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# Students with Disabilities on Placement: Guidance on the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations on Practice Based Professional Placements in Professionally Accredited Programmes

## Introduction

This article offers you a sneak peek into the most recent research by AHEAD, soon to be launched, on Reasonable Accommodations and Professional Placements (RAPP) titled, **Students with Disabilities on Placement: Guidance on the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations on Practice Based Professional Placements in Professionally Accredited Programmes**. This new Guidance will discuss the results of the research and the key themes emerging from it, and provides guidance about:

- **Understanding disability discrimination and fairness**
- **Identifying how professional courses can deliver success for disabled students**
- **Showing how equitable assessment of disabled students regarding competence standards can be assured by the provision of reasonable accommodations**
- **Learning from good practice examples.**

The guidance will support professionals in a range of roles including senior managers with responsibility for diversity and inclusion, quality improvement or course development and delivery, deans of schools/faculties, course leaders, preceptors, placement co-ordinators in both Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and placement locations, disability service staff and student union officers.

For information on the digital launch of the full RAPP Guidance go to the [RAPP Webpage](#) and register your email address we will send you a copy.

## Why This Work Was Needed

This research resulted from AHEAD and the Disability Advisors Working Network (DAWN) identifying issues arising for students with disabilities on professionally accredited programmes featuring practice-based placements. Concerns were that reasonable accommodations were not always provided on the practice-based professional placement element. Successfully completing these placements by demonstrating professional competency against the national standards, set by the relevant professional body, is an essential part of graduating to professional employment.

AHEAD's student participation data found that students with disabilities were underrepresented on courses in the fields of 'Health and Welfare' and 'Education' (Ahead, 2021a). Previous literature in Ireland shows that entry into teaching (Keane et al., 2018) and health professions may be a particular issue for disabled students. Despite a historic under-representation, there is an increasing number of students with disabilities engaging in professional placements (Nolan et al., 2015). Stakeholder evidence suggests that these students face a range of barriers

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including access to appropriate reasonable accommodations whilst on these placements. A lack of understanding by HEIs and placement providers of the need to provide appropriate reasonable accommodations to support students to meet national competency standards can be a barrier to students with disabilities accessing and completing these programmes. A failure to provide appropriate reasonable accommodations on placement has the potential to have a long-term impact on students' future employment ambitions and opportunities.

The over-arching aim of this research was to learn about the lived experiences of disabled students who were undertaking or had completed professional placements and to understand the perspectives and experiences of the professional staff who support or work alongside students in both the higher education institutions and the placement location.

AHEAD and DAWN, therefore, established the following research objectives:

- **Research and review barriers and examples of good practice to allow students with disabilities to achieve course competency standards in an appropriate manner**
- **Produce national guidance, including examples of good practice, to provide clarity and support on the application of reasonable accommodations in national competency-based courses.**

## Here's What We Did

The RAPP team, Barbara Waters and Dr Vivian Rath developed a three-phase qualitative research design to hear: the lived experience of disabled Higher Education (HE) undergraduates, graduates and Further Education and Training (FET) students who have experience of engaging in professional practice based placement; the perspectives of FET and HE staff and placement location stakeholders; and the views of professional bodies (AHEAD 2022).

Based on the data, AHEAD and DAWN identified the course programmes of Nursing and Midwifery, Health Professions and Teaching to review and research. In addition, the role of FET in offering alternative qualifying routes was included. The research was overseen by a Stakeholder Group.

## Here's What We Found

Six key themes were identified following the analysis. Those themes were:

1. **Equality legislation,**
2. **Disclosure,**
3. **Placement challenges and good practice,**
4. **Creating a culture of success and inclusion,**
5. **Role of professional and other statutory bodies, and**
6. **Mental health.**

And were followed by a discussion of the Further Education and Training pathways.

**Here is a condensed summary of some of the key research findings.**

The Student Voice

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- A majority of students reported a positive placement experience. They valued a supportive placement environment open to discussion and provision of reasonable accommodations. **They appreciated staff with a high level of disability awareness, and HEIs and placement providers with inclusive practices supported by clear structures.**
  - Some students were aware of reasonable accommodations being in place in advance of their placement. **A few students felt placement arrangements had been made without reference to, or discussion of, their needs assessment, and need for appropriate reasonable accommodations.**
  - A majority of students were found to have faced barriers to completion of their placement. Experiences which were perceived as negative included **an apparent lack of knowledge among staff around including students with disabilities and the equality duties of the providers.**

#### Staff Consultation Workshops with HEIs, placement providers and FET staff

- It was clear from the research that there was a need among staff involved in placement locations and in HEIs for greater disability awareness of reasonable accommodation provision, and **an increased understanding of the obligations of placement providers under the equality legislation and human rights duties.**
- The majority of staff considered assistive technology an important resource and reported that **a lack of a clear policy on the use of AT in the placement environment** created stress and anxiety for students.
- The decision by some students not to disclose their disability created significant challenges for staff when supporting students in the placement environment. It was felt that these difficulties could be overcome by **creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for disclosure, and by implementing a universal design approach.**
- Student mental health was considered a major concern for staff. They reported very high levels of anxiety among students. **There was a consensus that clear policies, information and access to support on placements was critical.**
- Whilst it was widely acknowledged that working through the COVID-19 pandemic posed major challenges. There was broad agreement that the changes made during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more inclusive teaching practices and created a more empathetic environment towards disability within education and work (AHEAD, 2022).

