

Committee for Employment and Learning

Inquiry into post Special Educational Need provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities, in Northern Ireland.

Background Information

North West Regional College is a leading provider of Further and Higher Education and skills training. The College's three main campuses in Derry~Londonderry, Limavady, and Strabane boast modern and industry-standard learning environments, at which over 20,000 students achieve their personal educational goals, through full and part-time study every year.

North West Regional College has 7 academic schools:

- Business Services and General Education
- Science and Technology
- Media, Multi Media and The Arts
- Craft Services
- Early Years, Children and Young People & Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy
- Health and Social Care
- Hospitality, Tourism and Sport

The student population ranges from school leavers and mature students, to professionals and jobseekers, who wish to improve their skills and qualifications. Students originate from all parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland - the majority live in local areas including neighbouring County Donegal.

1. To examine the current range of choice and opportunities available for those with Learning Disabilities on leaving full time schooling.

Transition Planning

As an FE college we recognise the importance of transition planning, and the time and detailed involvement by all parties involved to ensure a smooth path from one educational provider to another. Many students and parents view FE as a major step in independence, and are anxious at the challenge. We seek to reassure whilst encouraging a level of independence which is unique and appropriate to each student.

For those students with an Educational Statement, our Learning Support team is often involved with a student before the final Transitional review, which normally takes place in March of Year 12. This multi-agency Transition Plan will look at options for post-16 education and the type of support needs to be put in place to enable the young person to access their chosen course. The ELB Transition Officer relays this information to our Learning Support Centre staff and co-ordinates appropriate appointments with the Learning Support team, Student Finance and college careers service, as is necessary. This ease of sharing information from the ELBs happens only for the small number of students who are on Stage 5 of the SEN register or hold a Statement of SEN with the local ELB.

In addition we meet with prospective school leavers accompanied by support officers from Cedar, Autism Initiatives, social workers, RNIB staff, welfare officers and advisory teachers from the local ELB. We also work with a range of educational transition officers, social workers, and community groups based in NI and Donegal education and health services. This student cohort with more complex needs, tend to have good surrounding professional support, and the sharing of information is efficient so that transition is well informed and the appropriate support can be identified in a timely manner.

Concerns arise with students who have not been identified in primary or post primary as having additional support needs, or whose information is significantly outdated. In such cases we rely heavily on parents or students themselves to make us aware of their concerns and support requirements. Lack of information from home, and delays in schools producing evidence of support history can delay the process of support and sharing of essential information. Parents are often confused about what information they should have in their possession. The Learning Support Centre has a very good relationship with the Local Child Guidance Centers in our ELB area, and can source statutory information via this alternative route. Unfortunately there is no such alternative center for our students from Donegal, where assessment and support history is not readily available.

A single source for information would ensure timely provision and informed assessment for students, particularly those from Donegal.

Referral to College Learning Support Centre

Much effort is given to raising awareness pre entry, during induction week, via student diaries, TV plasma screens, information evenings, internet information, student portal, flyers and leaflets. Staff also attend regular awareness sessions and encourage students to seek support. The College has appointed a Curriculum Learning Support Co-ordinator within each Department whose role is to highlight the services of Learning Support within their specific area, monitor provision, communicate concerns and make referrals to the Learning Support Team. Such teamwork is a necessary provision of a large College, and develops inclusivity of support.

From the College perspective, a formal process begins each year with the publication of our Prospectus, Open Day, and Information Days in conjunction with local ELB Transition Officers, where students and parents are encouraged to communicate with us regarding their support needs at the earliest stage. The College has in its Application Form a simple tick box indicator for Learning Support which once ticked, mobilises key communication with the student and/or parents. An open door policy and a range of well-advertised literature and leaflets mean parents and students have numerous opportunities to engage with our support service.

College Careers

The College Careers team is closely involved with this support process to ensure student's career aspirations are being met and progression routes identified. The Learning Support team meets regularly with our College Careers officers to advise individual and groups of students with regard to support and appropriate courses. We are always mindful of the student voice, and balancing realistic and progressive aspirations. We often meet more than once with students prior to enrolment and organise meetings with tutors and tours of the College for students who require one or several visits for familiarity. Our careers advisors will discuss each student's unique needs and if a course of study has been identified, advice can be given regarding the appropriate level of entry as well as attainment and progression routes. The College has a wide range of mainstream courses both FE and vocational to accommodate the needs of students with learning disabilities. The majority of these students will have discussed their options with their school or inter-disciplinary team, and will have certain career choices and course options in mind. Course co-ordinators often attend these careers meetings and can offer a real insight and answer particular questions about the specific course.

