and ETBs with some services funded directly by Higher Education institutions
- Offering 201 accredited courses (QQI, City & Guilds, ICDL, Microsoft Office Specialist)
- Offering 54 Awards: QQI Level 1-5
- 787 specialist and experienced staff support students to achieve personalised education and training goals
- Of the students who complete their training over 90% progress to either higher levels of FET, higher education or jobs (approximately 1500 per year from ETB and HSE funded courses)
- NLN operate in a UDL informed teaching and learning environment. NLN were finalists for the prestigious John Kelly Award in 2022

Student Profile



Diverse Needs: NLN supports a diverse student population including people with challenges relating to:

- Neurodivergent/Autism
- Communication
- Intellectual Disability
- Mental Health Conditions
- Neurological Conditions
- Specific Learning Difficulties
- Long-Term Health Conditions
- Physical and Sensory Conditions

Age Range: Students range in age from 16 upwards with 47% aged 18-24 and a further 24% in the 25-34 age category

A Suite of Learning Services

Not What We Do, But How We Do It

- National Learning Network services are guided by international best practice in disability inclusion and education and training.
- Our services are diverse, however, all services share common threads.
- These threads are personalised training, individualised student supports and outcome focused service delivery.
- National Learning Network's service portfolio is adaptive, innovative and responsive.
- This is achieved through the ongoing development and enhancement of our services, always remaining cognisant of changing demographic needs, the needs of our communities and the labour market.

Supports Offered at NLN

Supports offered at NLN

- **Personalised training plans** supporting you to achieve your individual goals and ambitions. **You learn at your own pace.**
- **Key instructors** who will act as an extra support should you need it.
- **Wellness programmes** ensuring a holistic approach to your continuing personal and professional development. WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Planning) available if needed.
- **Education, literacy and numeracy supports** where required.
- **Information Technology** skills training including learning how best to use technology to support your training and education.
- **Access to health, leisure, social and cultural individual and group activities** supporting your quality of life and ensuring you enjoy yourself as you build confidence.



Evidence-Based Approach to Service Delivery

The Bio-Psycho-Social Model of Disability

- NLN adopts an evidence-based approach to service design and delivery and student supports provided are informed by the Bio-Psycho-Social needs of all students consistent with the World Health Organisation's revised definitions of disability.
- The Bio-Psycho-Social model of disability focuses on the interactions between biological (genetic), psychological (mood, personality, behaviour), and social factors (cultural, family, socioeconomic).
- Recognises that while disabilities are often due to illness or injury, the importance of the impact of biological, emotional and environmental issues on health, well-being, and function in society also need to be considered.
- The most frequently occurring interventions required by students to stay engaged in education in 2023 included supports to deal with Mental Health issues such as Anxiety (543), depression (290), managing behavioural issues (301) and dealing with trauma as a result of abuse (492).

Psychology Interventions 2023

2023	ETB	HSE
Students Numbers	2,659	1,444
Psychology Interventions	4,872	3,573

- Abuse
 - Addiction
 - Anger & Aggression
 - Anxiety
 - Assertiveness & Confidence
 - Behavioural Issues
 - Bereavement
 - Clinical Risk Assessment
- Concentration & Memory
 - CPD Activities
 - Delivering Training to Learners
 - Delivering Training to Staff
 - Depression
 - Developing Training
 - Evaluating Mental Health
 - Evaluating Suitability for Course
- Family
 - Frustration / Complaint / Bullying
 - Intake Screening Interview /Assessment
 - Medication
 - Offending & Criminal Behaviour
 - Paranoia
 - Physical Illness & Pain Management
 - Professional Consultation with Organisation
 - Professional Consultation with Staff
 - Programme Reviews
- Promoting Autonomy
 - Psychological Assessment
 - Referral for Counselling
 - Relationships & Communication Difficulties
 - Research
 - Sexuality
 - Sleep & Fatigue
 - Suicide & Self Harm
 - Supervision of RO's
 - Transition & Progression Resource Planning
 - Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP)

NLN Specialist Vocational Training Courses



- Our vocational courses are funded by the Educational Training Boards and include the following:
 - Arts, craft and media
 - Catering, tourism, hospitality and leisure
 - Business studies and administration
 - Informational technology and computer programming
 - Horticulture and sustainability
 - Career exploration and transition to employment
- Courses run from 9 months to 2 years depending on the programme.
- Sample/taster courses enable learners to make realistic choices for training and employment based on their individual strengths and abilities.

