

#nolearnerleftbehind

White paper

Reasonable adjustments and beyond: how to remove barriers to learning.

Many learners still face significant barriers that prevent their success in education.

In 2018, research by the Department for Education found that 25% of FE learners and apprentices who did not complete their programme were identified as disabled.¹

Why did disabled learners make up a quarter of non-completions? What about learners without a formal diagnosis?

There are many other learners with unidentified needs, who also fall through the gaps because providers simply don't know that these learners require support. So, the number could have been even higher than 25 per cent in reality.

Our data shows that roughly one in every three people are neurodiverse in a way that requires support.² We cannot ignore this fact, but we know that many people are unsure on how to approach learners who require additional support.

Educators want to do the right thing, and tutors will often put hours and hours of extra work into supporting learners. However, using a trial-and-error approach to provide support can be exhausting for tutors, demoralising for learners and simply unworkable at scale.

Technological and learner-centred innovations have been on the horizon of education for years.

Recent events have fast-tracked the necessity of these advancements and shown the importance of providing secure opportunities for learners who may be at a greater risk of non-completion.

Using cognitive assessment and evidence-based support helps to demystify learning needs and focuses on practical solutions that work at scale. Learners with identified learning needs can be allocated relevant reasonable adjustments at end-point assessment, based on existing guidelines from the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education.

We all know there is a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled learners under the Equality Act 2010. However, there are few attempts for learners without a formal diagnosis who have identified needs and still require support.

We can do more to break down barriers to learning and ensure all learners receive the support they need to achieve success.

Who needs to know what?

“Past the age of 16, young people with learning difficulties or disabilities comprise one of the groups most likely not to be in education, employment or training.”³

This white paper seeks to support colleges, employers, independent training providers (ITPs), end-point assessment organisations (EPAOs) and any organisations claiming Learning Support Funding (LSF). We outline the necessary proactive steps to implement reasonable adjustments, as part of the support provisions for apprentices with learning disabilities or difficulties (LDD).

All decision-makers need to ensure they are doing their part to implement reasonable adjustments and create more inclusive learning environments that consider learners' individual needs. We'll tell you exactly where your responsibility lies and the full process when it comes to understanding reasonable adjustments.

The main aim is to improve your learners' journey and make education, especially your end-point assessment, fairer for all learners.

What are reasonable adjustments?

In the Equality Act 2010, reasonable adjustments are defined as the means taken to avoid a substantial disadvantage that a learner may face due to their disability.

These adjustments are split into three categories: ⁴

1. **Provisions, criteria and practices.** For example, providing targeted learning interventions based on an apprentice's specific needs throughout their programme.
2. **Physical features.** For example, choosing an end-point assessment location for an apprentice with fibromyalgia, arthritis or a wheelchair that is accessible by automatic doors and has either a lift or a ground-floor assessment room.
3. **Provision of an auxiliary aid.** For example, using colour overlays for apprentices who experience visual disturbances when reading due to Irlen syndrome or dyslexia.

However, times have changed since 2010. Other government rules and regulations have become more inclusive and flexible. Yet, the application of Equality Act 2010 doesn't take into account the needs of learners who don't receive a formal diagnosis but still experience day to day difficulties with their learning. The lack of consensus can only leave providers unsure about their obligations and industry best practices.

The truth is that many people are unaware of the importance and impact of reasonable adjustments. Each reasonable adjustment is a small but necessary step towards inclusivity in education, and they are a core part of providing quality education. Higher Education has a far greater provision when it comes to reasonable adjustments, and it's vital we address the shortfall in the apprenticeship and skills sector quickly.

The good news is that providers don't have to turn existing provisions on their head – they are, after all, called reasonable adjustments. Instead, it's about working alongside learners, tailoring their support, and implementing changes to their education that are proportionate and provide learners with the means to achieve a legitimate aim.

Why are they important?

Reasonable adjustments are all about flexibility and equality.

We want to encourage discussions around reasonable adjustments on a case-by-case basis to discover the most effective ways to support learners' individual needs.

For example, this could be through personalised learning strategies targeted to specific needs, extra time to meet deadlines, one-to-one time with tutors to ask questions, additional resource materials, equipment or software to support their needs. Tutors should be aware of the different ways to support their learner's needs and receive training and support on how to adapt their communication methods.

These reasonable adjustments will have a direct impact on a learner's journey and their end-point assessment after Gateway.

It is an incredibly unfortunate reality that the hard work of the employer, education provider, tutor and learner can be completely undone through unintentional discriminatory barriers at end-point assessment. Reasonable adjustments are there to prevent this kind of scenario and avoid non-completion of learners who otherwise perform well and are capable of doing their job.

