Through Inclusion to Excellence: Learner Voices

A learner consultation and feedback report

Commissioned by the Steering Group for the Strategic Review of the LSC’s Planning and Funding of Provision for Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities across the Post-16 Learning and Skills Sector

July 2007

Of interest to the further education system, researchers and academics
The Steering Group for the Strategic Review of the Learning and Skills Council’s (LSC’s) Planning and Funding of Provision for Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities across the Post-16 Learning and Skills Sector commissioned Skill, the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, to perform a learner consultation and feedback exercise on its behalf. The purpose of the exercise was to ensure that the voices of learners were heard and considered as part of the review process, in addition to the voices of agencies and providers. This document reports the voices of learners in this context.

The learners used in the case studies gave permission to Skill to use their real names. Where this permission was not secured, their names have been changed.

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Executive Summary

Date March 2007

1 As part of the strategic review of the Learning and Skills Council’s (LSC’s) planning and funding of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities across the post-16 learning and skills sector, its Steering Group commissioned Skill, National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, to perform a learner consultation and feedback exercise on its behalf. The purpose of the exercise was to ensure that, alongside agencies and providers, the learner voice was heard and considered as part of the review process.

2 A total of 300 learners from a wide range of ages and disabilities and on a variety of programmes was interviewed. By talking to learners in their familiar learning environment, feedback has been gained on how learners found out about provision and chose a course, what they did and didn’t like about it, how it could be improved, what they had gained and what message they would like to send to the LSC. This report illustrates the learners’ comments with case studies. In addition, Skill undertook a literature review of disabled learners’ views in schools.

3 The views of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have not been overtly sought since the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) report, Student Voices (1996). This report compares learners’ views nearly 10 years on and highlights the developments in the past decade. The most prominent difference is the improvement in Additional Learning Support (ALS), both in quality and reliability of provision. The learners strongly state that they would not be able to study without ALS and, that they want the LSC to continue to provide ALS and the opportunity to re-engage with learning in small steps. Learners also liked the individual learning packages that have been developed for them and are concerned that changes in funding should not reduce these opportunities for other learners in the future. It is also noted that one issue, which has remained unresolved since 1996, is that of transport for learners to colleges and learning centres.

4 Recommendations designed to reflect learner views and to improve their experience were given to the Steering Group for consideration. These recommendations are explained fully in paragraphs 73–80, and are outlined below alongside the key points raised by the learners.
Recommendations

Learners were very positive about the benefits of support, funded through Additional Learning Support.

Recommendation 1

5 The LSC should continue to ensure, through budget provision, spending guidelines, and regional and local monitoring, that appropriate Additional Learning Support is available to all learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, and that this is not subject to geographic differences.

Learners clearly outlined the importance of small steps in to learning and non-accredited provision, especially for building confidence.

Recommendation 2

6 The LSC should sustain funding for ‘other provision’ at affordable levels and with Additional Learning Support, to provide an essential access route to learning and progression for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Learners said that not all staff were aware of strategies for working with people with learning difficulties and disabilities, but where they did, this made a difference to their learning experience.

Recommendation 3

7 The LSC should require all providers to demonstrate a rolling programme of staff development on disability awareness and disability equality issues as part of the funding arrangements, and should examine ways of monitoring this.

Many learners were positive about the opportunities offered through specialist provision, but there were dangers that individuals could become quite isolated from the community.

Recommendation 4

8 The LSC should explore flexible funding partnerships between specialist colleges and further education (FE) providers so that more learners can benefit from shared packages. All FE colleges should have plans to raise the baseline of provision for all learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. For learners with profound and complex learning difficulties, annual agreements on shared budgets between LSC, and health and social services should be negotiated.

Learners would like to see more opportunities for feedback.

Recommendation 5

9 The LSC should promote learner forums in all providers.

From the information provided by learners, the quality and range of support in sixth form education for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are widely variable.

Recommendation 6

10 The LSC should include benchmarks and levers in the funding formula to reward good practice in staff development and provide incentives and practical help to change poor practice in supporting learners. The LSC should also identify with the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) how to share good practice. The LSC should work with Ofsted to gain information on provision in schools where there are small numbers of disabled learners.
Case study 1

Peter is a 17-year-old learner on a two-year Joinery NVQ, half-day release course. He started the course in September 2004. He had erratic school attendance and during Year 11 spent three days a week at a work-based learning provider and the other two in school – except he didn’t go. He likes to work with his hands.

In my secondary school, they didn’t take enough care or interest in us. I used to skive off and go and work landscaping. In my last year, I went to Rathbone’s: it was different – no paperwork, we used to go out on trips like doing army training. I liked doing practical things.

Two years before leaving school, I met a Connexions personal advisor. She was a real help, she knows what I have done before and I see her as a friend. I go and see her when I want to.

I found out about the course here through my boss. He was a teacher and knew about college and these courses. He asked me if I wanted to go to college. I didn’t have any interest then – nothing to show what I could do – but he said he would take me around. He took me around and I thought I would give it a go. Without my boss, I wouldn’t have seen the door to college, let alone gone through it.

When I started at joinery, and saw the packs and had a look at them, they were rock-heavy. I couldn’t do them so the teacher said that I needed a support worker – but it took a lot of time to get one. Now having a support worker, it has lifted a ton off my shoulders. She does my reading and writes down what comes out of my mouth. I see her from 9.00 to 12.00 for the theory parts of the class. She turns words round for me, explains it how I need to hear it and makes it clearer for me. I get on well with her. She helps me work on the skills I’ve got – that’s made me a lot happier; a nicer person. If I weren’t in the college, I’d probably be in a cell.

Part of me still says, ‘You still have a lot to do’, but the other part of me says, ‘Yes, but there are things you can do, even though you have problems.’ Part of me allows me to feel confident, but there are things in my head that won’t allow me to yet.

From being on the course, I know I can achieve the goals I want to: goals in life are to run my own building business in Australia.

I’m on my way now… There’s lots of people sitting in the gutter like I was, loads who think they can’t do things… they need encouraging. I had it in my head that I couldn’t learn in college. With people’s help, I’m quite surprised, I feel clearer now – it’s made me a different person – a nicer person – a person you never thought you were.
Case study 2

Ayun is a young Asian man in his early 20s with recognisable learning difficulties and speech impairment.

He had experienced depression and real loss of confidence in his extended family and not being able to participate in male roles distressed him. High expectations led to him just sitting at home feeling lost.

He saw a college advertisement and came in to collect some information. He was referred to the Learner Support Service.

His subject choices were Basic Skills Level 2 then Level 3 Maths and English. He enjoys college with support, particularly in using the computer. He plans to move on to do an NVQ at Level 1.

His growing confidence is encouraging him to want to learn to swim. He is enjoying his college experience and feels he can hold his head up in the family.

As a long-term future he would like to continue part-time learning and have a job clearing boxes in a warehouse.
1 Introduction

Background and Methodology

11 As part of the strategic review of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, Skill was commissioned by the Steering Group to listen to learners about their views of provision funded by the LSC across a range of post-16 opportunities in England.

12 A research team was created of Skill’s staff, independent consultants with considerable experience with this group of learners, and two organisations of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, experienced in this area of work: Speaking Up and Disability Equality in Education.

13 The LSC already gathers feedback from all learners on an annual basis, including those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, through its national learner satisfaction survey. The survey is conducted using telephone interviews. The Steering Group, however, asked Skill to provide learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities with an opportunity to give their views through a wider variety of formats and contexts.

14 In December 2004, the team shared experiences and methods of working with learners with different learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In order to facilitate input from a wide range of learners, it was agreed that this would not only take the form of a questionnaire with facilitated group discussion, but that other ways of communicating with learners would be used, where applicable, for example story boards and symbols, graffiti walls and tactile materials. Some learners were interviewed on a one-to-one basis, both as an alternative to focus group discussions and to collect more in-depth case studies. The research team listened to learners where their learning took place and in a familiar environment.

15 The wider review process collected qualitative evidence formally and informally from providers, agencies and individuals using three key questions.

- What practices should be kept and built upon in developing provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?
- What barriers and gaps are currently present in provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities?
- What solutions and plans are required to address these problems or to more widely implement successful practice?