HSE Bridging and Transitional Training Opportunities

- Includes School Leaver Transitioning Opportunities, Rehabilitative Training and Community Inclusion Hubs.
- Services are not delivered in health settings.
- Bridging and Transitional Training opportunities are delivered in an education and training setting with a strong emphasis on using mainstream services and facilities in the person's community.
- The majority of these services will be pan-disability, but some will focus on specific areas of specialisms such as mental health and wellbeing, autism and neurorehabilitation services.
- All are time limited, progression focused and provide personalised supports coupled with accredited and non-accredited training.

Education Support Services in Further and Higher Education

- We work with students with disabilities Educational Support Services in 8 Higher Education Institutions and 8 Colleges of Further Education in City of Dublin ETB.
- Services are co-located with Access or Disability Officers.
- The services focus on educational assessment of need and provision of learning and exam accommodations.
- This is augmented with student supports in skills development across areas such as academic skills and skills to support social inclusion and wellbeing.



NLN Case Studies

Case Study: Martha, 22 years old

Martha's Background:

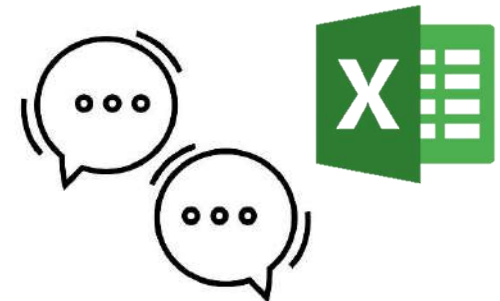
Martha achieved a Leaving Certificate but had difficulty with some of the daily living skills required for independence. Martha is Autistic. When she finished school, she did not feel ready for college. She thought she lacked the 'soft-skills' required to get a job.



Martha's Person-Centered Plan and Supports:

Martha wanted to learn how to look after herself in day-to-day life. She wanted to develop her employability skills and sample working life. She also wanted to keep playing basketball because it keeps her healthy and feeling well. She worked with her Rehabilitation Officer to make an individual skills development plan that suited her needs.

Martha found verbal and non-verbal communication challenging. With the support of her Instructor and peer group, she worked hard to develop her communication and listening skills. She also gained essential skills in Microsoft Excel which helped her to get a part-time job.

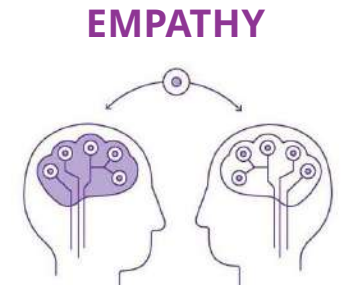


Case Study: Martha, 22 years old (continued)

Martha worked with the NLN Psychologist to develop her ability to stay on task. Staying focused on a task was a challenge, she would often get stuck on or distracted by the smaller details.



Martha worked through her course content at her own pace and, in her small group, she developed her decision-making skills and learned how to interact constructively with people, from a position of self awareness and social sensitivity.



Martha worked with her Rehabilitation Officer and Instructor in NLN to develop her personal effectiveness skills. Martha learned how to work independently and how to ask questions at appropriate times.

Outcomes:

Martha completed a Vocational Skills Foundation (VSF). She progressed to a Fast Track to Employment QQI Level 4 in NLN and completed a work placement with a large telecommunication company. She secured a part-time job and is excited about her career progression opportunities in the telecommunications industry.



Martha was thrilled to represent her province when she competed in the Special Olympics Basketball Competitions



Case Study: Kieran, 23 years old



Kieran's Background:

Kieran spent a lot of time in hospital in his final year of school. He has a long-term health condition and needed to take time off for medical procedures. He didn't get offered any of the courses he wanted after his Leaving Certificate and didn't know what to do. He began to experience mental health difficulties and became withdrawn. He eventually lost contact with most of his school friends.



Kieran's Person-Centred Plan and Supports:

Kieran wanted to identify his skills, interests and aptitudes and match them with opportunities available. He wanted to develop some wellness skills, learn how to manage his medications and how to look after himself better in day-to-day life. All of these goals were reflected in his personal plan.

