

## Are We There Yet?

Improving lifelong and life wide learning journeys for disabled people  
9<sup>th</sup> June 2016, Perth College UHI



*Morning plenary session with Shirley Anne Somerville MSP, Frankie McLean and Dame Anne Begg*

### Aims of our conferences

Lead Scotland enables disabled young people and adults to access inclusive learning opportunities. At a local level, we do this by providing direct support to learners through person-centred learning opportunities and individualised support to help them plan their learning journeys. At a national level, we provide information and advice on the full range of post-school learning opportunities, as well as influencing and informing policy development.

Our annual conferences allow us to bring together a wide range of partners to discuss and debate key issues around supporting learners with additional support needs, and help identify and take forward a range of actions to deliver real change.

## Policy Context

Disabled people account for a significant proportion of Scotland's population, and make a vital contribution to our economy, culture and public life. Yet, they experience considerable inequalities in relation to education, employment and overall life chances. In comparison with their non-disabled counterparts, disabled people are around twice as likely to be unemployed<sup>1</sup>, around 3 times as likely not to hold any qualifications<sup>2</sup> and twice as likely to live in poverty<sup>3</sup>.

Removing the barriers to inclusive learning and employment is therefore vital in terms of improving educational attainment and earning potential, reducing reliance on welfare benefits and facilitating access to life-enhancing experiences.

The Scottish Government's refreshed Employability Framework recognises the effect of recent developments on individuals' employability and life chances, including:

- The difficult economic conditions
- The ongoing effects of welfare reform
- The reform of public services and recent spending cuts
- Measures being introduced through the reform of post-16 education

Many of these developments disproportionately affect people with additional support needs, making it imperative to work towards improving employment outcomes for a group already facing significant barriers to the labour market.

## The Situation

The last decade has seen steadily increasing numbers of disabled people in Scotland requiring lifelong and life wide learning opportunities, in order to work, volunteer and sustain positive health and wellbeing. This is in part due to a rise in disclosure rates following sector wide improvements to equalities monitoring practice. There are also growing numbers of people now satisfying the legal definition of disability under the 2010 Equality Act, and a rising trend in the prevalence of people with specific impairments, such as mental health problems, dyslexia and autism.

## The Challenge

The Equality Act requires learning providers to offer a more inclusive and integrated approach to delivering support and adjustments, whilst a breadth of knowledge and expertise is necessary in order to engage and retain disabled people with a range of specific impairments. Practitioners have expressed the importance of a shift towards inclusive approaches that promote independence in order to prepare young people for the world of work. So how can learning providers ensure they are responding to the appetite for learning opportunities and meeting increasingly specific needs, in creative and inclusive ways, with limited resources?

Lead Scotland's 2016 national conference aims to bring together a diverse range of partners across the college, university, skills, health and community learning sectors to meet new and emerging challenges, develop important networks, showcase new

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<sup>1</sup> The Annual Population Survey, March 2013

<sup>2</sup> Labour Force Survey, Quarter 2, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Employers' Forum on Disability, 2012

technologies and share examples of effective strategies, partnerships and programmes to meet the challenge.

This year's conference put the spotlight on some of the current areas professionals and learners have identified as a priority:

- Supporting the increasing number of learners experiencing mental health difficulties
- Improving post-school transitions
- Effectively supporting learners with sensory impairments
- Inclusive approaches: integrating support and adjustments into learning settings
- The role of technology and digital spaces in mainstreaming support, widening access to learning and developing the young workforce

## Conference contributors

### Chair



#### **Dame Anne Begg**

Elected in 1997, Dame Anne was the first wheelchair user to sit in the House of Commons in modern times. During her time in the Commons, she served on the Scottish Affairs Select Committee and, from 2001, the Work and Pensions committee which she chaired from 2010-15 during a time of unprecedented welfare reform. She was a secondary school

English teacher in Angus schools for 19 years and the Labour MP for Aberdeen South for 18 years until she lost her seat in May 2015.

