



Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of a Survey of

**Provision for Students with
Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities in the
Colleges of Further and
Higher Education in Northern Ireland**

Inspected: 2007/2008

CONTENTS

Section		Page
1.	Introduction	1
2.	Summary of Main Findings	2
3.	Provision for Students Supported through the Additional Support Fund on Mainstream Courses	5
4.	Provision for Students with Learning Disabilities in Discrete Courses	10
5.	Conclusion	19
	Key Priorities for Development	20
	Appendix	21



1. Introduction

- 1.1 This survey focused on the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities enrolled on mainstream college courses and discrete courses for the learning disabled across the six recently constituted area based further and higher education colleges (Appendix). A total of 70 taught sessions were observed; in almost one third of these sessions, learners with disabilities and sensory impairments were fully integrated into the mainstream courses of their choice; the remainder were sessions for students on discrete courses designed specifically to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Discussions were held with students, college support staff, main course tutors, and middle and senior college managers.
- 1.2 The criteria which govern special educational provision within the further education (FE) sector are set out in the FE (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. Article 13 of the Order sets out the general duties of governing bodies of institutions of FE, and requires colleges to have regard to the needs of students over compulsory school age who have “learning difficulties”. This phrase refers to those who have difficulties and/or disabilities which impact on their learning. Colleges are also required by the Department for Employment and Learning (the Department) to examine provision for students with special needs, identify strengths and weaknesses and make proposals for improvements. This activity is carried out within the context of the annual development planning process, in particular the budget-setting and curriculum target-setting aspects of each of the colleges development plans (CDPs).
- 1.3 The Department has a number of strategies which support the objective of improving access to FE for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The Department provides funding for the colleges to support the enrolment of students with learning difficulties and disabilities on mainstream courses. Funding for such students is incorporated within the FE funding mechanism and this ensures that colleges are able to meet the costs of students with a learning difficulty or disability that may require an extra level of support. The Additional Support Fund is also available to provide additional technical and/or human support, such as brailers, specialist software and signers. Also, the

Department has ring-fenced funds totalling £1.5m to help colleges to meet the extra costs associated with the provision of education to students with learning disabilities who require a discrete learning environment.

- 1.4 The previous survey in 2003/2004 of the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities within the FE sector identified as strengths: the commitment within the sector to making provision for these students; the good quality of much of the teaching, and the successful participation of the majority of students in their chosen courses. The increasing willingness on the part of colleges to meet the diverse needs of those who require support to access the available courses, and the increasing range of accreditation and progression routes available to these students, were also identified.
- 1.5 Among the areas for improvement identified by the previous survey were the need for colleges to: review their learning support structures to ensure the effective integration of students with learning difficulties or disabilities across all curriculum areas; provide students on discrete courses with broader access to appropriate nationally accredited courses and; initiate a programme of appropriate whole-college staff development in special needs.

2. Summary of Main Findings

- 2.1 In the areas inspected, the colleges have important strengths in their educational and pastoral provision. The survey has identified areas for improvement which the colleges have the capacity to address.

The main strengths of the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities across the colleges are the:

- continuing commitment of the colleges to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities from the communities they serve;
- good or very good quality of the provision in most of the colleges;

- commitment of significant resources by senior management teams to learning support provision, including the appointment of well qualified and experienced learning support co-ordinators;
- improved planning, at both strategic and operational levels, to identify students with learning difficulties and disabilities; this enables them to participate in the mainstream course of their choice, with individually tailored support;
- quality of the provision for learning support, which is very good in half of the colleges and has important strengths in the remainder;
- increased provision of suitable accredited courses, and the improved focus on developing the employability skills of students for whom full-time or part-time employment is a realistic option;
- development of more rigorous approaches to initial assessment and the tracking of student progress which have led to more informed decisions being taken on accreditation and employment opportunities;
- increased awareness of both academic and support staff of disability issues, as a result of the implementation of appropriate staff development;
- strong working relationships which have been developed with staff from a wide range of statutory and voluntary agencies; these are used to good effect to provide students with the most appropriate support arrangements; and
- good collaborative work with statutory and voluntary agencies which has led to the implementation of new programmes which have successfully developed the students' independent living or employability skills.