Case Study: Kieran, 23 years old (continued)



As part of his course, Kieran's Instructor supported him to compile a personal profile which involved exploring his personal identity, likes/dislikes, strengths/skills and values in life. Kieran realised that he really loved learning about plants. It gave him a connection to nature that was hard to get in big cities. He hoped it would be possible to make a career out of this interest.

Outcomes:

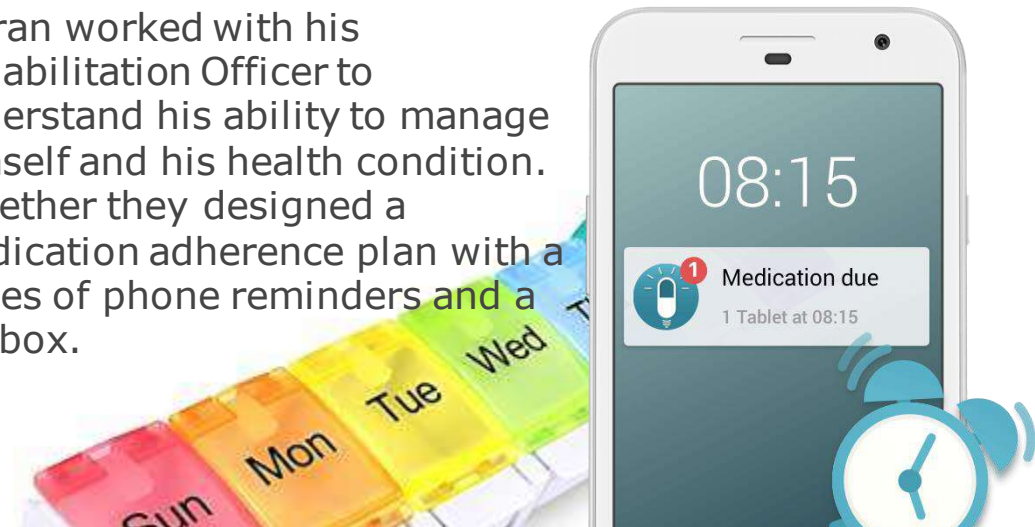
Kieran completed a Level 4 Horticulture course and as part of his course he completed a work placement in a local garden centre. After he graduated, he secured full-time employment in Kilruddery House and Gardens in Bray and reported that his health condition is back under control.



Kieran completed Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) training. With the support of his Psychologist, Kieran designed his own prevention and wellness toolkit. He now knows what activities keep him feeling well and can identify the early warning signs that tell him if things are slipping.

A form titled "Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)" with a "Traffic Light" section. It features a vertical scale of colored circles: green (labeled "Me Well"), white, yellow, orange, red, and light green. To the right of these circles are corresponding sections for "Daily Maintenance Plan:", "Triggers & Action Plan:", "Early Warning Signs & Action Plan:", "When Things Are Breaking Down & Action Plan:", "Crisis Plan:", and "Post Crisis Plan:". At the bottom, it states "The goal of Action Plan is to get back to 'Me Well.'"

Kieran worked with his Rehabilitation Officer to understand his ability to manage himself and his health condition. Together they designed a medication adherence plan with a series of phone reminders and a pill box.