### Speakers



**Shirley-Anne Somerville MSP**, Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science returned to the Scottish Parliament in 2016 as the member for the Dunfermline constituency after previously serving as an MSP for the Lothians region from 2007 to 2011.

She has worked as a parliamentary researcher, Policy and Public Affairs Officer at the Chartered Institute of Housing and as a Media and Campaigns

Officer at the Royal College of Nursing. This is her first ministerial role.



Currently Operations Manager at Deaf Action, **Frankie McLean** was born as a fourth generation Deaf child into a proud Scottish, Deaf family having British Sign Language as its first language. Frankie holds a BSc (Hons) in Immunology & Pharmacology, a BA (Hons) in Social Work, and a Graduate Certificate in Practice Learning. Working in the field of deafness for well over a decade as an active

practitioner and manager, Frankie has engaged in a wide range of work across specialities encompassing research, education, project management, strategic planning and overseas work.



**Vonnie Sandlan** is NUS Scotland President for 2016/17 and the first woman and parent appointed to the position.

Vonnie has a keen interest in the role education can play in securing social justice. Working to improve access to education - particularly for those from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds – is a top priority for her. Vonnie is also an advisor to the board of Who Cares? Scotland, a national

voluntary organisation providing advocacy, advice and support services across Scotland for children and young people with experience of care.



**Keith Smyth** is Professor of Pedagogy at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), where he leads the Learning and Teaching Academy and works across the UHI partnership on strategic learning and teaching developments, funded projects, and supporting staff to engage in educational research. Keith has a particular interest in technology-enhanced learning, and in a previous role led a professionally

accredited and award-winning MSc Blended and Online Education for teachers and educators. Keith has been involved in a range of projects and initiatives focused on harnessing technology to support inclusive educational practices, co-creative pedagogies and curriculum models, and open educational practice.

**Dame Anne Begg** opened the conference and set the scene, asking us to consider throughout the day just how far we have come in the last decade in appropriately supporting disabled learners to reach their full potential in lifelong and life wide learning settings, reflecting on how much change had happened during her career firstly as a teacher and then as a politician.

**Shirley Anne Somerville MSP** addressed the conference in her first public appearance as the new Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science. Ms Somerville acknowledged the importance of joined up partnership working in enabling and empowering disabled people to realise their potential, with particular reference to a need for planning and collaboration across the transitional stages. Ms Somerville pledged the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring the individual needs of disabled people are met when accessing formal and non-formal learning at any age and when looking for work.

Ms Somerville also gave an overview of the newly devolved powers Scotland will have from April 2017, commenting on the potential positive impact designing and delivering employability support could have on disabled people's economic participation and to bridge the current employment and qualifications gap. Ms Somerville had to leave after her speech for first ministers questions but asked Lead Scotland to ensure questions from the day reach her. Please email [info@lead.org.uk](mailto:info@lead.org.uk). Ms Somerville has accepted an invitation to discuss the priorities around widening access to learning for disabled people further with Lead Scotland and other key stakeholders.

**Frankie McLean**, Operations Manager for Deaf Action began with a personal account of his own experience in accessing education as a Deaf child. Frankie reflected on the unhelpful attitudes and lowered expectations he regularly experienced as a child, with teachers warning he would struggle to succeed in mainstream education or to achieve very much in life. Sadly he said, these attitudes can still be common place for young deaf people.

He went on to say that the new BSL (Scotland) Act should be celebrated as a historic step towards improving access to the language, but emphasised that legislation is not enough. Despite the introduction of the Equality Act six years ago, too many young deaf people are still leaving school without any qualifications – a shocking 8.9% in comparison to 1% of their hearing peers. This stark statistic grabbed the attention of the whole lecture theatre and served to highlight the attainment disparity between deaf and hearing people.

Frankie commented that we need to go beyond 'reasonable adjustments', as reasonable isn't good enough, we need to 'be aiming for perfection'. Frankie wants to see more money invested in young Deaf people at an earlier stage. Deaf rather

than hearing staff carrying out assessments with deaf students and improved levels of BSL amongst mainstream learning staff. Frankie finished by putting out a call to action – pro-actively engage with young Deaf people more, ask them how they feel and what they're thinking as they're more likely to struggle to have a voice than their hearing or non-disabled peers.