2.2 A number of areas remain in need of attention, however, to ensure that the needs of those students with learning difficulties and disabilities are met more effectively within and across the colleges.

The main areas for improvement are the:

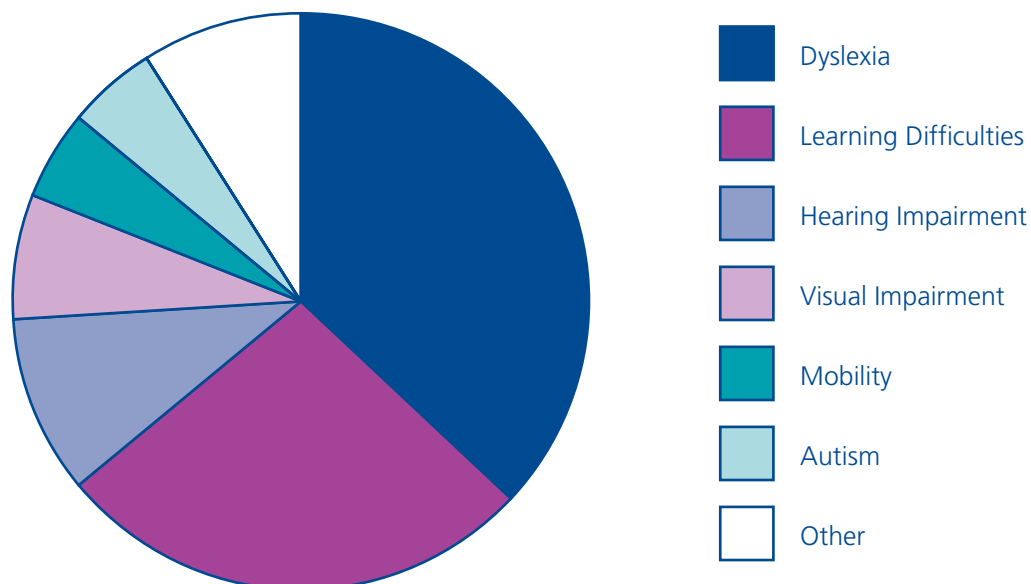
- development of an agreed and progressive curriculum, negotiated with key providers, which builds effectively on the learning undertaken at school and the provision made by both statutory and voluntary health and social care agencies in the area served by the appropriate college;
- appointment of a designated senior manager to lead and coordinate the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities across each college;
- need for improved arrangements for the provision of information on progression pathways for students with learning difficulties when they leave school;
- transition arrangements and the flow of information between the colleges and other organisations;
- need for focused training for academic and support staff in their work and contact with students with particularly challenging conditions, including attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorders;
- improved planning for, and robust quality assurance of, all provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, on mainstream or discrete courses; and
- development of effective strategies to identify and disseminate best practice within and across the colleges;

3. Provision for Students Supported through the Additional Support Fund on Mainstream Courses

- 3.1 Since the previous survey in 2003/2004, considerable progress has been made by the colleges in appointing learning support co-ordinators with clear roles and functions. In addition, colleges have refined their enrolment systems to facilitate the early identification of students with additional learning needs, and have implemented strategies for supporting students in mainstream courses across all curricular areas.
- 3.2 Currently, the Additional Support Fund provided by the Department, which facilitates the provision of equipment and non medical helper support, is being used to give support to 472 full-time and 690 part-time students with additional educational needs in mainstream courses throughout the colleges (figures supplied by the Department, March 2008). These students are enrolled on a wide range of courses from entry to degree level, across all curricular areas within the colleges.
- 3.3 The students have a range of disabilities and sensory impairments which act as potential barriers to learning, including the conditions identified in figure 1 below. The provision includes a high percentage of students presenting with difficulties in literacy. In most instances, these students experience a clear identification and diagnosis of the extent of their problem and are often assisted through the provision of laptop computers and in a minority of instances, one-to-one tutorial support. The majority of colleges have trained staff, or use the services of external consultants, to provide specialist support for students with dyslexia. In a minority of colleges, however, there is insufficient contact between the staff providing these services and the academic or vocational tutors. As a result of this missed opportunity for joint planning, the students do not have sufficient opportunities to transfer the learning and apply the strategies acquired within the specialist support setting to their course work. In the best practice, students who are diagnosed with dyslexia for the first time are offered access to therapeutic counselling. In two of the colleges, innovative work is under way in the use of primary movement as a method of assisting students with dyslexia and concentration problems.