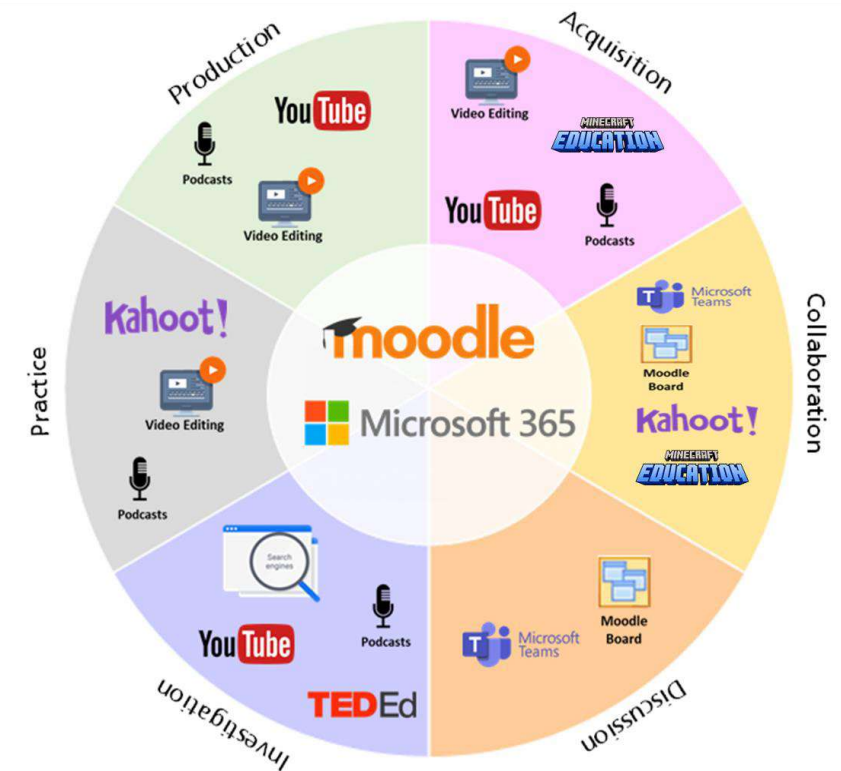
Innovation In Learning

Digital Skills Empowerment: NLN's Tech Wheel

The NLN Tech Wheel, introduced in March 2023 during the European Year of Skills, showcases a diverse range of digital tools like Office 365 and Kahoot, empowering instructors and students to integrate technology-enhanced learning into the classroom.

With the appointment of an E-Learning Teaching Enhancement Officer, regular training sessions are provided to instructors, ensuring seamless incorporation of technology.

Emphasising the benefits of digital and transversal skills for students, NLN aims to equip everyone to thrive in the digital age, leaving no one behind.