16 These questions were used as a basis for the learner interviews and focus groups and enabled information to be collected within the wider framework of the review. Feedback was also collected on the following areas:

- how learners found out about the provision they were attending
- how they chose the course they were currently undertaking
- what they liked most about the course
- what they liked least about the course
- how they thought it could be improved
- what they felt they had most gained from the experience
- what they thought their next step might be
- what the learners would like to say to the LSC.

17 Participating providers were selected from those that had volunteered to be involved at the Skill post-16 conference in November 2004, and those providers known to have learners demonstrating a range of ages and impairments, and studying on a variety of programmes.

18 Engaging school sixth forms to participate was more problematic, as no up-to-date figures are available from the DfES on numbers of pupils with special educational needs in individual schools. Schools were approached in three areas: London, Birmingham and Cambridgeshire. The LSC provided a list of schools funded under the formula for 2005/06.
Schools found the concept of learner feedback to the LSC more difficult and less relevant to their pupils’ experiences, and for some, the arrangements were a low priority. In some mainstream sixth forms, as might be expected, numbers of disabled learners were small, so the research team asked to meet Year 11 pupils with disabilities as well. This necessitated further consultation with the head of Year 11 and the head of sixth form, creating further delay.

Learner profile

19 Participating learners ranged in age, including young people aged 15–25 and adults of all ages. Participants were on a wide range of programmes, including accredited and non-accredited provision, and from Pre-entry Level to A-level, and vocational qualifications. The learners were offered the opportunity to contribute by their learning providers, who were selected by the research team to cover as wide a variety of provision as possible. These included FE colleges, including those both with and without discrete provision, adult and community learning (ACL) providers, work-based learning (WBL) providers, sixth form colleges, specialist residential colleges, school sixth forms and a special residential school. Learners disclosed disabilities including profound and complex learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties, sensory impairments, motor impairments, specific learning difficulties, hidden disabilities including health-related issues such as epilepsy, and mental health difficulties.

20 In total, 300 learners participated from 24 providers. The providers included three ACL providers, seven FE colleges, three WBL providers, two specialist colleges, two sixth form colleges, six schools and one specialist school.

Learner Response to Feedback Exercise

21 This report discusses the responses of learners. In addition, there are two thematic reports included as appendices, on learners with mental health difficulties and learners with profound and complex disabilities. Learners with mental health difficulties were chosen for focus because of their status as a priority for the LSC. The Steering Group also asked to focus on the experience of learners with profound and complex disabilities because this cohort represents a particularly vulnerable cohort.

Choice and transition

22 The majority of learners stated school or careers staff, Connexions and social workers as the prime source of information about post-16 provision. This reflects the higher number of young disabled people in the group. The next most commonly mentioned sources were: having previously attended the college or provider, parents, disability employment advisor and Jobcentre Plus, and college marketing – leaflets and advertisements. This differs from the LSC national learner satisfaction survey, which found the most likely advice to be provider teachers and tutors, followed by friends.

23 Learners in school said they and their parents lacked information about how they might be supported in further and higher education. They quoted Connexions, social services, promotional literature and prospectuses as ways they knew of finding out information.

24 The importance of timely, high-quality, independent information, advice and guidance is highlighted in both the Skills White Paper and the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit report Improving Life Chances of Disabled People. The LSC can only benefit from the improvement of the transition process. Later in this report, the literature review (paragraphs 56–66 and Annex D) and the feedback from providers (paragraphs 67–72) for the review confirm the importance of good transition processes.

25 There are three areas on transition in which a proactive role by the LSC would enhance the best use of resources. These are:

- proactively negotiating with other parties with powers with regard to transport for example, the DfES and children’s trusts or local authorities
- clarifying the role of the local LSC in local authority’s children and young people plans required under the Children Act for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities up to the age of 25
- the promotion of good practice in transition and engaging with other stakeholders, for example, learning providers, school sixth form staff and careers teachers, Connexions and Jobcentre Plus to provide the necessary experiences to promote choice across the range of provision. The experiences described by learners indicate that both learners and some professionals weren’t entirely clear on the content of courses offered, and that some learners enter the ‘revolving door’ of courses early on because poor information and guidance led them into areas they no longer wished to pursue.
Case study 3

Ian is a learner at a specialist college and a local FE college. He has partial sight and is now doing a higher education course.

He was looking to improve his qualifications when he heard about the specialist college. His previous further education experience had resulted in poor A-levels in English Literature and History, A/S Information Technology (IT) and Business, in which he had obtained low grades.

Since joining the college he has progressed from Years 1 and 2 AVCE IT in 2001–03 with Maths at GCSE level, to Years 3 and 4 HND Computing and Software Engineering.

When the specialist college suggested the AVCE course, he saw this as a step backwards but in hindsight he sees this was excellent advice. He enjoyed the practical elements that broadened his experience and provided a major step forward in knowledge for him.

All study is done in the FE college. For most lessons there is a note-taker support worker who will also work with him after class, and help him to review and organise his study.

He thoroughly enjoys his time. He comments that staff at the FE college are becoming more aware and experienced at dealing with the needs of visually-impaired students. His experience is that his tutors have become good at adaptive education. The FE college’s advanced courses make this a really vital educational experience.

He is very positive about his experience in further education. The shared environment between specialist college and FE makes it an excellent place to develop independent living skills and to study. He says he would recommend this approach to others without hesitation. He believes he has benefited from gaining organisational skills for life and also for his studies.

*The ability to organise myself, my life and my work has been a major factor in my progress.*

When considering his next move he is still a little unsure of choices for next year, and is exploring the possibilities. This unique partnership of two colleges has made it possible for him to consider:

- a further year to change his HND for a degree; or
- employment in IT or the computer industry.
Case study 4

Chris is a young man with Asperger’s Syndrome and some attention-deficit difficulties.

He is at an FE college on the second year of a two-year course with a music option. He studies maths, communication, basic skills and IT along with music modules including singing, songwriting, ensemble skills and drum practice. He has drum lessons outside college and has reached Grade 3. He had attended special education previously. His family came to college on a short music course and saw opportunities for him.

Dad thought it would be a good place for me to learn.

I have made friends, and enjoy my course. I think I have done really well getting this far with my work.

His learning support assistant confirmed his confidence had developed.

He feels that he is getting a lot of help and good music teaching.

Dislikes

College is a bit noisy first thing in the morning, but it is quieter at lunchtime.

His transport arrangements mean that he has to wait after classes, but there is insufficient time to have a band rehearsal with fellow students, or meet friends.

What would you change?

He would have liked even more help at the start of his course.

Transport, long delays and very inflexible arrangements meant a lot of hanging about.

He would have liked to see more students on the music course and to have more drum rehearsal time.

What do you want to achieve?

I would like to continue playing with a band.

Dad wants me to return to college to do another course. I haven’t made my mind up yet.

He was encouraged by his Dad to put an advert into the local newspaper advertising his drum skills. Since his advert, he has been invited to Quad Studios. He is now rehearsing and playing with a live band (semi-professional). The band and singer are pleased with his drum performance. It would appear that he could become a permanent band member.

With drum tuition outside college and working at Grade 3, he has gained the confidence to produce effective audition performances. The college provides him with a learning environment and the support he needs to succeed. His initial contact with the college was a short course which led him on to academic and vocational aspirations.
2 Learners’ Views on the Quality of Courses and Provision

26 Learners were overwhelmingly positive about their learning experiences and welcomed the opportunity to talk about them. The most commonly mentioned positive responses were:

- learning new skills
- literacy learning, including the use of symbols such as Widget, and an interesting context led to a feeling that this contributed to learners making more progress than in previous learning, especially school
- making friends
- provision of learning support and the high standard of that support.

27 Learners also mentioned they like doing practical and interesting things, work experience, working with computers (although a few thought there was too much IT in some vocational courses) and achieving certificates and qualifications. In particular, key messages from the group of learners interviewed at RNIB Loughborough were:

- excellence in partnership of the two colleges provides a learning and living environment that supports achievement
- there are alternative qualifications to A-levels
- learning support is tailored to individual needs.