#### Feedback from professional bodies and other national organisations

Some professional bodies are aware that HEI and placement staff are not confident in applying reasonable accommodations that, in the view of the professional body, would be acceptable ways of demonstrating competence to the required standard. Some of the professional bodies are currently reviewing their guidance in relation to equality duties to make this clearer.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic CORU, The Teaching Council and NMBI provided advice on adjustments to assessment on placement with regard to alternative methods of demonstrating achievement of competence standards for all students. Both The Teaching Council and CORU have now published reflective reports. In reviewing these reports, the research team found that many of the solutions regarding changes in assessing learning outcomes under COVID-19 would be equally useful in understanding how appropriate reasonable accommodations for disabled students might be made in the future.

The full research findings can be found in the RAPP Guidance, details of when this will be launched are at the end

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of this article.

## Moving Forward – How we can improve?

**The Guidance offers recommendations under each of the six themes and the FET discussion.**

The research project has demonstrated the need for all those involved in teaching and learning and supporting disabled students to **understand better the impact disability discrimination has on the life chances of disabled students, both when studying and when moving into employment**. The concepts of fairness, equity and equality are important when making decisions on reasonable accommodations in all areas of study. This research shows the need to **be more explicit about responsibilities towards disabled students and staff when planning awareness training and continuing professional development (CPD)**. This relates to developing, delivering and reviewing courses leading to professional registration and which include a practice placement. The work of QQI supporting the importance of HEIs and PSRB's working together adds impetus to the active inclusion of equality and diversity matters in quality improvement

The possibilities offered by **moving towards an inclusive learning environment** will support changing institutional and workplace culture and attitudes and enable these recommendations for students with disabilities to be actioned more effectively within the wider Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategy.

The learning from the changes to assessment and placement procedures required by the COVID-19 pandemic for all students on courses leading to professional registration has created a new landscape for doing things differently, and this supports widening the options for reasonable accommodations on practice-based placements for disabled students on professionally-accredited programmes.

It is possible also to build on this work for further research, particularly across the further education sector in the areas of career guidance for students with disabilities when considering level 5 and 6 preparatory courses in further education, and in schools when reviewing options for applications to higher education. The recommendations on understanding disability discrimination and the opportunities for reasonable accommodations and advice on disclosure are equally relevant here. This guidance aims to offer an opportunity to reflect on current practice and build on it to secure the place for people with disabilities within the professions

## Where Can You Get Your Copy

You can get your copy of the full report from the 14th December 2022 by going to the [RAPP webpage](#). You can register your email address and we will email you a copy.

## References

AHEAD, (2022). **Students with Disabilities on Placement: Guidance on the Provision of Reasonable Accommodations on Practice Based Professional Placements in Professionally Accredited Programmes**. In Press. AHEAD Educational Press.

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### **Barbara Waters**

Journal Editor, AHEAD

Barbara Waters is the Project Lead on the Reasonable Accommodations, Professional Placements (RAPP) Project, Barbara was Chief Executive of Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, UK. 1996- 2010. Barbara represented Skill nationally on policy issues in education and disability related to post 16 education, training and employment. Since 2010 Barbara has worked as a researcher on further and higher education and disability. She was part of the LINK European network concerned with disabled students in higher education and has undertaken research on competence standards and learning outcomes in higher education for the Equality Challenge Unit, UK, published in 2015, looking particularly at Nursing, Teaching, Foreign Languages and STEM subjects. She was the evaluator of the Erasmus + programme on Universal Design for Learning completed in October 2016, and rapporteur for AHEAD Ireland in the MappED access programme with the Erasmus Student Network in 2017. Currently, she is the editor of the peer to peer Journal for AHEAD Ireland. She has an MA in Business and Public Sector Strategy and received an honorary doctorate from the Open University, UK.



### **Dr Vivian Rath**

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Vivian is the Organiser of the National Disabled Postgraduate Advisory Committee and the TCD Forum for Disabled Staff and Postgraduate Students.

Vivian is an academic, a human and disability rights advocate and a change maker. He is currently an Adjunct Teaching Fellow in Trinity College Dublin (TCD) School of Education and the Research Officer with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD). His Ph.D, titled the "social engagement experiences of disabled students in higher education in Ireland", focused on the areas of disabled student social engagement, transitions, voice and belonging.