[To access Frankie McLean's full speech, click here.](#)

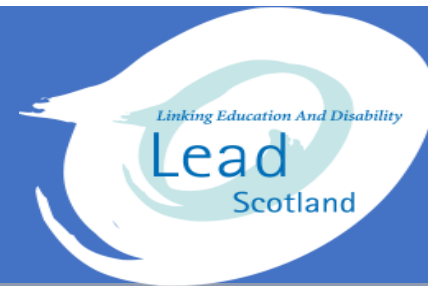
Delegates were undoubtedly inspired by Frankie's address, which was evident from twitter, the post-conference survey monkey as well as feedback on the day,

"I thought Frankie and Vonnie were both inspirational and brought both insight and humour to their comments." (Delegate, on survey monkey)

"This is powerful stuff. I'm very proud to be here for @UkAdept today. Deaf students deserve better." #leadconf16 (Delegate, on twitter)

"Frankie McLean from @DeafAction is presenting to #LeadConf16 just now. Witty and smart, and incredibly insightful."

# Morning Workshops



Delegates attending Deaf Action's workshop, *"Help! We have a Deaf student."* Stress-free processes to admitting Deaf students onto your course

Transitions and employability were clear themes emerging from the morning workshops which sought to explore how students with specific impairments could best be supported to succeed in post-school learning. Contributors including **Dyslexia Scotland**, **Deaf Action**, **CHAS**, **RNIB** and **Autism Network Scotland** focussed on transitions from child to adult services and from school to college/university as well as from learning to work; while **Skills Development Scotland** explored how successful partnership working was contributing to effectively supporting more young disabled people to take part in national employability training programmes.

**Dyslexia Scotland's** workshop gave delegates the opportunity to consider how they could adequately prepare dyslexic learners to make the transition from learning into the workplace with a focus on self-advocacy, declaring dyslexia to an employer and understanding rights and reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act. Delegates said,

"Fiona, as always, offers an excellent presentation. Particularly helpful (to me) was the employment (and Equalities) context." (Survey Monkey)

"Fiona is very knowledgeable about the subject, and has an excellent method of delivery. Good speed, lots of information without being overwhelmed." (Survey Monkey)

**Deaf Action** came hot on the heels of Frankie's earlier inspiring plenary address, delivering another popular workshop which sought to help participants deepen their knowledge and understanding of supporting deaf students moving into post-school education, as well as effectively working with sign language interpreters. The experiential session gave delegates an opportunity to gain some perspective on the challenges interpreters face when having to move between two very different language systems at lightning speed as well as how difficult trying to lip read can actually be for deaf people. The session also clarified the key differences between interpreters and communication support workers and offered practical information and advice on working with and booking interpreters.

"Very informative and interactive session." (Survey Monkey)

"Great at putting us in the Deaf person's shoes." (Survey Monkey)

"Excellent workshop providing an insight into the challenges faced by deaf students, and also practical advice and guidance which can be used to improve accessibility and the overall learning experience for deaf students."  
(Survey Monkey)

[To access all the slides from the morning workshops please click here.](#)





*Keith Smyth, Vonnie Sandlan and Dame Anne Begg at the afternoon plenary session*

**Professor Keith Smyth's** talk, 'How Inclusive is Open Education?' kicked off the afternoon plenary session, asking delegates to consider the as yet unharnessed potential of open places and digital spaces in widening access to education for disabled and disadvantaged learners. Keith reflected on the rapidly expanding availability of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in recent years, but questioned whether they are truly reaching the people who could benefit from them most, or if they are currently serving to amplify the education, and voices, of engaged learners already qualified at higher level.