Figure 1

Learning Support by Disability



Information in Figure 1 was provided by the colleges.

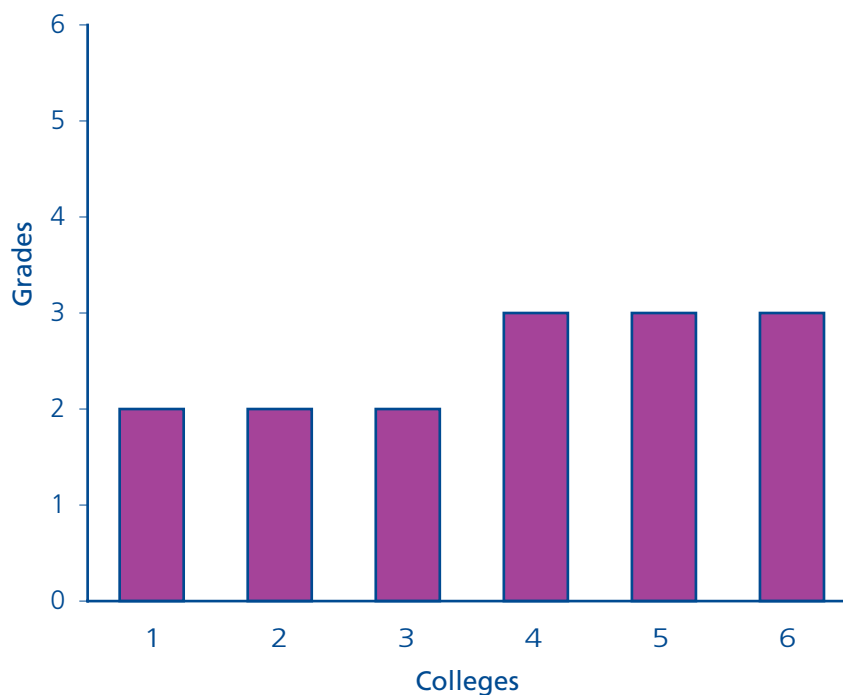
3.4 Students with physical disabilities and sensory impairments are provided with relevant materials and equipment and, where relevant, specialist assistance, including brailers and signers. A significant minority of colleges provide students with learning mentors. In the best practice, the mentors have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and they work to provide students with appropriate support, within a culture which supports and promotes independence. In these situations, the mentors undertake a rigorous induction, link appropriately with course tutors, are observed regularly by academic members of staff who provide feedback on their performance, and withdraw learning support in a planned, systematic and supportive manner. However, in a minority of colleges, the role of the mentor or learning support assistant requires clarification to ensure that the student's potential to progress independently in their learning is not undermined, for example, through excessive intervention.

3.5 The survey has identified that the quality of the support provided for most learners in mainstream courses is good across the sector. In half of the colleges the provision is very good and in the remainder it has important strengths. From discussions held with groups of students, it is clear that

they welcome the support given, that it has facilitated their continued participation on their course, and has been instrumental in raising their self-esteem. Relationships between students, learning support coordinators, tutors and other support staff at all levels are good. It is evident, from the taught sessions observed, that students with learning difficulties and disabilities are mostly well integrated into the life and work of their college. Most of the colleges have developed good relationships with relevant staff from a wide range of specialist statutory and voluntary agencies, which are used to good effect to provide students with the most appropriate support arrangements.