Cognition, inclusivity and reasonable adjustments

“In general, a learning disability constitutes a condition which affects learning and intelligence across all areas of life, whereas a learning difficulty constitutes a condition which creates an obstacle to a specific form of learning, but does not affect the overall IQ of an individual.”⁵

People with specific learning difficulties are often smart and capable people, but they regularly face discrimination because their brain works differently. Within education and employment, it is essential that all individuals are afforded the same opportunities, and that we work towards removing the stigma that some people may experience.

For example, many individuals don't disclose their disabilities, SEN, or additional learning needs in their application forms because they feel embarrassed or scared about sharing this information.

In 2018/19, the Department for Education (DfE) published statistics that show just 12% of people starting an apprenticeship declared that they had a Learning Difficulty or Disability (LDD).⁶ This number falls short of what we would expect, given that our data shows that over 30% have a neurodiversity that requires additional support.⁷

Another factor contributing to the discrepancy in these figures is that apprentices may not be aware of their LDD. These hidden needs can potentially go unidentified for years into their adulthood and create unintentional yet insidious barriers to their progress.

Starting a wider conversation around neurodiversity and the ways we think and learn will help to raise awareness in the industry. Creating a more inclusive environment for learners, and indeed employees, who are encouraged to share and embrace their unique cognition.

All tutors will have experience working with learners who have low attainment. Often, they are disengaged from learning, seemingly inattentive, and lack self-esteem. These learners might miss deadlines or turn up late for classes and meetings, creating friction between the tutor and the learner. But what's underneath this behaviour?

On assessment of these learners, we have found that they can identify with a need in executive function, which affects problem-solving abilities, concentration, organisation, prioritising tasks, among other traits. With this understanding comes a greater level of empathy, tutors can see that these behaviours aren't intentional.

With some adjustments and better coping strategies, we have seen that learners can become much more engaged in learning, have greater self-esteem, and it creates a better relationship between the learner and tutor.

Executive function is just one of eight key domains essential for thinking and learning. The others are literacy, numeracy, visual information processing speed, non-verbal memory, visual perception, verbal reasoning and verbal memory.

Hidden needs in one or more of these domains can present real barriers to learning. We know there is more scope to determine learners' needs than through often expensive and scarcely available reports from educational psychologists.

Supporting learners effectively throughout education plays a key role in addressing the skills gaps and building a more resilient and capable workforce.

Where does your responsibility lie?

“The evidence shows that equity can go hand-in-hand with quality; and that reducing school failure strengthens individuals’ and societies’ capacities to respond to recession and contribute to economic growth and social wellbeing.”⁸

Equality should be synonymous with quality in education and employment.

Now more than ever, it is vital that educators focus on ways to support disadvantaged learners and increase equality in education. There is also a growing need to increase diversity and employment opportunities in the workforce.

For educators, it’s all about quality. Support provisions at every stage of the learner’s journey, including their end-point assessment, make a huge difference to a learner’s experience and achievement. Merely following the letter of the law is not enough.

These provisions make the difference between a “good” and “outstanding” Ofsted inspection; they make the difference between completion and non-completion; and they change the lives of people who would otherwise have been denied opportunities.

For employers, making your business more diverse and inclusive has benefits for everyone involved. There is clear evidence that entry-level vocational learners who have low attainment still have high aspirations.⁹ Supporting them into secure employment, with opportunities for career progression gives them a real sense of purpose, and they can become incredibly loyal employees.

Reasonable adjustments are simple but profound measures that help to provide equal opportunities. Your role in this process matters. Your drive to deliver high-quality and ambitious prospects cannot be fulfilled if you are ignoring the needs of individuals and failing to support all learners to achieve.

So, how can you help?

The employer:

“Having the right amount of cognitive style diversity is important for team performance. Teams with too little cognitive diversity may lack the cognitive capacity to tackle tasks that require different ways of encoding and processing information[.]”¹⁰

Embracing cognitive diversity can be a real asset to employers. Yet, according to the learning disability charity, Mencap, “the reasons why people are unlikely to be forthcoming with their support needs are that they are concerned about the reaction they may get from employers, should they do so.”¹¹

Therefore, it’s vital that employers encourage a supportive working environment and help to remove the stigma associated with learning difficulties and disabilities to provide equal opportunities and access to employment.

For apprenticeships, many employers sub-contract their 20 per cent off-the-job training to independent providers, and with it also sub-contract a lot of the responsibility around reasonable adjustments.

However, employers have a choice about which providers they work alongside and can, therefore, influence the level of support their employees receive.