Keith highlighted examples from across the UK of grassroots projects that were going further to engage disenfranchised and disadvantaged learners, sometimes using blended learning where participants could opt to learn in a physical space, an online space, or both. Keith also talked about why we need open education and what purpose it serves in our communities, touching on themes of democratic renewal and active citizenship. Keith concluded with an invitation for collaboration and partnership working between UHI's and delegates from across the spectrum of post-16 learning to bring their innovative blended learning programmes to more learners across Scotland.

"Discussing good practice of [#wideningaccess](#) examples <http://freeuniversitybrighton.org/> & [#raggedproject](#) [#leadconf16](#)" (Delegate on Twitter)

“@smythkrs highlighting fantastic work of @laperryman and @celTatis in #openeducation & #inclusion #leadconf16” (Delegate on Twitter)

Keith was more insightful and very informative, while challenging his own sector at the same time (Delegate on Survey Monkey)

“I would love to see the presentation from Keith Smyth again.” (Delegate on Survey Monkey)

[To access slides from Keith Smyth’s talk click here.](#)

Despite being the last speaker of the day, **Vonnie Sandlan** of NUS Scotland captivated the audience with her funny yet brutally honest account of struggling to cope as both a single parent and a mature student while experiencing deteriorating mental health problems as a result of post-natal psychosis. Vonnie commented on the lack of appropriate joined up mental health support services for students, despite the increasing prevalence of poor mental health and wellbeing amongst the student population in Scotland. Factors like financial issues, social isolation, exam stress, moving away from home and coping with the transition can all contribute to poor student mental health, Vonnie said.

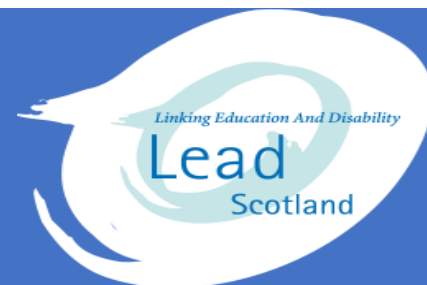
Improved support for mental ill health is clearly an issue students feel passionately about, when representatives voted it as one of their top three priorities for NUS Scotland’s Shaping Scotland’s Future Campaign. [NUS Scotland’s ‘think positive about student mental health’ project](#) aims to improve support, reduce stigma, tackle discrimination and promote wellbeing. As part of the project, two key resources have been produced that have a focus on self-management for students and ending stigma and discrimination while promoting the use of reasonable adjustments in colleges and universities. Both resources are available from the think positive website link above.

#leadconf16 @NUS\_Vonnie still a problem for young people moving to uni/college in new city needing to access adult mental health services. (Delegate on Twitter)

“Frankie and vonnie very inspiring.” (Delegate on Survey Monkey)

“I felt Frankie and Vonnie in particular were exceptional speakers; both inspirational in their own completely different way.” (Delegate on Survey Monkey)

# Afternoon Workshops



*Participants using arts & crafts to create powerful messages for young people as part of Aye Mind's workshop.*

The afternoon workshops were delivered by **NUS Scotland, Perth College UHI, Glasgow Kelvin College, Aye Mind** and **Jisc Scotland**, exploring themes around open learning, digital resources and student mental health, expanding further on Keith and Vonnie's plenary talks.

NUS Scotland's workshop gave delegates an opportunity to explore the 'think positive about student mental health project' further while sharing examples of institutions all over Scotland leading the way with their own campaigns to tackle discrimination and improve support. The session produced some rich conversations about personal experience both from student and staff perspectives and gave colleagues on opportunity to learn from each other what was working for them.

"Really good discussion got in the way of the workshop plan but it was very moving and valuable."

"Very interesting presentation and lots of discussion with colleagues."

**Jisc Scotland's** workshop was oversubscribed with delegates keen to learn more about making learning accessible and inclusive as well as how to exploit mobile and digital technology. Delegates were given an overview of some best practice rules around creating accessible Word, PDF and PowerPoint documents as well as the importance of using a combination of text, and audio/visual aids in order to fully engage learners.