Figure 2: Quality of Learning Support Provision

Grades Allocated for Learning Support Provision



3.6 The survey has identified many examples of best practice in the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities in mainstream courses. Across the colleges this is characterised by:

- rigorous and sensitive initial assessment processes where outcomes are used effectively to plan support;

- thorough risk assessments which match students to the most appropriate courses;
- a prevalent culture of inclusiveness which promotes independence in learning;
- effective use of information and learning technology to support learning and;
- bespoke training for tutors involved in supporting particular students in mainstream courses, which complements general disability awareness training provided for all staff through a systematic staff development programme.

In one of the colleges a well developed Web portal provides personal and unique access for each student to a Managed Learning Environment (MLE). Through the MLE each student has access to a virtual learning environment, assignment details, and the full and extensive range of student services, including student support and library loans. The benefits to the student include: significant access to substantial amounts of relevant information about the college and their particular course; good lines of communication with tutors; extensive access to class notes and good opportunities to engage in practice tests or extended tasks. These facilities are of particular value to those students whose fine motor skills are not well developed, and to those who need longer periods of study to digest or understand the information presented to them.

3.7 To improve provision further, there is a need for colleges to develop effective mechanisms for identifying and disseminating best practice within their campuses, including the best strategies for identifying and supporting students on mainstream courses. In addition they need to develop robust procedures for evaluating the impact of the learning support provided to the students, to include an analysis of the key performance indicators of retention, achievement, and progression to employment or further education

or training. There is also a need for bespoke training for academic or vocational tutors in the specific implications of particular disabilities, and in teaching and learning strategies that can be used to support students with disabilities in all aspects of their learning.

One student on an engineering course at one of the colleges was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and ADHD at pre school stage. He had a full-time classroom assistant throughout his time at secondary school but did not wish to have a full-time worker in class at the college. The following plan was agreed between the college's support centre, the student and his parents.

Transition arrangements:

- *Full-time support worker for one month and phased withdrawal of the support worker over a two month period.*
- *Lunchtime contact with the student and his support worker or member of the college support staff at lunchtime and at the end of each day.*
- *Text messaging between the student and support centre staff.*
- *Staff awareness and training in relation to the student's condition, complementing the general fact sheets on the full range of disabilities which are available for all staff through the college's virtual learning platform.*

Current support:

- *Training for the tutor in the nature and specific implications of the student's condition.*
- *Agreed 'triggers' when the tutor will allow the student a controlled period of 'time out' in an agreed, quiet location. The student keeps a folder of work that he can use in time out situations.*

- *Text messaging continues between the student and learning support staff each day to make sure that staff are available if he requires them.*
- *A prompter for examinations.*
- *A learning mentor who assists the student with time management and the organisation of his work.*

One student who is taking an A level equivalent course at one of the colleges has a hearing impairment. She does not use sign language. The tutor has been made aware of the hearing impairment and provides handouts and copies of electronic presentations used in class. The student can also access information from the course virtual learning environment and communicates with her tutor in relation to her written work through email. The students with whom she is working have been advised of simple strategies they can use to communicate with her more effectively. The student has access to a learning mentor for one hour a week to help with the organisation of assignments and course work and a conversor for use in class. Inclusive risk assessments, to determine the risks to both the student and her peers have been carried out by the college staff to identify a suitable work placement and deaf awareness training has been undertaken with work placement staff.