28 Learners valued being treated as adults, being given greater freedom, being challenged and seeing themselves develop personally. They also valued the richer programme and choice of activities on offer, and mentioned sport, music and cooking, commenting that these were the areas they had been excluded from at school, often to undertake physiotherapy or extra literacy classes.

29 Learners expressed surprise at how different the nature of learning opportunities in further education was from school, including team work and group discussions, which were new to them but which they enjoyed once they got used to them. They liked working at their own pace using the appropriate support equipment, and the jointly agreed learning aims. They valued the encouragement of staff and quality of the staff who worked with them.

30 Many learners in school were familiar with further education but had opted to stay in school. However, some said they would have preferred to study in FE but had either left it too late to apply or were dissuaded by their parents who thought that college would be too tough. They recognised that the college environment might have treated them more like adults and felt that sixth form was the ‘same old people’. Others liked the familiarity of sixth form and noted the added responsibility it gave compared with school.

31 Those learners in work-based learning liked the £50 training allowance but made observations about the payment arrangements, including it not being paid into their own bank account.

32 They looked forward to work experience and enjoyed meeting ‘people like me’ and gaining an understanding of the disabilities experienced by their peers.

33 Across all providers, many of these comments suggest a welcome progression to more adult status and that learners were well engaged with this process.
Learner Feedback on Issues They Would Like to see Improved to Enhance Their Learning

Transport

34 There were aspects of the programme some learners didn’t like or enjoy, but the primary problem encountered was difficulties with transport. Either transport arrangements were difficult to organise or the timing of transport was a problem – including arriving too early or having to wait around to be collected, with nothing to do, given there wasn’t enough time to undertake another activity. Some travelled long distances to attend a college with better support provision and this was very tiring.

Teaching and learning

35 With regard to teaching, a number of learners on vocational courses said they weren’t always sure what to do on a task. Communication with the teacher was not always clear and they were left to struggle too long. Learners commented on the pace of some programmes and the amount of work to be completed. Learners complained of too much reliance on worksheets and wanted more interactive teaching.

36 There were a number of comments that suggested that learners were unprepared for the content and delivery of the course, expressing surprise at the amount of IT work on a construction course for example, and being distressed at the knock down and rebuild approach when they had taken pains with a piece of work.

37 This suggests that the pre-entry guidance was incomplete or that too many assumptions were made of learners’ experience and that some learners were on courses that were ‘available’ and not their first choice. These options may not have been so thoroughly investigated with regard to the curriculum and teaching methods before the learner enrolled.

38 Some learners felt there was some unwelcoming behaviour and rudeness from learners and staff. The majority suggested that all college staff should have training in disability equality as there was a big difference in understanding their needs between the disability and support staff and mainstream tutors. Some learners commented that staff seemed very stretched and that if staff were absent there was no cover available. Several learners in school sixth form raised issues about discrimination, feeling that they received prejudiced and stereotypical attitudes from staff on both disability and race.

39 Learners on a new course had been told they were ‘guinea pigs’ and found that support wasn’t in place and that facilities and teachers were unprepared. They didn’t think it was right for disabled learners to start a course if it wasn’t ready.

Facilities

40 A surprising number of learners commented about the learning environment, for example: the rooms were cold and uncomfortable; some vocational areas were cramped; they had problems with coping with building work and maintenance which disrupted their access; and there was abuse of disabled parking bays. Sudden changes of room were distressing; learners who were slower to move around wanted to be told of room changes in advance instead of finding a note pinned to the door, as this caused them to miss teaching time because they would arrive late at the new location.

41 Learners raised access issues such as ‘Too many learners in the lift who could use the stairs’ and mentioned difficulties in crowded corridors. Facilities for eating at break and at lunchtime were a problem for learners in outreach centres. Learners were very happy with equipment provided through ALS funding, but those that needed access to general college facilities rather than additional ones believed they received a poorer service from libraries and IT suites. They asked for better equipment and more tutors for IT.

42 This last point may indicate that a provider is not thinking through the issues of accessibility beyond ALS-funded support and that planning and budgeting is not currently impact-assessed for disability access. This will of course be required under the Disability Equality Duty. A priority for the LSC impact assessment within the Disability Equality Scheme should be for the LSC to include details in provider plans for learner services such as IT and libraries to improve equity of access. Ensuring equity of provision in outreach centres as part of provider plans will need examination and monitoring by local LSCs.
Messages From Learners

43 These case studies illustrate the messages learners were giving us about the benefits afforded by their learning opportunities, some of which are quantifiable in the form of achievement and accreditation, and some of which are wider benefits, such as using the NUS card and making new friends, which will enable them to be confident and assertive when taking decisions in their adult lives.

44 Paragraph 36 of the National Learner Satisfaction Survey (LSC, 2005) quotes the most frequent reason given by learners for attending college as ‘mostly for the social aspects’. It is important to bear this in mind and resist the temptation to regard this aspect as not part of the educational goals and aspirations of learners. The LSC must ensure that it is not discriminating against disabled learners unfairly by disregarding this universal aspect as undeserving of funding. Learners on non-accredited courses commented on how stressful it was to hear their course was under threat and might not be continued.

45 In many of these examples, learners have been attracted to learn by short, part-time courses, which have led to academic and vocational progression. This is an important access route, and one that needs to be maintained at affordable levels. None of the learners in these examples were in paid work before attending college and all were likely to be on incomes at social security benefit levels.

46 Learners were eager to participate, regarded the consultation as important and were very keen to send messages to the LSC. Post-16 providers made excellent arrangements for learners and the Skill team, who were impressed with the recognition providers gave to the national importance of the work. Learners had access to boardrooms, refreshments, support staff and private interview rooms where necessary. As noted earlier, meeting with learners in school sixth forms was more problematic.

47 The wide variety of learners, providers and programmes supports the wider benefits for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The examples show how valuable learners find the opportunities to make friends and be part of the NUS. The case studies show that learning choices and progression can’t be separated from the complexities of life and disability.

48 Learners had many direct messages but the overwhelming majority were concerned about opportunities being cut for those coming along behind them. They put great emphasis to the provision of Additional Learning Support. They wanted the LSC to fund more courses this way. They were very clear that they found the learning programme had helped them to develop and mature and make choices and be more involved in the next step. They were pleased to be asked. When asked why they had participated, the following comments were typical.

- Talking about this was good.
- I wanted to take part, it’s important to tell the people who make the decisions.
- I was curious.
- I want to encourage others.

49 Learners said they liked the buzzy atmosphere at college and found the ‘can-do’ approach of staff and learners inspiring. Generally, they found access to courses and support was good but that problems with the built environment and transport meant that their participation in learning was never secure.

50 Learners in school sixth forms found that the quality and range of support varied widely, from diagnosis of specific learning difficulties to support workers and assistive technology. Learners wanted equal access to high-quality facilities and support.

51 Learners in work-based learning wanted more time on Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes and more access to vocational and independence skills on E2E.

52 Learners in residential specialist colleges said it was great and that it was important to continue to fund similar residential courses for independence and communications support. They identified the benefits of residential learning as:

- more independence
- meeting similar people (with disabilities)
- well-trained staff – very disability-aware
- no bullying; but
- ‘it can be a bubble’.
53 Learners with profound and complex difficulties were able to express the benefits they enjoyed from the companionship of others and working with support staff. Skill found several examples of how learning programmes had been developed in local provision in partnership with health and social services for learners with profound and complex learning difficulties, which the LSC should explore, and share.

54 Learners with mental health difficulties valued the flexibility. Two colleges with innovative approaches had been able to accommodate these learners in a variety of settings, which would merit exploration and sharing by the LSC.

55 Learners identified the importance of not just looking for progression but filling the gaps in their previous education, which meant they needed to learn different things at different levels.
Case study 5

Natalie has complex physical and communication difficulties. She has no speech, but communicates very effectively using an electronic pad.

She was previously at a specialist residential college for people with disabilities. She is now doing various discrete courses at college including art, music and Out and About (making choices, travelling, saying what you want, and so on).

She clearly enjoys college – her face lit up when a support worker came to take her bowling as part of Out and About.