The workshop then delved further into how inclusivity can be mainstreamed into learning by utilising the vast amount of free resources, apps and built in accessibility features now readily available. The facilitators suggested an important shift was happening, where learners should be encouraged rather than disciplined for using their own devices to learn as it offers a truly inclusive approach that in some cases reduces the need to disclose a disability to the rest of the class. Delegates learned about best practice examples and case studies highlighting various platforms and resources that supported learners with a variety of access needs. All of the resources and links are available on the link below.

Delegates on Survey Monkey said,

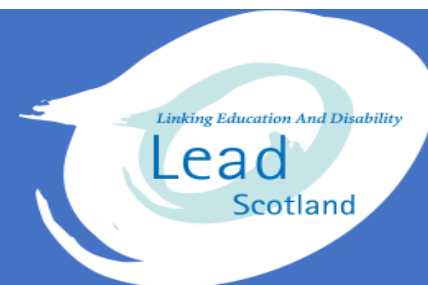
“I thought this was another brilliant workshop. It offered hands on experience of some uses of technology. From a local authority perspective, new technology is something we need to take more seriously from a post-16 community learning/educational perspective. This workshop gave a brilliant insight into what is available and what potential there is (even for a 'technophobe!'!).”

“It was a really interesting and informative workshop, I will definitely incorporate the accessibility basics into written documents I produce and I will share the learning with my colleagues.”

“Great presentation and overview of a range of tools which can be used by everyone. Also enjoyed the smart phone and tablet participation. Mags was a great presenter.”

[Click here to access slides from all of the afternoon workshops.](#)

# Conclusion



This year's conference was well attended with over 100 delegates and contributors from across the full spectrum of post-16 learning including colleges, universities, public, third and private sectors, working with both young people and adults, supporting learners with a wide variety of access needs.

The conference brought delegates together who may not normally have the opportunity to meet in a professional setting, allowing for a rich tapestry of knowledge exchange, inspirational stories and networking to flourish.

Dame Anne commented in her closing remarks that we are perhaps not there yet in providing adequate support in enabling disabled people to reach their full potential in lifelong and life wide learning, but progress is being made. The Equality Act has helped to provide a stronger legislative framework to underpin public sector equality duties, strengthen disability rights and clarify reasonable adjustments, but it's clear we have to go beyond legislation if post school learning is to be truly inclusive and accessible. Individual campaigns, projects, strategies and initiatives are happening across Scotland to drive forward the equalities agenda in education, but joined up partnership working and efficient professional knowledge exchange is absolutely key to ensuring disabled people's access to inclusive education is not a postcode lottery.

Feedback told us 64% of delegates made at least one new contact and over 83% of respondents advised they learned something new on the day.

"A really well planned and most informative and enjoyable conference."

"Really enjoyed it and made some connections that I think will be really valuable. Particularly liked the mental health and education workshops and presentation."

"It was a really well organised and informative conference. I learned a lot which I will share with my organisation. The personal testimonies by the speakers were inspirational and the workshops provided practical information to inspire action."

"A really great day. I came away re-energised and raring to go having spent a day with like-minded passionate people across every sector."

[Storify captures a flavour of the #leadconference with tweets, posts and photos from throughout day.](#)

## What next?

Employability, strategies for supporting students with a mental health diagnosis in higher education and focusing on adults over 30 were some of the suggestions put forward for next year's themes. What issues, ideas, initiatives and innovations would you like to see explored at next year's conference in order to further develop and widen access to education for adult learners with additional support needs? Please email suggestions to [info@lead.org.uk](mailto:info@lead.org.uk). In addition we will seek to ensure we find a fully accessible and inclusive venue and improve our signposting between areas after delegates suggested this could be improved on from this year. We welcome all comments and feedback about our events and services so again please feel free to get in touch on the above email address if you would like to have a say or missed the post-conference Survey Monkey deadline.

## Thank you

Lead Scotland wishes to express our thanks to all those who contributed to the conference, as well as the Lead Scotland staff and volunteer team. We are also grateful to the Scottish Government for their financial contribution towards conference costs and to Perth College UHI and their staff for hosting the event.