3.8 Both students are making good progress towards achievement of their qualifications.

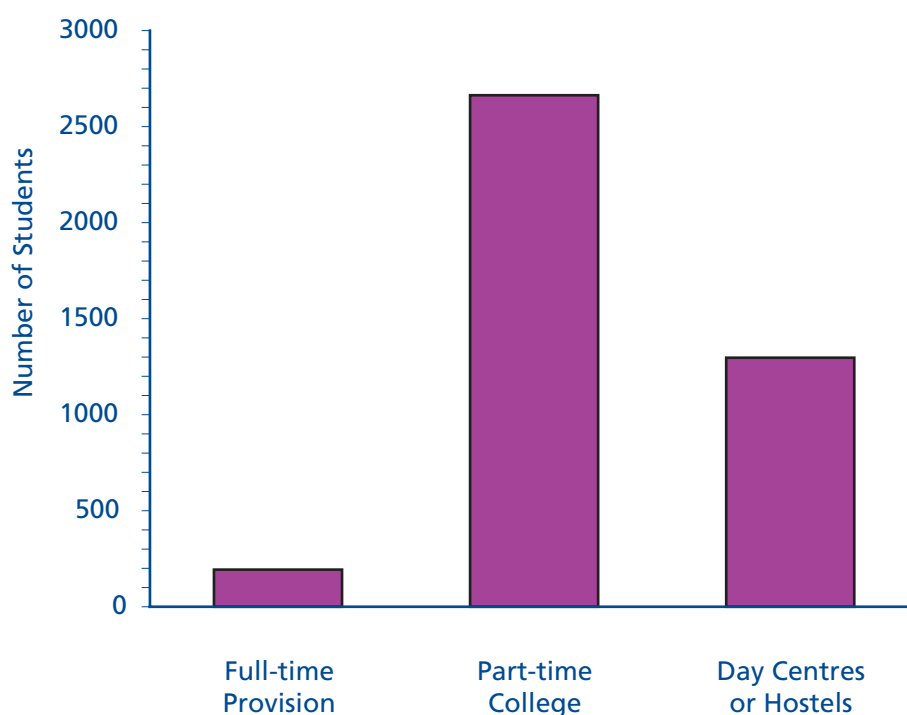
4. Provision for Students with Learning Disabilities in Discrete Courses

4.1 Currently, there are 188 students with learning disabilities on discrete full-time and 2,705 students on part-time courses within the colleges, and 1,000 students on courses supported by college staff in day centres or hostels. Taking into account the stage of the year at which the survey was

completed, these numbers correspond relatively closely to last year's figures, identified in figure 3. There are variations in the availability of full-time provision, both within and across the colleges. Over the past few years there has been a change in the make up of students accessing full-time discrete provision, with fewer presenting with severe learning disabilities, and more with moderate learning difficulties and additional behavioural conditions.

Figure 3

Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities in Discrete Courses in 2006/2007

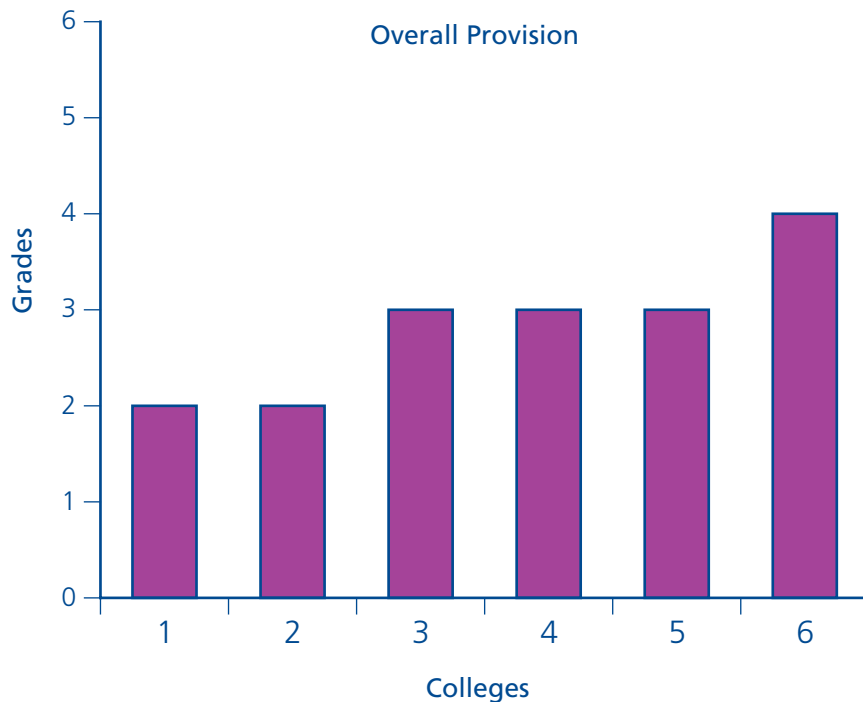


Data supplied by the Department.