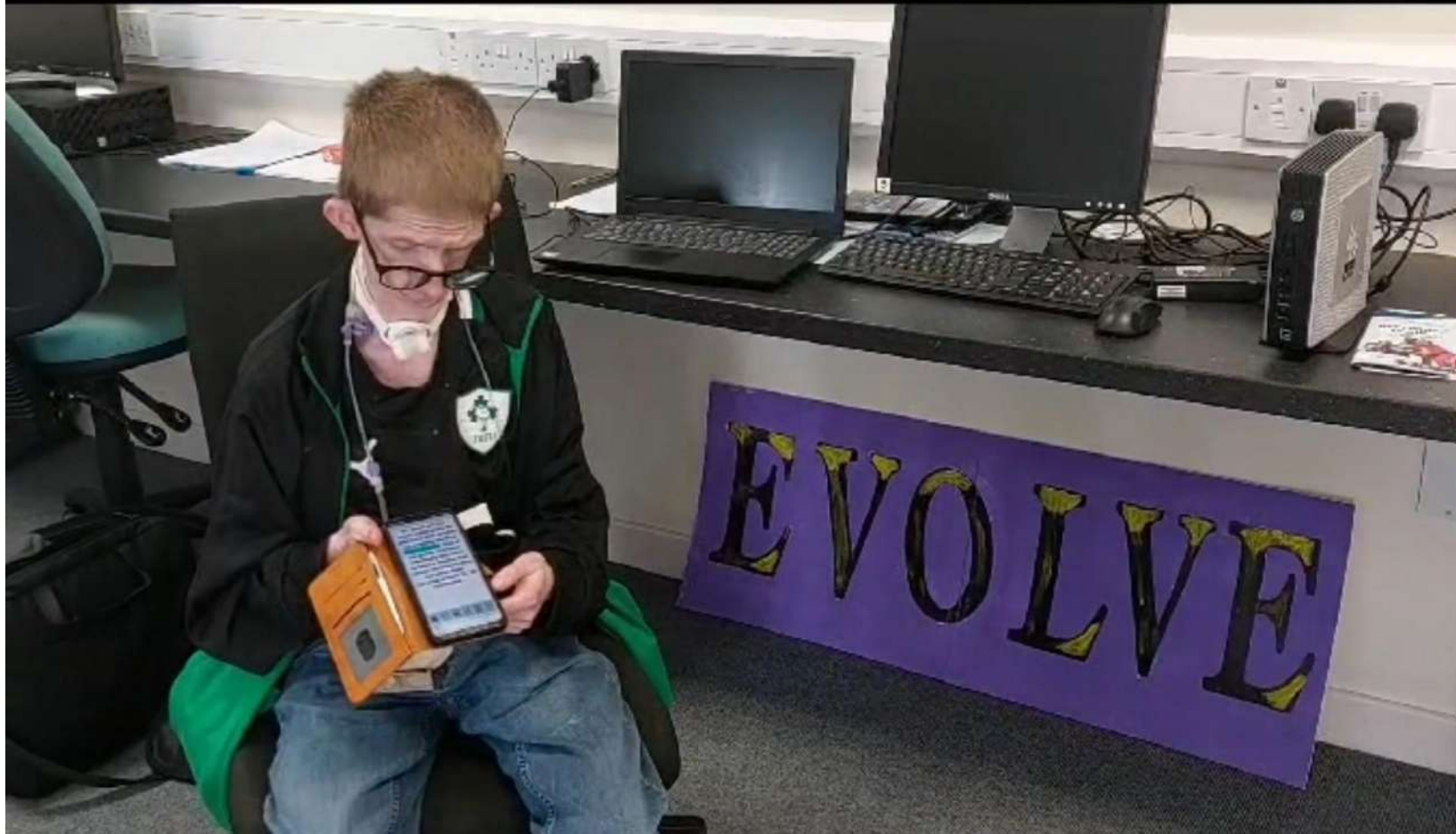
National Learning Network

**Showcasing the Tech Wheel in Action:
A Video Created by NLN Mullingar Skills for Life Students**



Video Link: [Tech Wheel in Action](#)

Assistive Technology



Video Link: [Assistive Technology](#)

Testimonials

The Student Voice

"Enrolling with National Learning Network has been a real life saver for me because **for the first time in a really long time, I believed I could change the direction of my life** and work in an area that was not only rewarding but where I really felt drawn to."

A former learner who had a very debilitating stroke described it like this:

"When I am at home, my wife wants the old me back, my children want the old me back, but when I am here, I'm just me and accepted for who I am now."

"I felt like I had hit rock bottom at the time. Luckily during this time a person from NLN gave a talk about the courses available to myself and others and it sounded like it was exactly what I needed. It was the first time in ages that I felt like someone was actually listening to me and willing to work with me to focus on my own strengths. **They really went above and beyond to find me work experience in my field and in my local area no less, which was no easy task.**"

"Before I started in here I was quite negative, I suffered really badly with anxiety as well, even my **Mum would say she can't get over the difference in me. I am very positive now. I have a completely different outlook in life.** A lady came in here (host company work experience) two weeks ago, I was chatting away to her for a few minutes and she said, "do you know what, you're a lovely girl".

The Student Voice

"You have all the support you need. **It's like someone taking your hand and taking you through your path to the next step of your life.**"

"If you're struggling with something or some of the work you can ring a tutor and they can talk you through it (during lockdown). There is always help there if needed, homely, like a family which is different to mainstream."

"You get to meet friends because of the way the centres are set up. Not too big. It is really great."

"I have a law degree and I practised as a solicitor but there is something that happens when your world falls down, everything you know, even **your degree seems useless because your mental health and everything around you is falling. You can't hold on to anything, so it was a huge setback for me and I was completely in my lowest of low.**

For me, being in NLN, I'm always reminded that I can do this, sometimes you completely forget that you are able to anything, even in my case, being well educated, you forget this, so **NLN helps you believe in yourself again, but in a more positive and safe environment to be able to do that.**

If you are struggling and not sure what to do next, this is the best decision you can make."

The Student Voice

"I am from Tallaght. I am a single parent with two children aged 15 and 10. I am employed as a Manager in a company that provides serviced offices to various companies.

I started in NLN at 16 with no education and no work experience. I started in NLN and I gained experience and built up my confidence. I had the opportunity to meet a diverse group of people with all different backgrounds and experiences. The atmosphere in NLN was always welcoming and relaxing. The instructors were always helpful and accommodating. NLN offers personalised training and assistance which was very beneficial for me.