I like the staff and that there is always someone with me. I like the other students and my favourite courses are art and music.

She normally gets the bus to college, which is fine, but it takes a long time to get there. On a Wednesday, a carer brings her, as her classes start at 9.00 rather than later, so she would have to be up really early if she were to get the bus.

Progression

She would like to work, but doesn’t know what kind of work she would like to do. She likes being with other people. She has previously mentioned that she would like to go into schools and talk to children about herself and her disability.
Case study 6

John is a potter and used to work for the National Trust, making reproduction pottery. He is in his 40s. In May 2002 he was involved in a very bad car accident, and was not expected to live. He now has one prosthetic limb, and is in a lot of pain, particularly when walking.

He came to the college because he wanted to do something stimulating while he recovers. He had previously tried distance learning, but that was not appropriate as he found being on his own brought on flashbacks and emotional difficulties. He had an interest in computers and hoped to develop creative skills that he could use in the future, as he is unsure whether he will be able to return to pottery. He had previously gained a degree in Art.

He firstly did a course in digital photography and Adobe Photoshop and then went on to do a City and Guilds Level 3 in Programming. He is now doing an HND in Computing at an FE college. He chose this course because it is in the daytime, whereas previous courses were in the evenings, leaving him with nothing to do in the daytime. Another factor in choosing the course was because the venue is more accessible than other colleges (it is not at the main college site). Indeed, John comments that this course was physically the only option. He had thought of doing a different course at the local College of Technology, but they had no car parking available, which made it impossible for him to attend.

Positive and negative experiences

He finds that access to colleges generally is very poor. Automatic doors often aren’t switched on, there is a lack of level access in the buildings, and there is abuse of disabled parking. He is very confident and feels happy to complain to estates and tutors about this, but change is very slow. Now that college staff know him, they are happy to help where they can. He thinks there needs to be a change in attitudes towards disabled people.

The course is hard work, but he says that he has time to dedicate to it, so he feels it is going well.

Progression

He is doing the course so that he can enhance his opportunities wherever he is and whatever situation he is physically in. He hopes the course will create opportunities for the future. He also sees the course as part of his emotional recovery from the accident and is glad of the mental challenge.

What would you change and why?

The one thing that he would change, given the chance, would be to tackle the abuse of disabled car parking bays.
3 Issues From the Literature Review

56 To support the face-to-face interviews with school learners, Skill undertook a literature review of work with disabled learners in schools. The review is attached at Annex D.

57 The literature review reveals that the number of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities moving on to post-16 education is still significantly lower than their peers, 54 per cent compared with 72 per cent of all young people (Connexions, 2002). Stalker (2002) comments that many school leavers are still directed towards day centres and segregated FE courses and that there is not enough serious consideration of a full range of opportunities, for example, employment and inclusive further education. When considering whether young disabled people experience choice, this depends on appropriate information and guidance. Wave 2 of the DfES longitudinal study of post-16 transitions for young people with special educational needs (SEN) found that while 73 per cent of young people wanted to go on to further study or training, young people with SEN statements were less likely to know how to find out about future work, education or training opportunities (DfES, 2004).

58 The literature review concludes that young disabled people need the information support, time and experience to be able to make informed choices. Taster courses, visits and work experience are very important in transition. Young people must be enabled to make a contribution to the transition process and their views must be valued. It is also essential that professionals, including teachers and Connexions and careers advisors, have appropriate expectations of young people and their aspirations and expectations. Young people want high-quality provision that meets their physical and intellectual needs. Care needs are important, but these must not be the sole or main focus of opportunities that young people are offered.

59 Many young disabled people want work-based and vocational opportunities. Local provision is often preferable as it enables young people to maintain friendships and continuity. However, in the current context, where local provision can be inadequate, many young people see residential provision as an advantage, especially for specialist services and peer support.

60 Choice at 16 needs to be properly facilitated and offered in appropriate ways to meet the needs of the young person. Going on to college or other post-16 provision should not be an assumption, but a real choice and active decision, with learners being given different options to choose between and supported to be able to make an appropriate decision for their future.

Distance Travelled by the FEFC and LSC

Student Voices 1996 – how do the learners’ views compare?

61 In 1996, Skill was asked by the Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee of the FEFC to undertake a series of learner workshops. The report from the workshops, Student Voices (Skill, 1996), looked at similar issues to those discussed in this report. Learners largely expressed similar views in 1996 but there are also some differences.

62 With regard to choice and transition, provision of information and advice about post-school choices, this came from the same routes. In particular, in 1996 schoolteachers, careers service advisors, key workers and social workers were mentioned.

63 Reasons for going to college were similar, including the opportunity to gain qualifications, helping employment prospects, increasing independence and social skills, and increasing self-confidence. In the 2005 feedback one of the key things mentioned was that in post-16 provision they were treated as adults, having greater freedom and being able to develop personally. In 1996 learners
expressed the same experiences, commenting that they found school babyish, but that they had also found difficulties with the adult approach and found it hard to structure their own time and take responsibility for their own work. This appeared to be less of an issue for the 2005 learners, which may reflect the changes in the teaching and learning approach over time towards a more individual programme.

64 In 1996 transport was a difficult issue, with journeys often being long and transport times not co-ordinating effectively with learning programmes. This difficult issue remains in 2005.

65 Learners in 1996 sometimes found that courses were poorly structured. The 2005 learners didn’t have this experience although learners did mention that some courses felt stale and that they didn’t like the over-reliance on worksheets.

66 This comparison does, however, identify a change in learners’ experiences for the better in the areas of staff development and learning support. In 1996, learners said that there was a lack of disability knowledge amongst staff, particularly where learners had come from specialist provision. In addition, learners found that learning support was not always readily available and that it took ages to get support in place. Learners in 2005 had a very different experience, and found the provision of learning support to be very positive. *Student Voices* (Skill, 1996) also found that physical access was often a problem, with learners not being able to access buildings, classrooms and other services for learners such as canteens and libraries. The 2005 learners reported this has improved greatly with the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Part 4 and funding for college estates, although some learners in 2005 still had particular problems with access, particularly those with mobility impairments and sensory impairments.

**Comparison of Learner and Provider Feedback**

67 In developing recommendations for the review from the feedback from learners, Skill has considered the feedback from the providers at the Skill post-16 conference in November 2004, which was also reported to the Steering Group of the review. At the conference, staff emphasised the importance of link courses, taster opportunities and planned pathways. This is supported by the learners’ dissatisfaction with courses that didn’t meet their learning choices and where learners had been poorly prepared for vocational options. In November, concern was expressed about the importance of other provision to learners and this is confirmed by learners in this type of provision reporting being highly motivated to learn and concerned about learning opportunities being reduced in future, and the negative effect this would have on their lives. Staff expressed wholehearted support for ALS and wanted it protected and better understood by the LSC and in some cases by their own senior managers. They also expressed concern about the absence of consultation internally on ALS when three-year funding plans were being drawn up. The recent change in the funding base for colleges has led to further concerns that commitment to ALS could be all but abandoned.

68 Staff expressed their difficulty in providing inclusive opportunities and developing other provision that would meet the individual needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities when they were working in a target-driven environment, adding that the target-driven agenda always took priority in the allocation of funds. This puts into question the LSC’s ability to meet the requirements of Section 13 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, should this trend continue.

69 Learners’ concerns about physical features, particularly in outreach centres, were also raised by staff, who asked for more capital funding, especially for multi-site arrangements.

70 Staff felt that emphasis on leadership in teaching and learning and good practice was essential if colleges were not to become administrative and target-driven to meet LSC requirements. The national drive in Success for All on teaching and learning initiatives had clearly not had an impact on those staff working with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

**Implications for the LSC of provider staff views**

71 Meeting the equality and diversity statutory requirements will require flexibility in funding methodology and the promotion of good practice among providers.

72 Current LSC plans and developments for changes in provider structure will need to take account of a new strategy for learning difficulty and/or disability. The role of the regional LSC champions for Additional Learning Support could be developed to oversee this.
Case study 7

The teenage psychiatric department of the local hospital referred Avril to the college’s P4P course. She was in a difficult home situation and had experienced bullying at school; as a result of all this she had anger management and behavioural problems. The bullying had resulted from the fact that she has cerebral palsy.