- 4.2 Provision for these students is very good in two of the colleges and there are important strengths in most of the remainder (figure 4). In the two colleges where provision is very good, there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability, and senior management show strong commitment to the provision of courses for learning disabled students.

Within the CDPs of these colleges, a strong strategic rationale for this provision is articulated, along with a commitment to the establishment of cohesive and systematic transition arrangements. There are also clear lines of responsibility and accountability and staff are engaged in effective partnership work with key agencies, including Disability Action, the Cedar Foundation, Sensory Learning Support Service and MENCAP. There is a strong commitment of key staff to the development of an ethos which promotes inclusivity and respect for diversity.

Figure 4: Grades allocated by the Education and Training Inspectorate



4.3 In most of the colleges, students with learning difficulties and disabilities integrate well into college life. The majority are making good progress and are benefiting from a wide range of inclusive experiences with their peers. In the majority of the colleges, full-time students have opportunities to participate in a good range of extra curricular activities and recreational opportunities which enable them to establish friendships, forge relationships

with others and develop social and interpersonal skills in a wide variety of contexts. In the best practice, all mainstream students receive disability awareness training as part of their induction. In a minority of the colleges the students are accommodated in premises which do not facilitate effective inclusion and this is an issue which should be addressed by college management.

In one of the colleges, full-time and part-time learning disabled students are totally integrated into all aspects of the life and work of the college. Full-time students benefit from a 'buddy system' which involves the allocation of a mainstream student of the same age who acts as a mentor and works to promote inclusion in college life. Within this campus, the students are involved in a wide range of social and recreational activities, including a college formal.

- 4.4 The quality of teaching and learning on discrete courses is mainly good across the colleges. Of the 70 lessons observed during the survey, 58 (83%) ranged from having important strengths to excellent: 64 (91%) were satisfactory or better. In classes, the majority of students are well engaged and actively involved and good working relationships exist between tutors, support staff and students. In most of the classes there is evidence of good planning, activities are relevant and interesting, there is appropriate differentiation, and the students clearly enjoy their learning. The majority of students achieve standards commensurate with their level of ability. In a minority of the sessions, particularly in part-time classes, there is a lack of challenge and insufficient development in the students' learning.
- 4.5 All of the colleges have worked hard to put into place appropriate accredited qualifications over the past few years. These courses include a range of Edexcel and City and Guilds entry level courses in life skills or preparation for working life and a range of accredited courses of the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). Courses are also offered in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA) occupational studies or, for students with better literacy and life skills, at National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 1. These courses enable

students to sample or undertake training in a range of vocational subjects, including catering, distributive operations, horticulture and information technology. Most of the full-time students are on programmes that incorporate modules on preparation for work. Recent policy developments in school curricula, particularly in relation to education towards employability, require closer engagement between the schools and the colleges, and joint staff development, to ensure that FE courses build effectively on school-based provision, and provide sufficient progression in learning.

- 4.6 Colleges report that it has been problematic to find suitable accredited courses for those students with the greatest learning disabilities who have major literacy problems and for whom the current qualifications are too academically challenging. Colleges need to engage in extensive dialogue with the staff from health and social care trusts to ensure that FE complements the work undertaken in day care provision and contributes most effectively towards the development of skills for life and independent living for severely disabled students.
- 4.7 Across the FE sector there is a need for the curriculum offer for students with learning difficulties and disabilities to be reviewed and adapted to take account of local considerations and the lessons to be learned from the best practice models currently in operation.
- 4.8 Over the past few years, a minority of colleges have worked very effectively in identifying sympathetic employers and developing opportunities for students to experience sheltered employment in the local community. The colleges report that the situation is becoming increasingly difficult, however, as a result of the rising employment rate and the increasing numbers of migrant workers. A minority of colleges use the opportunities for sheltered work placement within their own campuses well and there is room to extend this good practice across all of the colleges. A minority of colleges have recently appointed job coaches, who source local employment opportunities and support disabled students in the transition to work. The majority of the colleges have developed good links with the voluntary organisations which are also enabling disabled people to move into part-time or full-time employment. There is, however, a need for clarity in relation to respective

roles and responsibilities, to ensure that there is effective collaboration to maximise the use of resources and fully realise the potential benefits to individual students.