Pre-induction Orientation

Before the term begins, we host orientation sessions for students with complex needs who may benefit from additional familiarity with the College environment and key members of staff. This provides an opportunity for students, parents and key workers to engage with the Learning Support team and the wider staff of Learner Services. Students and parents also have the opportunity to meet with their classroom assistants in a quiet and informal environment, and tours of key areas such as the library and learning support areas are highlighted. This has proved to be a most popular service, and is consistently well attended.

Course options and progression

Students with disabilities may take any type of FE course which is suitable for their ability and interests in the same way as all other students.

Many students with learning difficulties require courses to assist them with independent living.

Students with moderate to complex needs (Discrete) students are facilitated by a range of courses including the two year Transitions course, offered across all campuses; the one year Workskills course and SEN classes in a range of vocational areas such as Hospitality. Both the

Transition and Workskills courses include a personal and social development component as well as basic vocational or subject learning and functional skills. These courses are designed to support the progression of learners towards a learning programme at level 1, or an apprenticeship programme, or towards independent living or supported employment. The courses run for approximately 16 hours per week for Transition and 18 hours for Workskills. The Transition course runs 3 days per week, whilst the Workskills course runs over 5 days per week. For these discrete courses, careful transition planning, inter-agency meetings and identification of appropriate support provision is coordinated by the course tutors and the discrete manager. Students attend for familiarity visits, and are supported in class by shared support worker provision and teaching assistants. Progression is a key area here, and Mencap are actively involved in providing careers induction and co-ordinate supported employment placements for the students on these courses. In Semester 2 of Year 2, an Information Day is held in the College, where students and parents can meet with a range of organisations, such as Cedar, Something Special, Mencap, Autism Initiatives, RNIB etc., as well as with the College Careers and Learning Support teams, to begin progression planning. The College Careers team is involved with the Careers Service NI and the Disability Employment Services (DES) specifically to accommodate students with learning disabilities to enhance progression from F.E. and training to supported employment.

2. To seek the views of young people, family carers and groups representing children and young people with learning disabilities what services they would like to see in place and how the current situation meets their needs.

Below are a few comments from students or parents of students with learning disabilities currently enrolled in the College;

"This has been a big step from school to college. Hardest was getting ready to use public transport. For three weeks I drove behind the bus to see he got here (college) safely. We practiced for most of the summer too. I still worry. Then there's the distance between the depot and the college."

"The meeting with Learning Support and the college careers was really useful in helping my daughter look at her interests and the realistic choices available, as I was concerned that she had unrealistic ambitions and everyone helped balance this out."

"I like the classes in the kitchen and wearing the uniform. It makes me feel like I have a real job, or what it would be like to work in a café."

The teachers and classroom assistants are helpful and tell me that I am doing really good. I like working with Mencap as they are helping me to get a job."

3. To research best practice in post school provision for those with learning disabilities.

The Learning Support Centre delivers services direct to students with learning difficulties, physical or medical conditions and those with specific learning difficulties and mental health needs. The team works in partnership with departments and other professional services to support students through needs assessments, specialist support, learning support advice and guidance. Within a broader College context the service makes contributions to the recruitment, progression and retention of students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties. The Learning Support Centre continues to work towards a more progressive model of disability to bring about greater inclusive practice in the College.

The summary below may help inform regarding our specific College provision and examples of good practice:

Synopsis of support

- 445 students were supported during 12/13 across all of our campuses.
- 73 full-time and part-time support workers were recruited to fulfil physical and generic support requirements. This number has increased over the past two years and reflects the increasing complexity of cases we continue to encounter. (A support worker may be employed in a full time capacity; approx. 16 hours; or alternatively may be involved on a part time basis supporting students from a minimum of 2 hours per week.
- Of this 73, 19 support workers were directly involved with supporting 03 Discrete students in full time courses. The remainder of support workers delivered support to students from Level 1 to Level 3 and HE courses.
- The term *support worker* involves a range of different roles, including: physical carer, campus assistant, notetaker, interpreter, mentor.
- In collaboration with Workforce Development we continue to provide training and awareness sessions for staff across all campuses.
- Feedback by the ETI Inspectorate refers to the *coherent, comprehensive and effective strategy for the provision of additional learning support* and states that *referral processes, lines of communication, and the mechanisms for tracking learner progress are well-defined and robust.*
- A new Learning Support website for staff was created to help raise College wide awareness of guidance and support available for students.
- A recruitment agency delivered Learning Support Services during 11-12, including all support workers, note-takers and interpreters and delivery of study skills. Outsourcing our study skills provision allows us to deliver process, service and capacity improvements to meet increased demand from students for this type of support and to offer a flexible service that is responsive to varying student needs. This service is proving increasingly popular with the student population.
- Two learning support staff qualified as Certified Text Help Gold Trainers.
- New software *Lucid Exact*, and *Lucid Lads* was rolled out across our three campuses, to advance effective assessment procedures where students with outdated assessment reports could have access to reliable and user friendly assessment.
- Detailed Learning Plans have been piloted to ensure highest standards of inclusion. This includes opportunity for individual feedback from each tutor.
- On-going specialist training continues every year including Deaf Awareness, Assist Suicide Intervention, Epi-pen, Epilepsy and Autism Spectrum Disorder awareness training.