Her initial college interview was an extremely painful experience. She spent the whole time with her head down, allowing her mother to answer most of the questions asked. An individual learning programme of Maths, English, IT, Art, Photography, History, European Studies and study skills was agreed on and in September 1999, Avril began her studies with the college.

Her confidence and self-esteem grew quickly and she not only became a committed student to her programme of learning but also became active in the wider college as the Disability Officer for the Students’ Union, where she worked tirelessly on behalf of all students with disabilities. At the same time, she was successful in gaining qualifications in all her subjects and her Art and Photography tutors recommended that she took GCSEs in both subjects. This she did and passed both at Grade B. This enabled her to go on and do A-levels, which she did successfully. At the same time, she kept contact with P4P and did one module of History along with GCSE English Language, which she passed at Grade C.

She planned to go on and take up Art at university, and after applications to several art colleges was offered a place to undertake a Foundation degree year. She began her Foundation course and in summer 2004 passed out as the student of the year.

In October 2004, she took up her place at a much-sought-after university and is studying for a degree in Fine Arts. Her academic achievement is there for all to see and is recognised by certificates and diplomas but there are no certificates for her personal and social achievements, which stand witness to her commitment and determination to succeed against all the odds, which were truly stacked against her.

She and her family believe that without the support and encouragement offered to her by the college through the P4P course she would not have been able to succeed as she has done.
Case study 8

Deborah is a first-year student on the Vocational Access programme on the post-16 campus. She has experienced behavioural difficulties and dropped out of school in Year 10 as she was excluded. When interviewed she seemed a gentle, quiet student, hard to link with her previous persona. She was relaxed and happy to talk.

Full Circle, a centre for pupils who had been excluded, providing Maths and English lessons and a counselling service, introduced her to the post-16 campus. She chose Vocational Access, with Art as her main area of study as she felt that she had been good at it, also Working Together, a programme on team building, along with Drama, basic literacy and numeracy, and Media Studies. A learning support assistant helped in the classroom. She has enjoyed gaining computer skills.

She said:

*College has been a good experience. Teachers teach well.*

*College tutors treat you differently; they give me respect and plenty of encouragement. I have learnt more basic skills, Maths and English. I feel more confident in these and have gained ICT skills. My attendance is now good.*

*I would recommend this programme to other people. It is a good choice. I am comfortable with my course. I have regular tutorials and have learning support in the classroom when I need it.*

**What next? What do you want to achieve?**

*I would like to stay for three years to progress on to Foundation and Entry Level and to gain some NVQs. Then I would like employment. I am not sure in which area yet, but I would like it to be creative.*
4 Recommendations Based on Learner Feedback

73 The learners interviewed responded positively to the review and indeed their satisfaction with their learning experience is also very positive. They shared a wide range of views on learning and progression and sent particular messages to the LSC, as described in the previous section. From this wide range of views, the most commonly recurring themes have been identified. The following six recommendations are made to draw the learners’ messages together into six strategic areas.

Recommendation 1

74 The FEFC and LSC are to be congratulated on the progress made. Additional Learning Support offered is much improved and there is a clear message from learners that this funding should continue. Overwhelmingly, learners said they could not achieve their learning goals without it. It is satisfying to note the number of learners on mainstream courses being supported by ALS. Skill recommends the LSC continues to ensure, through budget provision, spending guidelines and regional and local monitoring, that appropriate support is available to all learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties. It is particularly important in the light of legislation that this support is not subject to geographic differences. The support needs of a disabled learner in Newcastle will be similar to those of a learner in Penzance, and the LSC must work to ensure equity of baseline provision and availability of ALS. It is worrying that learners mention the need for it to be continued; clearly they are aware there is concern and insecurity around this support. (The research team had no brief to raise funding issues with the learners.)

Recommendation 2

75 A large proportion of the learners interviewed were on what might be classified by the LSC as ‘other provision’, often mixed with access for all or basic skills programmes or academic and vocational programmes. Clearly, the messages from inclusive learning have been acted on and individual learning packages have been created. There is clear evidence from the learners that this learning is leading to achievement of learning goals and progression. They particularly identify the opportunity to learn through their adult needs and interests; deaf adults learning to communicate through text is one example; music is another. Those adults who have been out of learning for a long period talk about this providing a second chance for learning – many may have left education years ago at a time when little support was available for them as disabled children and young people. The LSC has statutory duties for this group of learners under the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and there is obvious success and good practice in existence. The evidence from learners of re-engagement with learning through short courses of particular interest leads Skill to recommend that this ‘other provision’ learning should be sustained, and that this be taken into account when national decisions are made on funding. Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities may in the future not be able to progress through the levels of learning if this access route becomes beyond their financial means.

Recommendation 3

76 Where learners interviewed were on a mainstream course, there was a clear request that staff should receive disability awareness training, and understand disability discrimination. Skill recommends that all providers should be asked to demonstrate a rolling programme of staff development at all levels. The Disability Equality Duty (DED) under the DDA 2005, which came into force in December 2006, requires this. This would be strengthened if the LSC required providers to include their staff development plans under the DED in their annual funding agreements.
Recommendation 4

77 Learners in residential specialist provision clearly valued the opportunity, though they expressed concerns about available support to continue their learning locally.

78 Where learners with, for example, visual impairments, had the opportunity to experience a package of shared specialist residential and mainstream provision, they identified clear benefits. Skill recommends that the LSC explore flexible funding partnerships between specialist colleges and FE providers so that more learners can benefit from shared packages. All mainstream colleges should be encouraged to look at their pattern of provision and have plans in place to raise the baseline of provision in partnership with specialist support either from specialist colleges or the local voluntary sector or higher education institutions with well-developed provision. For specialist provision, for example, for learners with sensory impairments, support staff and therefore costs might be shared. For those with profound and complex learning difficulties, annual agreements on shared budgets should be negotiated.

Recommendation 5

79 The learners participating in the review enjoyed participating and valued the opportunity to speak up. Skill recommends that the LSC promote learner forums in providers that do not currently have them; again, this could be made part of the Disability Equality Scheme and a funding requirement. Skill also recommends that an annual programme of possibly eight identified sites should be revisited as part of the national LSC’s Disability Equality Scheme.

Recommendation 6

80 This recommendation relates specifically to school sixth forms. From what the learners tell us, a number of factors in sixth form education for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties are widely variable, from some poor staff training and support, to excellent learning mentors and assistive technology. This wide variation is unfair to learners, does not meet the LSC’s own equality agenda and raises issues for the funding formula. Numbers of learners in each school are small, and this huge variation doesn’t appear to be showing up on Ofsted reports. Skill recommends that the LSC include benchmarks and levers in the funding formula to reward good practice in staff development and provide incentives and practical help to change poor practice in supporting learners in sixth forms. The LSC should also identify with the DfES how to share good practice. The LSC should work with Ofsted to gain information on provision in schools where there are small numbers of disabled learners.
Case study 9

Anne is 55 years old. She is blind and has a hearing impairment. She is married and has two daughters, one son and three grandchildren. She is currently studying local history using Braille within an inclusive setting. She has been on the course for three months.

I’d been looking for a job for 10 years with very little success. I found out about the course from my local radio station, promoting open days at the college. I came down to the college and had a one-to-one with the course co-ordinator. I was told which courses were available and also discussed my support needs.

I originally enrolled on an English course but I wasn’t able to read Braille well enough. I have been on my present course three months. I found the course really daunting at first, as I was really worried about how the other students would take to me but I think they are used to me now. I also have a learning support worker who helps to record the lecture and then transcribe the information, which is a great help.

When I was at school I was looked down on. Things are a lot more open now, although I would like to be able to meet more disabled students because it would be good to get a better understanding of their disabilities.

College has made me more assertive and gets me out of the house. Before I came on the course I was at home looking after my family. My daughters all think it’s great what I am doing. They can see that I am achieving a project and know that I can do it. Ideally I would like to get a job but I would like to do more courses.
Case study 10

Liza is 35 years old. She attends three classes at her Adult Learning Centre and communicates using British Sign Language (BSL). She can also lip read quite well.