I was able to do work experience including Hair Salons, Creches, Offices & Hotels. This helped me choose which job role I would like to pursue. I gained several valuable skills including CV Writing, Interview Preparation, Communication, Time Management & Teamwork to name just a few. My time in NLN contributed to my professional growth. I received invaluable support, education, and opportunities and for that I am very grateful."

Kate, NLN Ballyfermot student

A Parent's Perspective

"NLN has been responsible for giving H a sense of hope, and a sense of future. It has **enabled H to get up and get out back into the world, with a sense of purpose and confidence.**

She has engaged again with her peers, and has friends and a sense of self. All of the staff we have dealt with have been simply amazing, from the Instructors to the clinicians. There is a sense of a common empathy from them all to support the students in their path.

The level of support that she has had from the moment of her first interaction with NLN has been fantastic, and I could not envisage as an educator myself happening in any other services. **I can totally understand why St. Pat's would recommend NLN as it has been such an uplifting journey not only for H but us as a family."**

"The supports available to her in the centre helped her in general and with her academic and typing skills. Her confidence, social skills and independence improved immensely.

Ciara says she was anxious starting this course but once she met her tutors and other students, she was happy. **We were very worried the first day, but we have to say this course changed her life. We were both so proud when she walked into her first work experience.**

The chefs ended up her mentors and she gained the confidence to make a good group of friends which is especially important to her."

The Employer's Voice

Lee Coates – Manager Third Space Cafe

Third Space is a social enterprise business with a strong and natural social and community focus.

Our relationship with National Learning Network is a high point and is included in the measuring of our social impact.

The NLN team has facilitated and supported a valuable working relationship to enable numerous training placements in Third Space and it's our pleasure to share our skills, time and space to encourage and build confidence in those that come to train with us.

Currently Third Space employees include two full time managers who came to us through NLN, another who is now a highly confident customer service and coffee professional.

Another is now employed in our office and training for a professional HR certification and yet another who trained and then was employed in our kitchen and is now running his own food business. We would encourage any business to engage with NLN. It really is a win-win. The NLN learners gain great experience and new skills. Our customers tell us they enjoy supporting a business that works with NLN learners. Our team develops their own skills as they work alongside NLN learners

Employer B:

"We are delighted to have such a great working partnership with NLN, Cork. The course content, delivery and focus on customer service really manifests when we see the calibre of students that come to work for us."

Referral Agent A:

NLN "provide a learner with fantastic support "

In mainstream education / other training courses this support & personal development isn't often there. It is with NLN.

The Employer's Voice

"We have worked with NLN for almost five years. NLN committed to work with Mr. Price teams around the country to build the disability confidence and support the company as we strive for an accessible, inclusive work environment.

Our work together in the space of inclusive employment opportunities is evidence of this. Over 100 disabled students from NLN have secured jobs in our stores and in Head Office over three years. Together with NLN, we constantly challenge ourselves to do better and do more. In 2024, we will collaborate on increasing the employment rate of disabled higher education graduates to roles in Mr. Price.

We have seen that NLN provide much more than education and training. The personalised supports, coupled with equitable learning opportunities, are opening doors for disabled adults of all ages across the country.

NLN isn't just a college; it's a place where people can be themselves and get the support the need to succeed in education and training. The training and support is when a person needs it and at a time and a pace that suits their needs. This is one of the reasons, our relationship has been so successful."

The Clinician's Voice

**Dr. Eugene G. Breen, Consultant Psychiatrist,
Department of Adult Psychiatry, Mater
Hospital, Dublin**

"The National Learning Network is a crucial cross-bridge for many people who have suffered or are suffering from mental illness. **It enables them to pick up again the threads of their healthy lives. The professional approach, with attention to individual needs, makes it an inclusive place to heal and re-engage with normal living and the demands of a working life.** We look forward to working with you into the future and supporting many people back to recovery."

**Rita Ni Dhuineain, C. Psychol. PsSI
Principal Psychologist, National Learning
Network**

"Our students attain high levels of success in terms of progression to further education and employment through the specialist clinical and non-clinical support provided by NLN. While the way we support students is different to mainstream alternatives, the outcomes are similar. Our students take a different route, by coming to us because they need a specialist training experience. The care that we give to understanding and responding to the unique needs of each individual student is critical to their success. While lots of our student success is seen and measured, other more subtle, but life changing successes are achieved and celebrated on a daily basis."