In the same report from Mencap, they recommended that, “the Department for Education make it a requirement for apprenticeship training providers to make available a cognitive assessment to every apprentice they think would benefit from doing such an assessment, as well as any apprentice who requests such an assessment.”¹²

This recommendation formed part of their best practices for supporting learners with LDD, and they noted, “that some providers are already using digital assessments to ensure that they can better support individuals on their learner journey[.]”¹³

Even when the responsibility does not fall directly with employers, they should be aware of the support provisions their employees can access throughout their apprenticeship. It’s also important to note that employers can make reasonable adjustments through Access to Work funding. If an employee is receiving reasonable adjustments during their 20 per cent off-the-job training, employers can take steps to replicate these adjustments for the individual within the workplace.

With these measures, employers can be sure they’re doing everything they can to support their staff and create an employee-focused environment that promotes wellbeing, increases job satisfaction and productivity.

The training provider:

“Over the past eight years, more than 40 per cent of people who started an apprenticeship in the UK did not achieve their apprenticeship.”¹⁴

There is no doubt that the lack of reasonable adjustments has a role to play in such consistently low achievement rates. Training providers need to be aware that they are still required to support apprentices with LDD after Gateway.

Apprenticeship achievement is not recorded until the apprentice passes their end-point assessment, which essentially means the learner is still on programme and the provider still has a responsibility to support that apprentice. However, it also means that providers can still claim funding to support their learners during end-point assessment, not just until they reach Gateway.

Training providers are responsible for outlining and applying for reasonable adjustments during end-point assessment. It is not, as many might think, the EPAO who is responsible for these adjustments. Training providers will have supported each learner throughout their programme, which naturally means they have the best idea on how to apply this support during end-point assessment.

However, the main issue for many providers is that they often struggle to identify learning difficulties. When people don’t present with distinct educational needs or self-declare during their onboarding process, they can be wrongly overlooked, and it may become too late to support that learner. Learners who don’t disclose an identified need can also access support if the provider has identified a need themselves and can provide evidence.

The ESFA funding rules state, “This includes individuals who self-declare a learning difficulty or disability, and those who do not have a diagnosis of a learning difficulty or disability but in relation to whom the main provider has identified to us a learning need.”¹⁵

This requirement is reflected in the ESFA legislation change for Learning Support Funding (LSF). Providers should be aware that they can claim additional funding to support learners they identify with LDD, and this funding can be used to implement reasonable adjustments related to their assessed needs.

You can also consult with your EPAO if you are unsure about which reasonable adjustments you should implement for your LDD learners in their EPA plan.

The end-point assessment organisation and awarding organisations

“[O]ur General Conditions, which continue to apply to all end-point assessments include requirements on awarding organisations to have in place clear arrangements for making Reasonable Adjustments.”¹⁶

Through conversations with EPAOs, we know there have been occasions where individuals who clearly have learning difficulties turn up to their EPA and no reasonable adjustments have been discussed or put in place. Situations like this one put EPAOs in a difficult position, one which could have been avoided at various points in the process.

EPAOs should have a clear idea of reasonable adjustments that can and should be applied for LDD learners and be prepared to discuss these with training providers. It will be your job to ensure the agreed reasonable adjustments are registered and put in place ahead of the assessment, making sure the assessor understands the adjustments and that they are carried out on the day.

The learner:

“When learners participate in decisions affecting their learning experience, they are likely to play a more active role in the provider’s quality improvement processes – a key lever of service improvement.”¹⁷

Personalisation is the key to inclusive education, and creating learner-centred processes can help to engage more learners. In a recent survey of apprentices, the most “Common reasons given for dissatisfaction included a lack of support or contact from training providers (50% of those who were dissatisfied) [.]”¹⁸ Learners want to know they are getting the most out of their education, and this requires a personalised approach to the learner journey.

Learners, therefore, need to be part of the conversation around identifying and implementing reasonable adjustments. Failing to support learners at end-point assessment can have disastrous consequences, “The most common reason for being unlikely to complete an apprenticeship was a perceived lack of support from employer and / or training provider (68%) [.]”¹⁹

Again, the learner’s negative experience focuses around a lack of support. Improving a learner’s journey based on their learning profile helps to provide a more engaging learning experience and, most importantly, reduces negative outcomes.

How do you identify and implement reasonable adjustments?

Many people think reasonable adjustments simply mean extra time in exams, but there are many ways educators can provide meaningful yet measured adaptations for LDD learners.

The End-point Assessment Reasonable Adjustments Guidance²⁰, published by the DfE in collaboration with others in the sector, including the Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education and Cognassist, has worked to establish the reasonable adjustments to be made during a learner's EPA.

The matrix supports EPAOs to provide consistent and suitable judgements on their assessment methods determined in the employers/training provider's EPA plan, without changing the demands of the assessment.

This matrix may act only as a recommendation, but it is based around the Higher Education Statistical Authority's (HESA) disability grouping framework.²¹ Each disability/difficulty is overlaid with listed assessment methods to ensure the most suitable adjustments are made for each learner on a case-by-case basis.

