New Programme Validation External Review Panel Report

Programme Reference Number:	S015
Faculty/School(s):	Design Education and Humanities
Department(s):	Education
Type of Review:	External

Details of Programme(s) Reviewed:

Title:	Award Type:	NFQ Level:	ECTS:	Duration:	Delivery Mode:	Proposed Student Intake:	Proposed Start Date:
Certificate in Inclusive Support and Care in Education for Special Needs Assistants	Special Purpose Award	6	30	2 Sem	Online	950	Sep. 2025

Date of Review:	18th March 2025

Review Panel

SPA Award - Validation Panel		
Panellist Role	**Name**	**Role and Organisation**
Chair	Dr Nigel McKelvey	Head of Department of Early Education and Social Studies, ATU Letterkenny
Academic Discipline Expert	Dr Pamela Cowan	Senior Lecturer Education, Queen's University, Belfast
Industry/Community Representative	Mr Colm McIntyre	Principal, Ursuline College Sligo
Student Representative	Pranavsingh Dhunnoo	ATU Letterkenny
Nominee of VPAAR / Secretary	Carmel Brennan	Assistant Registrar, ATU Galway

All external members of the panel have declared that they are independent of ATU (Atlantic Technological University), and all have declared that they have no conflict of interest.

Programme Design Team

The panel met the staff listed below during the review process.

Dr Fiona Crowe	Ailbhe O'Halloran

Introduction

This programme has been developed in response to a request for tender issued by the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) for the development and delivery of a National Training Programme for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). The purpose of the tender was to identify a provider to develop and deliver a national training programme for 1000 students annually for 3 years from 2025 to 2028 with provision for a 2-year extension to the contract.

The programme developed, the Certificate in Inclusive Support and Care in Education for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) is a Level 6, 30 ECT special-purpose, part-time online programme designed to enable SNAs to support students with Additional Care Needs (AENs) in inclusive learning environments by developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding of the SNA role. It will equip SNAs with the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to be effective in supporting the care needs of students with AENs and specific care needs in various contexts across educational settings.

Rationale for Programme(s)

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are additional school-based support staff who can assist children with additional educational needs and additional and significant care needs. The role of the SNA is currently defined by circular 0030/2014 (DES, 2014). SNAs are provided to schools based on the overall school profile of need. Schools recruit SNAs and are responsible for the deployment of SNA support to individual students. The SNA service is a key element to the inclusion of students with significant care needs in mainstream education, special schools and special classes.

The entry requirement to the SNA profession has remained unchanged since 1979. The minimum qualification required by SNAs is a FETAC level 3 major qualification, a minimum of three grade Ds in the Junior Certificate, or an equivalent qualification. The SNA role has evolved as schools have become more inclusive. The role of the SNA requires greater levels of knowledge and understanding of a wide range of AENs than was required nearly 50 years ago. The evolution of the SNA role is evidenced in DES circulars, 05/01 Post-primary, 07/02 Primary, and 0030/2014. Appropriately, the minimum qualification required by SNAs is currently under review and will be outlined in the revision of Circular 0030/2014 due in the coming months (no date yet specified). The timing of the new circular is highly appropriate given this proposed programme is due to commence in September 2025.

A comprehensive review of the SNA Scheme (NCSE, 2018) identified that there was no national training programme available for SNAs appropriate for the many and varied needs SNAs are required to meet in their role. Under the direction of the DoE in 2019 the NCSE held a competitive procurement process seeking a provider to design and deliver the first national training programme for SNAs. University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems, was the successful tenderer in 2019 and a contract was agreed between NCSE and UCD for the design and delivery of the programme. The Department of Education (DoE), through the NCSE, funded the development of the programme and covered the fees of SNAs employed in recognised Irish schools to complete the programme. In 2024 the NCSE held a second competitive procurement process for the national training programme for SNAs. This time ATU St Angelas was successful. This programme has been developed in response to a request for tender issued by the NCSE in 2024 for a national programme of training for SNAs appropriate for the many and varied needs SNAs are required to meet in their role and subsequently, upon qualification, possess a wider range of skills than currently offered by the existing minimum qualification level.