The Learning Support Centre plays a key role in ensuring that students with disabilities or learning difficulties receive support and help to integrate fully into College life and succeed with their chosen course. The Learning Support Centre is constantly evolving to meet the challenges created by the very different learning styles and expectations of our students with additional

needs. Technology has had a major impact on making information more flexible and accessible and we strive to exploit all the available technologies to engage our technologically literate generation. We are aware of the potential to make learning more accessible. We recognise the crucial role our holistic support plays in contributing towards College success and retention rates.

Staff Training

On-going staff development and monitoring of procedures ensure that we are more able to match the needs of our students. Activities undertaken include deaf awareness and communication skills for supporting students with hearing impairment, training from Middletown Autism Service raising awareness of the range and challenges of Autistic Spectrum Disorders, assistive technologies and creative solutions facilitated by the Learning Support and Discrete Working Group, closer liaison with academic staff delivering programmes where there is a high incidence of students with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, so that students can be identified and support implemented quickly.

Raising Awareness

The College recognises that the involvement of everyone is the key to success in implementing disability equality. It is important that all staff and students have a better understanding of disabilities – visible or invisible. Awareness raising is being achieved through specific briefings and training for all staff and for individual or groups of staff with particular roles, for example, Curriculum Learning Support Co-ordinators (CLSCs) Heads of School, or Learning Support staff. Front of house staff also receive appropriate training and awareness raising, including facilitating students on the Autistic spectrum and students with Tourette syndrome. Awareness raising for Management is achieved through briefings and meetings such as regular SENDO Committee meetings.

4 To Examine if the quantum and quality of post school provision for those with learning disabilities is meeting the demand and develop recommendation to address barriers to participation and delivery of high quality provision.

Successful Drop-In Support Facility

Having identified the need for a permanent Learning Support Drop-In facility for students we developed accessible student areas across all campuses where students can receive additional regular support, from helping students to learn spelling strategies for core words, improve handwriting or organise files, to assignment planning, mindmaps and other memory strategies, proof reading skills and exam revision techniques. A range of services are available to suit Level 1 to L3 students. Already the success of this service is evidential and demand may shortly outstrip supply. This service is an excellent way to increase the confidence and skills of students with learning, behavioural, medical or mental health needs. The learning support tutors work closely alongside classroom teachers on particular issues or areas of concern.

Administration and monitoring

The large amount of paperwork and sharing of information across a large organisation is a constant challenge. Our new in-house Learning Support database has been rolled out and fully utilised to ensure efficient dissemination of information, accurately and discretely.

Retention and progression can now be recorded on the new Learning Support Database. This information will inform our actions on an ongoing basis. We work closely with the College Careers service both pre and exit stages, often with parental and advocacy involvement. Enhanced tracking of the student will enable our services to provide relevant, realistic advice and information within progression and transition.

Training requirements

Ensure appropriate up-skilling of Support worker staff. We employ support workers through a local recruitment agency. Staff require regular up-skilling in a range of areas both medical and behavioural. We monitor support workers weekly, and receive regular feedback, mostly weekly from the students being supported. Our support workers range in role from campus assistant, notetaker, teaching assistant, classroom support, interpreter. Support workers attend regular training as appropriate to their support role. Those supporting students with more complex needs in particular, are closely supported by the curriculum staff and learning support team.

Accessibility Resources and ICT

We are constantly in need of new resources to creatively assist our students with additional needs. The Learning Support Team is regularly researching apps for a range of additional needs. These are distributed to students as the need arises. We work closely alongside our College ICT and ILT department to keep informed of technology innovations, and accessibility in this area.

The Learning Support Centre lends out a range of equipment including laptops with accessibility software such as Zoomtext, Dictaphones, coloured overlays, reading pens, magnifiers. As ours is a demand led service we often have restricted finances when faced with a specific student need with large financial outlay. Sourcing specialist services such as interpreters is also a challenge.

5 Given the complex and interrelated needs of individuals in this group to identify the barriers to co-ordination across department – regionally and locally and make recommendations for improvement.

We are aware of a range of challenges and/or barriers both locally and regionally. These are summarised below.