I attended a school for the deaf as a child and then moved to a local high school. I found it quite difficult to keep up with the work at high school and only received tutorial support for French and German. I left school without any qualifications.

After leaving school, I worked in a factory packing pies. However, I had to leave as the working environment was very cold and this affected my asthma. I felt I had never had a proper job.

I remained at home to bring up my family. I have 4 children between 2 years and 18 years. When I heard about these classes, I felt very motivated to join as I wanted to achieve some qualifications. I joined English for Deaf Adults, Maths for Deaf Adults, British Sign Language (BSL) Stage 1 and an Art class. During the last three years, I have passed BSL Stages 1 and 2 and achieved Entry Levels 1 and 2 certificates in English and Maths.

I am currently continuing with my English, Maths and Art and hope to gain more qualifications.

Joining the classes has made a real difference to my life. I have gained qualifications, which has greatly increased my confidence. I have met new people, both deaf and hearing. Also, my youngest child, who is two, has a place in the crèche. Without this support I wouldn’t be able to attend classes.

My teacher in English, Maths and BSL is deaf and I feel she is a positive role model.

My goal is to help people learn, like my tutor does. I realise now that I would like to work with disabled children or adults, helping and supporting them. I had no idea what I wanted to do before coming to classes but now I am very clear on the type of job I would like. My next step is to join a health studies class in September, to help me achieve my ambition.
Annex A:

References


Rustheimer (2003) *Inclusion Against the Odds; the Continuing Education and Life of Kirsty Arrondelle*, Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education.


Annex B:
Learners With Mental Health Difficulties

1 The Skill team interviewed 13 learners with mental health difficulties, both individually and in groups. All the learners interviewed were on mainstream courses across post-16 provision, supported by a learning support team. Some colleges offered entirely inclusive provision but in others discrete provision did exist and some learners had restarted their learning via discrete provision.

2 At one college, more than 10 per cent of learners receiving learning support had mental health difficulties. Provision featured offsite learning in the community for learners not ready to enter a formal education setting. In this college, two tutors worked ‘off timetable’ to engage the large network of support from NHS and community settings so that learning could be delivered in learners’ homes.

3 Learners participating in groups, although supported at the same college, had not met before. Learners were keen to share their experiences with the Skill team and did not appear to be held back by confidentiality issues. They expressed a desire to ‘give something back so that others could receive support’. Some learners had other disabilities as well as mental health difficulties.

Routes to Learning

4 In addition to the most common routes to learning experienced by all the learners interviewed, learners with mental health difficulties mentioned outreach sources of information including College in the Community, GPs, community mental health teams and drop-in centres run by voluntary organisations. The learners welcomed opportunities to learn in smaller settings before entering the larger college buildings. This stepped approach enabled them to deal with the stress and anxiety they experienced in dealing with new situations. They expressed pleasure in participating in activities such as swimming, and creative activities, which for some had led to vocational pathways such as a music technician’s course.

Benefits of Learning

5 As they progressed, several of the learners interviewed were now volunteering at drop-in centres to encourage and support others with mental health difficulties to engage in learning, including art and computer classes. All the learners interviewed reported gaining confidence, particularly in approaching people and filling in forms, and had developed self-esteem and strategies for dealing with external structures. The most common starting points in learning were Maths, English, CLAIT and Construction at Foundation Level. One learner had a part-time, supported employment placement. All were expecting this to enable them to move towards higher qualifications, particularly vocational qualifications. Some learners were studying a precursor to Access courses, leading to higher education. All the learners interviewed were adults and most were aged over 25. Looking at learners’ previous histories showed that most were starting at a lower level than their earlier qualifications merited, suggesting that with the right support they would have the potential to achieve at all levels. One learner had followed a path through from a teenage psychiatric department at the local hospital to a transition core social and study skills programme called ‘preparation for progression’. They had been supported through GCSEs and A-levels, receiving learning support at an FE college, and had progressed locally to higher education.

6 This learner and the parents said:

Without the support and encouragement offered by the college through the transition course, I would not have been able to succeed as I have.
Messages to the LSC

7 The learners highlighted the importance of having someone guide and support them in taking the first steps back to learning, as the effects of their impairment made this a very difficult time. They also emphasised that these first steps needed to be small, flexible and in non-threatening environments. Many said that without this approach they thought they would still be at home and very withdrawn. They expressed enthusiasm for learning and for the experience of success, however small, which for some was coming after many years of illness.

*I recognise my life has got to change and now I feel I have a future.*

*My recovery is all down to the college.*

8 The learners were aware they would still need a wide range of support services, but felt that learning was leading to a structured but independent way of life.
Annex C: Learners With Profound and Complex Disabilities

1 Throughout the learner feedback exercise, the Skill team consulted a number of learners with profound and complex disabilities in further education and adult and community learning providers. Some of the learners had no speech, and communicated using electronic communication boards. Others used communication files in addition to limited speech. Many providers offered discrete provision for learners with complex needs, and all the learners we spoke to were on discrete courses at the time. Learners were interviewed both individually and in groups. The Skill team found some very innovative provision for this group of learners, mainly developed as a result of an individual’s hard work and positive attitude, and also as a response to previous lack of provision.

2 Most learners in this group were not doing much before starting their current learning programme. One had been at home and socially excluded for a year. Learners had similar routes to learning as those experienced by all the learners interviewed. However, there was more emphasis on finding out about courses from social services, family and carers. Particular mention was made in one group of the closure in day services leading to learners finding out about learning opportunities. Some learners acknowledged that they would have benefited from increased time to assess their choice of subject. Taster sessions, aimed at helping learners make an informed choice, were also very beneficial.

Benefits of Learning

3 Learners clearly recognised the positive impact that learning had for them. They specifically mentioned benefits such as developing confidence and independence, learning to make decisions for yourself, making friends and learning to use ICT. Learners were increasing their vocabulary and understanding. One learner commented that it was good to leave the residential home for some time in the day. Making choices and decisions was frequently commented on as important, and learners wanted more information about choices and help in making decisions.

4 Learners were able to express the benefits they experienced from the companionship of others and working with support staff. Skill found several examples of how learning programmes had been developed in local provision in partnership with health and social services for learners with profound and complex learning difficulties, which the LSC should explore and share.

5 The majority of these learners were on courses with clear progression routes, carefully established to enable learners to show progression and express their views. This included setting goals through choices, and completing a record of work, again through picking from a variety of choices.

6 All the learners had support assistants and/or classroom assistants to support them in accessing their learning. Learners were aware that this was additional support and identified the importance of having supportive and consistent staff with good knowledge and training and who know the learner well.
Improvements

7 Some learners said that they felt held back in their learning by a number of factors. This included transport, and sometimes parents’ perceptions of their abilities.

8 Transport was a big issue for these learners, as they all needed specialist transport. Learners commented that the bus took ages.

What They Want to do Next

9 One of the learners with complex needs, a wheelchair user with no speech, had finished a course and was now employed by the provider as a classroom assistant. Many of the learners said that they would like to try work and do some more practical subjects, but were not sure if that would be possible. They thought that they needed more information about what choices were available and more opportunities to make their own decisions.

Messages to the LSC

10 Visits by the Skill team identified that good provision for this group of learners is often developed through the individual’s good practice and can-do attitude. The LSC should identify and share good practice so that all regions have appropriate provision for learners with complex disabilities.

11 The attitude and consistency of support staff, as well as teaching staff are also essential factors.
Introduction

1 This literature review considers the available literature on SEN, transition to post-16 education and the views of disabled learners. The aim of the literature review was to support the visits to schools that Skill has undertaken for the review. Given the small proportion of school sixth forms that have been visited, because of time and budget constraints, the report only investigates the views of disabled pupils on their education, choices at 16, transition and future goals.