This policy works as an essential guide to provide apprentice-centred EPAs. Naturally, each assessment is subject to some variance due to the apprentice's job role, employment context and support needs, and should be adapted as necessary.

Some flexibility is required, and all adjustments should be discussed with learners to make sure they are comfortable with the changes. The assigned adjustments for the EPA should accurately reflect the additional support that the learner has received throughout their apprenticeship.

Applying this matrix, providers and EPOAs can make specific adjustments depending on the assessment type the learner receives. We want to avoid inconsistencies and prevent learners from falling through the gaps, so it's important to have a clear understanding of the end-to-end process of implementing reasonable adjustments.

Free handbook: how to understand and implement reasonable adjustments

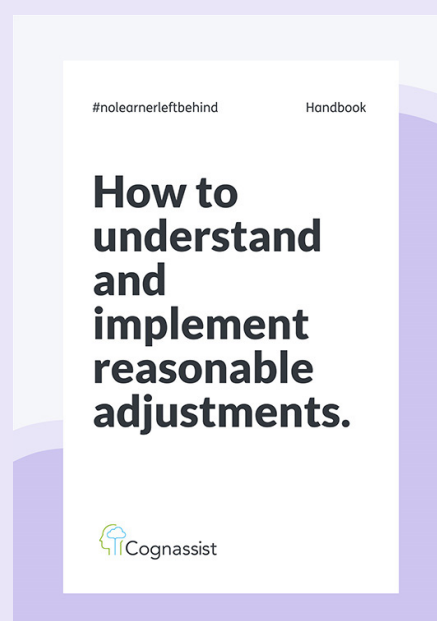
Implementing reasonable adjustments in your organisation is easier than you think.

In this practical handbook, we break reasonable adjustments down into 5 simple steps. To help you improve the learner journey and transform completion rates.

What's included?

- Where reasonable adjustments have the most impact for learners
- A matrix for identifying the best reasonable adjustments to drive learner success
- Guidance to create a successful application for your awarding organisation
- Best practices on evidencing and execution

Download now at [Cognassist.me/RAhandbook](https://cognassist.me/RAhandbook)



A collective responsibility

“Significantly, the group perceived by many to be the most challenging (for which read problematic) – the most disengaged young people who do not hold a statement of SEN – fall outside the provisions of both these initiatives, raising important questions about the Government’s broader commitment to developing a more inclusive society.”²²

We’ve talked about individual responsibilities when it comes to implementing reasonable adjustments, but they are just one part of an international inclusivity and accessibility agenda. This agenda will be vital to post-Covid recovery, and it requires the efforts of policymakers, board members and all key decision-makers within individual organisations and government bodies around the world.

We are all working towards the goal of greater inclusivity in education. The UK Government has rightly committed to “raising awareness of protected characteristics, our responsibilities and the benefits of diverse and inclusive teams. Educating our workforce to improve understanding of barriers faced by particular groups so that all employees can help to remove these barriers[.]”²³

Having a business strategy on increasing inclusion and diversity is a vital step towards this goal. Although, knowing how to action this strategy is what matters, and this is much harder to pin down. One of the ways the Charity Commission will measure progress on their diversity and inclusion strategy is through “learning and development data”. Cognitive science can provide incredible insight into data on learning and development. These rigorous and well-established methods can give organisations unparalleled knowledge on learner starting points and engagement. It also allows organisations to establish a data-driven approach to many of their key investment decisions.

Cognitive assessments also help to address socio-economic issues, “If self-confidence is important for the effective agency of deprived communities, so is a reasoned understanding of the difficult barriers that must be faced and overcome.”²⁴ We cannot fully understand and overcome barriers in education without a fundamental knowledge of how individual’s think and learn.

The disadvantage gap is widening. Currently, around one in five young people leave education without basic qualifications.²⁵ Of these learners, 45 per cent of children with Special Educational Needs leave education at 18 without reaching level 2 attainment, compared to only 18 per cent of all 18-year-olds.²⁶

Being able to identify and support learners who face barriers in education effectively will help to address inequality and provide opportunities for more learners, regardless of their previous qualifications or background. Educators need to adapt if they are to thrive post-Covid and, more importantly, if their learners are to thrive as well.

“[I]n order to generate social change, we first need to understand how power is distributed and can be re-distributed between and within social groups”²⁷

Reasonable adjustments are a way to ensure LDD learners are not at a disadvantage to their peers.

Changing our approach within the industry standards will ensure better outcomes for all, and every reasonable step we take towards this goal is a step further towards developing a more inclusive environment for learners and improving education as a whole.

No learner should be left behind.

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