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## **Education and Training Inspectorate**

### **Report of a Survey**

# **Survey of Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (SLDD) in Colleges of Further Education in Northern Ireland**

**Inspected: 2003/2004**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This inspection focused on the provision made for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD) within mainstream college courses and in discrete courses for the learning disabled across five colleges (Appendix). A total of 43 taught sessions was observed; in 35 of these sessions, learners with disabilities were fully integrated into the courses of their choice; eight were discrete courses for learners with disabilities. Discussions were held with students, college support staff, main course tutors and management.

1.2 The Department for Education and Learning (DEL) in its circular 16/03 sets out the criteria which governs special educational provision within the further education sector:

“The Further Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 requires governing bodies of institutions of further education, in the discharge of their duties under Article 13(1), to have regard to the needs of students over compulsory school age who have learning difficulties. This phrase is used in this document to mean those who have difficulties and/or disabilities which impact on their learning. Colleges will also be aware that, in preparing their Development Plans, they are required to examine provision for students with special needs, identify strengths and weaknesses and make proposals for improvements.

1.3 The circular further states,

“Provision for students with learning difficulties is a key element of the Government’s drive to increase participation and widen access. To this end the Department has embarked on a number of strategies to promote provision. These strategies include:

- the provision of a Good Practice Guide;
- the continuing support for Curriculum and Staff Development from the further education provision budget;
- additional weightings under the funding formula; and
- the creation of an Additional Support Fund (ASF).”

1.4 The previous survey in 2001/2002 of provision for SLDD within the further education sector, identified as strengths, the good quality of much of the teaching, the excellent relationships between students and tutors, the many opportunities for social interaction, and the well-documented outcomes for the majority of students. Among the areas for improvement noted were the variations in interpreting the funding mechanism for SLDD and, in a small, but significant number of cases, the lack of opportunity for progression to suitable accredited courses.

## 2. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 A significantly high proportion of the Additional Support Funding is given to students presenting difficulties in literacy. These students mostly 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. From discussion with

a number of the students, it is clear that they welcome the support given, and that it has facilitated their continued participation on their course. Relationships at all levels are good and it is evident, from the taught sessions observed, that students with learning disabilities and difficulties are mostly well integrated into the life and work of their college.

2.2 Three out of the five colleges visited identified as causes for concern the following issues:

- constant changes in the funding formula, which make it difficult to plan provision and allocate resources;
- a lack of clarity and consistency about which courses are deemed by DEL as vocational or non-vocational;
- a demand for community SLDD classes, which is greater than the colleges' capacity to supply;
- suitable accreditation and progression routes for the more severely learning disabled students; and
- suitable staff development for the college staff.

2.3 The findings from the survey clearly indicate that provision for SLDD has significantly improved since the last survey of 2001/2002. Chief among these improvements are:

- the more rigorous identification of student's learning needs through scrutiny of the their enrolment forms;
- the high quality of much of the teaching observed;
- the more focused use of Individual Student Learner Agreements (ILSAs) which has led to more informed decisions being taken on accreditation and career opportunities;
- the effective way in which the Learning Support Fund is used by colleges to help students with a learning disability to participate in the mainstream course of their choice, with individually tailored support;
- the identification, in two of the colleges, of an enhanced role for the Learning Support Co-ordinator and the development of a cross-faculty team and a whole-college approach to meet the broad spectrum of special needs;
- the increasing interest and support of the colleges' senior management teams evidenced in the identification of special needs as a priority for development in the college development plans;
- the developing culture of inclusion and increased access for students with learning disabilities across the further education sector; and

- the increase in the enrolments of students with disabilities across the whole range of further educational provision and their success across an increasing range of accredited courses.

2.4 A number of significant areas remain in need of attention, however, if the Department's aim of increasing participation and widening access for students with learning disabilities is to be more fully realised:

- all colleges should learn from the practice of the best by developing learning support services which include all departments and faculties, and which facilitate a culture of participation and inclusion for the most vulnerable students;
- staff development on special education issues, remains a major area of need across the vocational areas within colleges, and will become increasingly so with the imminent implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA);
- there is limited provision across the colleges of courses with appropriate and nationally recognised accreditation, for students with more severe learning difficulties;
- the increasing use of part-time staff, increases further the need for staff development because many of these staff do not have adequate experience or qualifications in special needs;
- the careers advice given to many students is not good enough.

2.5 The survey report of 2001/2002 on SLDD made the following recommendation:

“The category of SLDD should be discontinued since its interpretation perpetuates the concept of handicap and low expectations. This should be replaced by a new category of student referred to as having learning difficulties (LD students). Colleges should be required to furnish evidence, extracted from the enrolment form, of the extent of the learning difficulty experienced by a student and the reasonable expectation of the outcomes of course participation. This should have the effect of identifying progression routes in the students' learning and encouraging the principles of life long learning.”

2.6 This survey found significant evidence of continuing confusion about the SLDD designation because it includes both students receiving support from the ASF and students who are more learning disabled. Further consideration of this issue is necessary to ensure that the designation and in particular, its use for funding purposes, does not perpetuate the concept of handicap and lead to low expectations for the students.

### 3. CONCLUSION

3.1 It is clear that there have been positive developments in the provision made for students with learning difficulties and disabilities over the last few years. This survey has demonstrated clear evidence of commitment within the further education sector to making provision for SLDD. The majority of the teaching observed was of good quality and the majority of students participate positively and successfully in their chosen courses. There is a greater sense of inclusion and an increasing willingness on the part of colleges to meet the diverse needs of those who require support to access the available courses. As a result there is also an increasing range of accreditation and progression routes available to these students.

3.2 A number of problem areas, however, remain and need to be addressed if provision for SLDD is to meet as fully as possible, the needs of students with learning difficulties. Chief among these issues are the need for colleges a) to review their learning support structures to ensure SLDD provision exists across the curriculum areas; b) to provide SLDD with broader access to appropriate nationally accredited courses and; c) to initiate a process of effective whole-college staff development in special needs. There is also a need to review the designation of SLDD itself to ensure that it is fit for purpose.

**Colleges Visited During the Survey**

Castlereagh College of Further Education

North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education

Fermanagh College of Further Education

Upper Bann Institute of Further and Higher Education

East Tyrone Institute of Further and Higher Education.

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