The special educational needs framework and statements

2 The special educational needs (SEN) framework governs the provision of support in the English schools system. Local authorities and schools have duties under Part IV of the Education Act 1996 to meet the needs of children with SEN. Although funding in school sixth forms now comes from the LSC, statements of SEN and related procedures and terminology continue to have a role. Gray notes that the term ‘special educational needs (SEN)’ was intended to encapsulate a more functional definition of learning difficulties, with a recognition that these were relative to the educational context (Gray, 2002). However, the term ‘SEN’ can be problematic when considering young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, as the two populations do not overlap completely. For example, SEN can be used to describe pupils with educational difficulties due to economic or social deprivation, rather than just those with a specific impairment. In addition, some young people with impairments will not have ‘special educational needs’.

3 Statements of SEN are documents drawn up by the local authority describing a child’s special educational needs and the support they should receive. These only continue to be used in post-16 settings if the young person continues at the same school for post-16 education. There can be a great deal of concern about ‘losing’ statements of SEN and the subsequent fear of losing appropriate support.

Choice and Transition

4 Options at 16 can consist of: staying at school; moving to a new school for post-16 provision; moving to an FE college or sixth form college; undertaking training; or finding employment. Young people should be involved in the decision-making around transition. For young people with statements of SEN, there is a statutory duty enshrined in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 to carry out transition reviews in Year 9 of school, and Section 140 assessments in the last year of compulsory schooling, to facilitate a successful transition. Transition planning should start at age 14 and be built into the curriculum, but often it is only a one-off meeting. These transition arrangements are also recommended for all young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Pupil Participation and the Views of Disabled Young People

5 The Government recognises the importance of pupil participation and giving young people a say. The document Working Together: Giving children and young people a say (DfES, 2004) provides statutory guidance to schools on actively involving children and young people when making decisions. As the Young People’s Advisory Group for the document says:

We children and young people know what we want. The only way we can change things is to make sure that people who make decisions know what we think and what we want.

DfES, 2004: ii
Pupil participation will we hope be further strengthened by the new Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which includes a specific duty on schools to promote disability equality and involve disabled people in that process.

**Methodology**

The literature review was mainly carried out through Internet searches and using articles from the journal *Skill*. A number of key intermediaries were also contacted, including Alan Hurst, Professor of Education at the University of Central Lancashire; Lesley Dee, University of Cambridge; Nic Rowland-Crosby, consultant at Paradigm UK; Steve Davis, Get PAID Manager at the South London Learning Partnership; Chris Hewitson, consultant; and representatives from Scope, the National Autistic Society, the Council for Disabled Children, Contact a Family, the National Development Team and the Transition Information Network.

**Choices at 16**

Reaching the age of 16 represents a key time of choice and transition for young people. Compulsory schooling ends and young people have the choice whether to continue education or to move on to training or employment. Some young people become economically inactive.

The Connexions Annual Activity Survey 2002 found that 54 per cent of young people with SEN went onto full-time education beyond 16, compared to 72 per cent of all young people (Connexions, 2002). There was a greater proportion of young people with SEN in training and employment; 11 per cent and 12 per cent respectively, compared with 6.7 per cent and 8.2 per cent of the whole cohort. It has not been possible to find out the precise level of this training and employment, so there is some uncertainty over how positive this progression would have been. For example, 31 per cent of those with SEN entering training and employment went into ‘other elementary occupations’. There were also more young people with SEN who were ‘not settled’ compared with the figures for all young people.

**Availability of choice**

The availability of post-16 choices for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities is often limited, as found by Pickthall (2003), and young disabled people can feel that choices are restricted because of disability, rather than being fully based on their aspirations (Future Plus, unpublished).

Stalker (2002) comments that ‘many school leavers are still directed towards day centres and segregated FE courses’ and that there is not enough serious consideration of a full range of opportunities, for example, employment and inclusive further education. Morris (1999) found that young people with complex health and support needs had not been given opportunities to continue with education, as they would have wished. In particular, Hendy and Pascall (2002) found that some disabled people felt that ‘schools had limited their expectations and achievements’ despite their advantages of resources, specialised skills and peer support.

Morris (1999) found that choice at 16 depends heavily on access and appropriate support being available. Access and support are essential both in terms of support and access to decision-making, and also access to provision and support available within that provision.

Choice also depends on appropriate information and guidance. Wave 2 of the DfES longitudinal study into post-16 transitions of young people with SEN (Dewson, Aston et al, 2004) found that while 73 per cent of young people wanted to go onto further study or training, young people with statements of SEN were less likely to know how to find out about future work, education or training opportunities. The need for good information is supported by *The Road Ahead?* (Tarleton, 2004), which found that young people need practical information and support that would enable them to make decisions and be involved. Furthermore, Morris (2002) found that young disabled people were often disadvantaged in accessing information if their parent(s) did not understand ‘the system’. In addition to written and verbal information, young people value the opportunity to try things out to identify options and confirm views about what they want to do. This facilitated choice and progression:

*We had a chance to try every subject over a week, like tasters so you could find out which ones you wanted to do.*

Scottish Executive, 2004a: 4

Dee (2002a) additionally describes choice and transition as being an unpredictable set of events, not the neat (and bureaucratic) process that SEN transition conforms to. Thus, young people found that unexpected events often confirmed ideas and gave them a chance to exercise their opinions.
Specific options

15 The main options for post-16 transition mentioned by young people in research and reports were residential provision, FE colleges, and to a lesser extent, work-based learning.

Residential school or college

16 A number of studies mention residential provision as a possibility post-16. Some learners expected to go onto residential college after school, as other learners they knew had done the same. Dee (2002a) found that professionals also made assumptions about post-16 options, for example teachers assuming that young people would stay at special school to attend the FE unit, or progress to residential specialist college if their special school did not have post-16 provision. Likewise, for learners in comprehensive school, it was assumed that they would go to college.

17 Young people in London saw residential provision as a positive choice, especially for promoting independence, but the lack of local provision remained a difficulty (Future Plus Ltd, unpublished). While some disabled young people said that having opportunities for making friends and independence was good in residential provision, homesickness was common (Abbott, Morris and Ward, 2001). Young people expressed a wish to maintain contacts with friends and family while benefiting from residential provision. One young person in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation study of residential schools commented that it was impossible to stay close to his culture and religion at residential school (Abbott, Morris and Ward, 2001). The importance of maintaining home contacts is further illustrated by Stephen’s story in ‘Where do you think you’re going?’:

“I was sent away to a special school as a kid but now (aged 17) they’ve sent me back again to mum and dad. I’ve got no mates here and I don’t wanna do anything cos it’s all boring here.”

Ackroyd, 2003: 20

18 There is evidently inconsistency in the area of residential school or college, with some young people staying on at special school until the age of 25.

Work-based learning opportunities

19 Work-based learning opportunities were less frequently mentioned as options for post-16, perhaps due to the relatively recent development of work-based learning opportunities specifically designed for young people with learning difficulties, and therefore the lack of research currently available about this. Statistics show that there are high numbers of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in work-based learning. There needs to be more information about these learners’ needs to enable a more worthwhile analysis.

20 In the study for Connexions Central London, high-quality vocational and/or work-based learning was seen as being a desirable option for young people, but was not widely available to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (Future Plus Ltd, unpublished). The study found that young people with a view on their future career often quoted areas such as gardening, computer-based jobs and catering, which would lend themselves perfectly to work-based learning.

Further education colleges

21 Heslop et al (2002) found that over three-quarters of young people went directly from school into further education, and states that this was often because it was the expected path, rather than an active choice. This is supported by Dee (2002a), who found that assumptions were made about transition from comprehensive school to college. Many young people were aware of older learners going onto college and this was what they expected to do (Tarleton, 2004). Young people were frequently quoted as aspiring to mainstream learning with proper support (Future Plus Ltd, unpublished).

22 Although some learners at FE colleges saw it as a direct route to their future employment or independent living plans (see paragraph 44), some options at college were found to be inadequate, with courses only relating to basic skills and repeating learning already undertaken.

Few educational opportunities

23 There are more and more educational opportunities available for all young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, but available research reports do still consider that for those with complex support needs, there are few further educational opportunities once they leave school (Ackroyd, 2003; Morris, 1999). Florian et al (2000) found in their initial research for the Enhancing Quality of Life project that there were still some young people in their early 20s in school because nowhere had been found for them to go to.