Currently, almost 22,000 SNAs are employed in schools across Ireland. The Irish government has allocated funding for an additional 1,600 SNA positions in Budget 2025. This will bring the total number of SNAs to 23,000 by 2025, the highest-ever number in Ireland's education system. However, in a recent national survey of SNAs (Special Needs Assistants Working Development Group (SNAWDU), 2024), 82% (n=6068) of SNAs who participated in the survey indicated that they have not completed the National Training Programme for SNAs. This data suggests that a large majority of SNAs have yet to avail of the fully funded National Training Programme.

Validation Criteria

ATU's Developing and Validating New Taught Programmes Policy specifies that new programmes must comply with the following criteria for validation:

1. The programme aims and learning outcomes are clear and aligned with the proposed award title.
2. The rationale for the programme is well informed and justified.
3. The design of the programme is suitably structured and fit for purpose.
4. The design of the programme ensures that students can successfully achieve the Programme Learning Outcomes.
5. The teaching, learning and assessment strategy is well planned and appropriate for the discipline area and type of award.
6. Assessment techniques are fair, valid, reliable, consistent and a credible measure of the academic standard attained by students.
7. The planned resources, including staff, physical, online, library and student supports, sufficiently support the teaching, learning and assessment strategy for the programme.
8. The programme facilitates lifelong learning for a diverse student population by setting out appropriate entry requirements and opportunities for access, transfer, and progression.
9. There is demand for potential graduates from the programme.
10. The learning environment and mode of delivery are consistent with the needs of the intended students of the programme and accessible and appropriate support services for students have been provided for.
11. Students will be well informed on the requirements of the programme, guided to relevant resources and supported in their studies in a caring environment.

Findings

Overall Finding

Validated without changes	
Validated subject to condition(s) and/or recommendation(s)	**X**
Rejected	

Reason for Overall Finding

The new programme validation panel reviewed the documentation provided and met with the Programme Development Team and consider that the programme is well considered and designed and are happy to approve it subject the conditions and recommendations outlined below.

Commendations

The Validation Panel advises Academic Council of the following commendations.

1. The programme development team have been proactive in developing this programme to meet a national demand.
2. The opportunity for choice in assessment tasks is good practice and reflects the needs of a large and diverse cohort.
3. The programme design builds in reflective and reflexive opportunities which is very important for individuals working in this area.

Conditions

The Validation Panel advises Academic Council that subject to satisfying any condition(s) detailed below, the panel is satisfied that the proposed programme(s) meets the validation criteria as set out in Atlantic Technological University's Developing and Validating New Programmes Policy.

1. Ensure that each module's total hours are sufficient to meet the requirements of ECTS. In doing so, consider whether each module might be better delivered over a 5-week block allowing more time for digestion of material and assessment.
2. Revise the entry requirements for the programme to include minimum academic requirements appropriate to a level 6 programme and including reference to alternative entry routes for mature students and recognition of prior learning. Consider whether numeracy should form part of entry requirements for those using alternative entry routes.
3. Clearly outline the induction that students will undertake in week one, and the supports which will be provided, with consideration of participants' likely varying levels of IT knowledge. Induction should help students put faces on the core staff members who will be supporting them throughout the programme. To this end consider offering an in-person option for induction with opportunities for interactive support.

Recommendations

The panel advises Academic Council that the Programme Development Team and/or the Department should take cognisance of any recommendations outlined below.

1. Revise the wording of the progression route to ensure that it is suitable and is appropriately stated in compliance with ATU's Policy on Access, Transfer and Progression.
2. Revise the programme and module assessment strategy and induction programme to ensure that academic integrity is embedded appropriately, particularly given this is an online programme. Consider various methods of designing and delivering multiple choice questions, giving consideration to the use of 'testlets'.
3. Check with the Department of Education whether an enhanced disclosure check (Garda Vetting) needs to be undertaken for this cohort of students.
4. Include 'netiquette' as a key element of induction and ensure that forums/chat are managed to ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality, disclosures or inappropriate comments.
5. Consider whether the timing of in-person sessions should be staggered to allow an opportunity for all to attend. Consider how non-attendance at these sessions will be managed.
6. Clarify that this programme will be unclassified in the programme document.
7. Consider including further academic or networking events for students to build communities of practice and to help support students through the programme.

8. Contact the Vice-President responsible for Students Services to ensure that she is aware of this large cohort and their potential needs for access to supports.
9. Review the documentation to ensure that the delivery of the programme is correctly represented in all instances.

Report Approval

This report has been agreed by the review panel and is signed on their behalf by the chairperson.

Signed: Name: Dr Nigel McKelvey Validation Panel Chair	Date: 18th March 2025