One of the colleges revised its full-time discrete provision three years ago, to focus on the development of skills for employment. On the STEP programme, students spend four days each week in the college and one day in supported work placement. The college appointed a job coach who has a central role in the programme, linking with local employers, matching students to the most appropriate placement, and providing a link between the college and the employer. Of the nine students who completed the programme last year, all were offered either full-time employment or part-time work for one or two days a week.

- 4.9 Almost all of the colleges have developed very good working relationships with a range of other providers and a number of them have developed excellent models of provision, as a result of close partnership work with key agencies from the statutory and voluntary sectors.

In one of the colleges, a day release programme is being piloted in collaboration with the local health and social care trust. This 30 week, WORK RITE programme has been designed as an alternative to day care for people with a disability living in the community without access to day care provision. The programme is supported by a day care worker who cares for the physical and medical needs of the students, enabling the college staff to concentrate on their education and training needs.

The Life Skills Programme provided by one of the colleges gives full-time students the opportunity to gain qualifications and encourages them to work towards different types of accreditation. The structure of the course is flexible to allow individual learning profiles to be developed for each student. Group meetings and tutorials are an essential part of the course. Students are encouraged to work towards accreditation in arts and crafts, distributive operations,

enterprise, hairdressing, life skills, motor vehicle, personal social and health education, using the internet and working skills. The Life Skills programme runs in collaboration with the Mencap Job Club. This initiative provides a progression route for students to enter the world of work and to eventually obtain work placement and employment. Within the Life Skills programme, many different teaching strategies and methods stretch, challenge and encourage learning. Good use is made of the interactive whiteboard to create an inclusive and interactive learning opportunity for the students.

- 4.10 The colleges value the work of the specialist careers advisers and the support they provide for students with learning disabilities. Interviews undertaken with both careers advisers and college staff during the survey, and scrutiny of the documentation made available to them at the point of transfer of the young people from school, indicate clearly that there is considerable inconsistency in the quality of the information provided by schools and its relative value in facilitating the provision of effective guidance or planning for the student's future development. There is a need for the involvement of, and agreed lines of communication between, all key providers to support the effective transfer of information from schools, voluntary organisations, or day centres to ensure that accurate information is provided about the social, emotional and medical needs of each student to support the transition process.
- 4.11 In a significant minority of cases, important details about the prospective student's strengths and weaknesses, including relevant information about particular learning needs or requirements such as medical conditions, are not made available to staff in the college by outside agencies. There is a need for relevant agencies to develop suitable protocols to ensure that relevant information is provided to safeguard students while they are in college or with employers on work-placement.

In one of the colleges a multi-agency forum has been established to improve the flow of information between the various agencies in the interests of enabling students to make the transition from school, voluntary organisation or day centre most effectively and to maximise the joint expertise of the group. The forum includes representation from the careers service, health trust, the college and individuals such as transitions officers from the education and library board and support staff.

In another region, the college is closely involved with the work of an inter agency consortium, which has representation from key stakeholders, reflects the interests of a wide range of statutory and voluntary providers and focuses particularly on planning to meet the needs of people with severe learning disabilities in the area.

- 4.12 The survey has identified that there is a lack of clarity for both parents and young people about the options available when formal schooling ends. There is a need for improved arrangements for the provision of information on progression pathways for students with learning difficulties when they leave school.
- 4.13 Most of the colleges have worked hard to strengthen their procedures for tracking and monitoring student progress. In one of the examples of best practice observed during the survey student progress is tracked at course team level and closely monitored to ensure appropriate routes for progression are identified. Careers officers within the college, finance and learning support staff, tutors and course team members are all involved in ensuring suitable progression.