24 The intention of removing Schedule 2j of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, as part of
the changeover to the Learning and Skills Council, was that local provision would be developed to accommodate the needs of learners. Whilst this group of learners has gained some increase in access to specialist college provision for the first time, there is little evidence to show access to FE colleges has been facilitated.

**Concerns at 16**

25 There were often concerns associated with moving on from school mentioned by young people and their families. These concerns were mainly in the areas of transport and health and social services. It is clear that educational transition and choice cannot be seen or considered in isolation, and that transition is much more complicated for young disabled people than for their non-disabled peers because of the complexity of health, support, transport and education needs.

26 Although these areas may not be directly in the remit of LSC provision, it is essential that the LSC and providers are aware of the complex nature of transition for young disabled people.

**Health and social services**

27 The transition to adult services is another important and sometimes worrying change that young disabled people experience around the age of 16–19. Young people with health needs, such as speech therapy or physiotherapy, may have these needs met at school, but are less likely to access these services within mainstream college. One young person in quoted in Grewal et al (2004) believed that she would be ‘the loser’ when she moved into adult services because she had been told she would lose her session worker.

**Transport**

28 Transport remains a major issue due to the lack of accessible transport and its unsuitability for young people with complex needs. The root of the problem lies in statutory wording that describes transport provision by specifying ‘powers’ rather than ‘duties’ for post-16 transport. Social services, local authorities and (under the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4) even colleges have the power to arrange appropriate transport, but not a duty to do so. Without transport funding, some learners simply cannot take up educational opportunities. For all disabled learners, this climate of uncertainty is destructive to their life chances and planning, and disruptive to their confidence when considering the continuation of their educational career.

29 In Grewal et al (2004), transport is seen as a key factor in a successful educational transition, and disabled people and their families reported anxiety about what impact the transfer from child to adult services would have on transport provision. The study quotes an example of a 17 year old who had started at a special needs unit, and had the option of staying until the age of 25, but the family didn’t know whether she would still be entitled to transport provision to take her there (Grewal et al, 2004). In Skill’s Aasha report (Maudslay, 2003), many parents felt that the lack of available transport was the main reason preventing them from sending their son or daughter to college.

**Social considerations**

30 Just as decisions about educational transitions cannot be considered outside wider health, social services and transport needs, social considerations must also be taken into account. Opportunities for social opportunities, to make friends and to have a boy- or girlfriend are also extremely important for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and this must not be ignored. Dee (2002a) found that young people’s social needs were often disregarded, even if these were among their most important aspirations. For example, the beginning of young adult life was reflected in wishes to go to the pub, have a girlfriend, join a youth club or get a job. Dee states that, ‘these aspirations appeared to carry less weight than decisions about post-school placements’ (Dee, 2002a: 229), whereas in reality they are essential parts of the transition process and of moving to adulthood.

**Transition Planning and Involvement in Decision-making**

31 There are statutory requirements for annual transition planning meetings for young people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties, which should look at every area of the young person’s life, and include meaningful participation by the young person.
Through Inclusion to Excellence: Learner Voices – A learner consultation and feedback report

Transition planning

32 Although transition planning should take place for all young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, this doesn’t always happen. The Bridging the Divide project, which surveyed 283 families and interviewed 27 young people, found that one-fifth of young people had left school without a transition plan (Heslop et al, 2002). Young disabled people in placements outside their local area are particularly likely to experience inadequate transition planning (Morris, 2002).

33 There is currently little evidence about the effectiveness of transition planning and Section 140 assessments post-implementation of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

34 Polat et al (2001) found that pupils from specialist provision generally had more positive attitudes towards school and teachers than young people in mainstream education, but that special school pupils had lower aspirations and expectations for the future, and were less well prepared for the transition to adult life.

Opportunities for involvement in decision-making

35 It is a legislative requirement for young people’s views to be sought and recorded as part of the transition planning, and young people want to be involved in planning for their future, but too often are not actively involved in the process.

It is nice if I can say what I want rather than have people say this is what you want.
Young person cited in Noyes, 1999: 66

36 Dee (2002a) found that professionals can exercise a disproportionate degree of influence over the decision-making process, and that pupils with learning difficulties were least likely to exert direct influence in the decision-making process. This could be because of a fear of the future, a wish to maintain the status quo, and the structure of formal review meetings and language used by professionals therein.

37 Heslop et al (2002) found that 60 per cent of young people had been partly or fully involved, with 23 per cent not involved at all. The survey by Connexions Central London also found that young people were not always fully involved in decisions about their future (Future Plus Ltd, unpublished).

In Scotland, young people have said that when they attend reviews, case conferences or meetings, they can feel that their views are not listened to (Scottish Executive, 2004a). Participation by young people needs to be meaningful and effective.

38 Morris (2002) found that one reason for not involving young people is the lack of options for them to choose between.

39 As discussed above, young people are more likely to be actively involved when the information, support and opportunities are in place to facilitate participation (Heslop et al, 2002). This may include visits and work placements to inform choice, or watching videos and reading brochures. In order to be able to participate effectively in transition planning and decision-making, young disabled people often need support. The DfES longitudinal study found that 20 per cent of young people surveyed said that they do not get enough support to plan for the future (Dewson et al, 2004). Timing and resources are also important, as without enough time to participate, young people can feel left out of the transition process.

40 In order to enhance the transition process, and therefore choices post-school, young people state that they need someone independent to talk to, consistent support to build self-confidence, encouragement of higher expectations, and time (Heslop et al, 2002).

The Future – What Does Post-16 Education Mean?

41 The DfES longitudinal study of young people with SEN found that 74 per cent of young people know what they want to do next. Of these, 51 per cent wanted to find employment, 22 per cent wanted to go to or stay at college and 10 per cent wanted to progress to a higher education course (Dewson et al, 2004).

Employment or further (and higher) education

42 College was often seen as a route into employment; for example in The Road Ahead? two young people stated that they were going to college ‘to learn about how to look after babies to get a job’ (Tarleton, 2004: 14). Another learner was
on a catering course. Many young people clearly see the benefit of education to their future careers;

I decided at 11 that I wanted to be a fashion designer when I grew up. I’ve been to Bradford College. It was a two-year course in fashion design… then when that finished I wanted to learn more about fashion design so I decided to go to York College for an HND – a more advanced course. My lecturer really encouraged me there… While I was studying at York College I received an award at the BHS fashion show… It really made me proud… From that experience I decided to go to York University to learn more about fashion.

Morris, 2002

However, as mentioned above, FE colleges or residential provision in particular are sometimes seen as the ‘norm’ rather than a conscious and informed decision. There are also concerns, for example, that placements can be more concerned with meeting care needs rather than education needs, and that there are still assumptions made about progression from special school to specialist college and then to adult day services (Morris, 2002).

Independent living

A number of the young people in The Road Ahead? (Tarleton, 2004) wanted to know more about being in charge of your own life and living independently. Most of the young people were currently living with their parents, but wanted information to enable them to be in control of their lives, and on aspects of independent living such as cooking, understanding television magazines, telling the time, using transport (public or private) and using money.

Conclusions

Young people need the information, support, time and experience to be able to make informed choice. Taster courses, visits and work experience are very important in transition. Young people must be enabled to make a contribution to the transition process and their views must be valued. It is also essential that professionals, including teachers and careers advisors, have appropriate expectations of young people and the young person’s aspirations and expectations accordingly.

In terms of provision, young people want high-quality provision that meets both their physical and intellectual needs. Care needs are important, but these must not be the sole or main focus of opportunities that young people are given. In particular, a number of research reports highlight the fact that young disabled people want work-based learning and vocational opportunities and many do have an idea of a career they would like to go into.

There are examples of excellent quality provision and opportunity at post-16 level for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, but this is not the general experience often reported by learners and their families. Local provision is often preferable as it enables young people to maintain friendships and continuity. However, in the current context, where local provision can be inadequate, many young people see residential provision as an advantage, especially for specialist services and peer support.

Finally, choice at 16 needs to be properly facilitated and appropriate to the needs of the young person. Going on to college or other post-16 provision should not be an assumption, but a real choice and active decision, with learners being given different options to choose between and supported to be able to make an appropriate decision for their future.

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