Transport

The issue of transport is a constant concern for many of our students. Our location means that many students from a rural background face real challenges in accessing their nearest FE College. We have met with students and parents who have felt forced to continue in their present school as their transport provision will continue, even though it is clear that they are primarily interested and ready to enrol in an FE course. Students with mobility difficulties very often rely completely on the WELB taxi service to travel to and from school. FE or vocational training seems impossible when faced with the financial costs of taxi travel in specially adapted taxis. Students with mobility difficulties and those with complex learning needs, including many students with ASD, cannot safely use public transport. The reality is that many parents do not have access to transport, or are working full time and cannot transport their young person to our institution. In reality there are young people in this situation who are confined to their homes and cannot continue their education. This is an area of very real concern, both for the student and their families, as well as our College. This concern applies to young people from Northern Ireland and Donegal.

Risk Assessments

The number of students who require Risk Assessments in the College to ensure standards of health and safety are adhered to, has grown dramatically in the last 3 years. Students with more complex medical needs including brain tumour and severe epilepsy, means teaching and support staff require training, and students must be closely supervised to ensure safety in College. These complex conditions impact directly on our financial spend. Timely sharing of information from health services and schools (e.g. copies of care plans) would allow us to plan and alert us to the significance of a medical condition which may otherwise impact adversely on a student's chosen career path.

Statements of Special Educational Needs

A Statement of Special Needs identifies the learner's special educational needs (SEN) and the special help the learner should receive. The local ELB will usually create a statement if they decide that all the special help required cannot be provided from within the school's resources. These resources often include money, staff time and special equipment. Specific resources are identified and recommended within the Statement which often brings together reports and advice from Education and Health services. These Statements are active during primary and post primary education up to the age of 18 years or the end of full time schooling (whichever comes first). However, if a student moves to an FE college, the Statement effectively ends, and Recommendations for transition to College are not addressed. It is a most unequal system that a Statement can remain active within the school system at age 16+, but the student with significant additional needs who takes the FE route does not have access to this specialist provision.

Students who have a Statement of Educational Need during post-primary education often present this as their primary evidence during transition to the College. The quality of this information varies. Most information is relevant to the previous school and holds little information for the new College. Often the most recent educational psychologist assessment was undertaken during the student's primary school education. Information relating to the students current progress and ability, level of support needs, career aspirations and range of

interests, would be very useful in beginning to plan progression and appropriate support efficiently. Any current care plans and medical or mental health issues should also be highlighted at an early stage.

Consistency of Transition Planning

If a young person does not have a statement, there is no formal duty on school or ELBs to ensure appropriate provision is reviewed or transition planning is carried out. It is unclear what level of transition planning and support is available for those young people with special needs that do not have a statement. Transition varies by educational setting; tends to be less developed in mainstream, more thought out and meaningful in special school setting. Guidance therefore on appropriate provision for students with additional needs who do not possess a Statement is essential to ensure consistency of transition planning for these students.

Greater Collaboration

Greater collaboration between ELBs and FE Colleges – possibility of Statement extending/being ‘handed over’ until age of 25 years, similar to what is being brought in throughout UK in September 2014 under the new EHC plans, (Education, Health and Care).

This may ensure a more seamless approach.

See link for information:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/275104/RR326B_EHC_planning_pathway_-_FINAL.pdf

Greater collaboration between Support services including education and health, where students have been excluded from school, and are then referred to FE College. Relevant information is difficult to source. Confusion exists as to whom to request information from as often several support teams are involved. One key worker is required to co-ordinate this information and support the young person who may have been previously excluded from education. A careful transition is required here to ensure meaningful engagement and retention.

Complex needs: Flexibility and attainment

For those students with complex or profound needs, the curriculum should be flexible and personalised allowing for incremental learning, and the funding process should support the reward of ‘softer’ outcomes, which would encourage progress. For certain students the funding methodology should recognise and record progression and achievement) for those learners at the lower end of Entry Level. Funding issues linked to progression is often a barrier. Entry-level or level 1 courses are so important for helping learners with complex needs become independent. Learning has to be personal for each individual. Social and life skills such as how to use a bus or shop effectively are often the priority learning skills, as opposed to literacy or numeracy. There is a need for the curriculum to be flexible and relevant.

Information sharing

Recommendations relating to sharing of information so that meaningful and informed decisions can be made in terms of career aspirations and appropriate levels of support need to be acknowledged by Departments of Education in NI and Ireland to facilitate students from Donegal and beyond so they can be equally serviced. Being informed gives confidence to the College and outside organisations that support our students, to parents and to the learners themselves. It also helps towards more coherent financial planning of support funds.

Additional information: NWRC Learner Services Annual Report 12-13:

http://nwrc-web/portal/staff/documents/reports_reviews/doc/Student%20Services%20Report%202013.pdf