In another college, inter-agency appraisals, which parents and students may attend, are used four times each year to track student progress, in addition to the individual student learner agreements (ISLAs), which are completed on three occasions during the year.

- 4.14 Most of the tutors on discrete programmes are well qualified and experienced. They are supported well by learning support assistants and other support staff. They are highly committed to the students and most work well together to encourage independent learning in students. In the best practice, support workers are an integral part of the team, are clear about their roles and responsibilities, are fully involved in monitoring student progress, and work to promote the student's ability to work independently. They also have full access to all relevant staff development activities. Tutors from a minority of colleges have used the 'Lecturer into Industry' scheme to spend time in special schools or day centres and are using the learning gained to good effect in their work with students.
- 4.15 All of the colleges have implemented programmes of staff development to meet the requirements of current legislation. There is a need for ongoing disability awareness training to create a shared understanding of the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities amongst all staff across all of the campuses of each college.
- 4.16 For staff involved in discrete provision, there is a need for training in: awareness of challenging conditions, including ADHD and autism; behaviour management strategies; and the use of technology to support learning and teaching for lower ability learners. For staff generally, there is a need for training in whole college issues such as resources to facilitate inclusion, classroom management, and training in how to meet the needs of students with particular disabilities in a classroom or workshop setting.
- 4.17 Most of the colleges have appropriate policies and procedures in place for pastoral care and for the protection of children and vulnerable adults. In the best practice, the colleges have worked with feeder schools and external organisations to develop an appropriate range of policies. In these colleges, schedules of staff development have been designed to ensure all staff are trained in issues which relate directly to the protection of vulnerable adults. Throughout the colleges, more emphasis needs to be placed on the use of visual cues, to make students with learning difficulties and disabilities aware of procedures relating to child protection issues.

- 4.18 Resources are mostly good and at times excellent. Colleges make good efforts to resolve access difficulties experienced by students. For example, in one college in which a student who required showering facilities found that the height of her wheelchair did not correspond to the equipment which was used for showering, a tutor from the joinery section designed and manufactured a ramp overnight to address the problem.
- 4.19 All of the colleges are currently working to bring coherence into the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities across their constituent campuses. Within each college, there is a need to establish a clear management structure for this provision, to include clearly defined roles and responsibilities, clear lines of reporting and accountability and well defined arrangements for the holistic monitoring and evaluation of provision leading to improvement. There is also a need for colleges to develop clear linkages with relevant cross college functions including staff development, estates, student services and finance, and to develop uniform systems for data collection across all of their campuses.

5. Conclusion

The findings from the survey indicate clearly that provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities has improved since the last survey of 2003/2004. Considerable progress has been made by the colleges in introducing suitable accredited programmes, revising provision to focus more strongly on the development of skills for independent living or employability where appropriate, and improving staff awareness on disability issues, through a structured programme of staff development. There have also been improvements in the arrangements to support students with learning difficulties and disabilities in mainstream courses. The survey has also identified a number of key priorities for development, which are detailed below.

Key Priorities for Development

Colleges should establish local planning fora, involving key stakeholders, to organise a curriculum, which takes due account of existing provision in their locality and offers continuity of progression in the development of skills for life and independent living, and employability skills.

There is a need for improved arrangements for the provision of information on progression pathways for students with learning difficulties when they leave school.

Colleges should continue to identify and articulate clearly their provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities within their CDPs, and they should develop appropriate performance indicators against which the efficiency and effectiveness of the provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities in both mainstream and discrete courses can be measured and quality assured in a holistic manner.

Consideration should be given by the Department to the replacement of the designation 'students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities' with the more positive term 'students with additional learning needs'.

Colleges Visited During the Survey

Belfast Metropolitan College

Northern Regional College

North West Regional College

South Eastern Regional College

Southern Regional College

The South West College

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