



**OxSpec: Occasional Papers**  
**Oxfordshire Special Needs Research Project**

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**"Colleges of F.E. - Incorporating Students with  
Learning Difficulties and Disabilities"**

**INTRODUCTION**

On April 1st 1993 Oxfordshire's six Colleges of Further Education ceased to be maintained by the L.E.A. and became individual corporations in their own right, under the Further & Higher Education Act 1992.

Oxfordshire Education Authority maintains a policy of students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities being educated in Colleges of FE after the age of 16. This policy was confirmed by the Education Committee in June 1992 and again in December 1992.

In anticipation of Incorporation, the Adviser for SEN spent two days in each of five colleges - one day in one college - between October 1992 and January 1993. The brief was to look at all aspects of provision for students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities. This involved classroom observation, discussions with students, teaching and support staff and members of senior management. Individual College reports were written and used as the basis for discussions with Principals.

**FINDINGS**

This short paper identifies the common general issues which emerged from the visits and makes recommendations in the light of requirements and expectations of the new Further Education Funding Council (FEFC).

**College Commitment**

"Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities" (LD & D) is the only group of students given specific mention in the 1992 Act. As such the FEFC is taking its responsibility very seriously and consulting widely on all aspects of college provision. This was reflected in the colleges themselves. There was a demonstrable commitment by staff at all levels - both teaching and ancillary - to supporting students' learning. There was also a willingness to share expertise and to work collaboratively with others for the benefit of students.

## **Definitions**

The phrase "Special Educational Needs" is not used in the 1992 Act, but is replaced by "Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities". As such it is no longer used in three of the six colleges. Where it *is* still used there is a difference of opinion between staff about its usefulness or otherwise. Phrases such as a feeling of "...them and us..." and of being "...second class", of "...mainstream and Special...we *are* mainstream" were being used to express feelings

There is an additional confusion in terminology between schools and colleges. "Learning Support" in schools refers to support for students with any form of learning difficulty. In colleges however it refers specifically to Adult Basic Education provision, which is not regarded as part of "Learning Difficulties and Disabilities".

## **Coordinators for students with LD & D**

Each college has a senior lecturer with responsibility for students with LD & D. However the title, role and function, and line-management is different in each case. Each is responsible for the provision on discrete courses. Each has a cross-college role in supporting students with physical disabilities and sensory impairments on other courses. Only two have a truly cross-college role in supporting the larger proportion of students who have a learning difficulty and need support with Basic Education to access their mainstream curriculum.

In three colleges, although there was a declared willingness by Coordinators of LD & D and Learning Support to work together, there seemed to be no mechanism for so doing. This is regrettable and needs to be addressed. Where the issue had been addressed, supporting learning had a much higher standing in the college

## **Equal Opportunities**

All colleges had either set up a cross-college group representing aspects of supported learning, had plans to do so or were beginning to discuss it. The first function of such a group would be to develop a policy for students with LD & D as part of an Equal Opportunities policy. Where this had already happened, frequent use was made of the policy statement in all literature and the group had an on-going responsibility to monitor its implementation

## **Access**

All colleges had addressed the question of physical access to their buildings, with varying degrees of success. Whilst it was recognised that entire buildings could never be completely accessible to all students, nevertheless there were some areas which could be made more accessible at little additional cost.

## **School Links**

All colleges maintained strong links with schools. Staff attended Parents' Evenings, Careers lessons, Students' Annual Reviews and Leavers Conferences: all of which took a considerable amount of time. If the future funding arrangements are to be based on an "Entry/On-Programme/Exit" model, then it will be important to load the "Entry" funding for students with LD & D

Link Course provision is not as strong as it was two years ago since the demise of the Link Course budget. Future funding arrangements have yet to be settled, but recognition of the importance of Links is made in the Formula for the extension of LMS to Special Schools. "Links" are an essential part of the assessment process and transition from school to college

Other links also exist between schools and colleges. when staff visit each others' institutions to discuss curriculum or individual student programmes. This is an ideal vehicle for curriculum-led staff development and as such needs to be encouraged.

## **Curriculum**

"The students should be at the centre of everything" and "...every student should have an individual programmes" were expressed aims from two colleges and point the direction in which curriculum generally needs to develop. "Every student who comes through the door has a special need."

Many students with LD & D attend discrete courses where the practice varies considerably, from the "Unit" to individual programmes. The more flexible the programme, the more consideration had been given to individual needs and provision: Individual Action Plans were being negotiated with students, realistic targets set and progress recorded. Conversely, the more "closed" the course, the more the curriculum was defined as a timetable, the less course aims and individual programmes were in evidence and record keeping was rudimentary. The notion however of an Entitlement Curriculum or Core Curriculum was gaining ground and needs to be discussed in an Equal Opportunities context.

The best documented courses were those under Youth Training where criteria and funding were externally controlled

Evidence of course planning and curriculum development will form part of the evidence looked for by FEFC Inspectorate. If future funding is to be based on an "Entry/On-Programme/Exit" model, then course and individual expectations will need to be set, against which achievement can be judged.

## **Integration**

There was abundant evidence of students with a physical disability or sensory impairment being enabled to access their chosen curriculum area. Learning Support Assistants and outside Professionals were supporting students and lecturers both in-class and with additional help out of class

Flexible learning workshops were increasingly available to support students with their Basic Education needs

However much more could be done within and between the discrete provision. There were examples of excellent practice, as when a group of students were undertaking the "Vocational Access Certificate" and were drawn from three separate courses or where all students across a college join in college-wide social and leisure activities. At the other extreme there were students with profound and multiple difficulties more segregated from their peers than they had been in school.

Whilst discrete *provision* is necessary for some students, discrete *courses* need to be broken down and individual programmes developed to access a range of facilities and activities. In some instances, the present system is perpetuating courses, which are financial unviable.

### **Adult Provision**

The three year European Social Fund project to develop 19+ provision has resulted in five of the six colleges mounting classes either at college or at Training Centres. Some work was funded by the colleges themselves and some by Social Services. Under Schedule 2 of the 1992 Act, some of this work will be in jeopardy. Under recent Education, Health and Social Services legislation, there is a requirement for closer cooperation and planning for individual adults with learning disabilities. Local groups will need to consider the needs of their own community, in the same way that colleges were asked to do when drawing up their Strategic Plans

### **Staff Development**

During the last few years "Special Needs in F.E." has been a G.E.S.T. National Priority. However, staff development funds are now part of colleges' devolved funds. In the light of new external expectations and internal constraints, a Needs Analysis might well be undertaken so that a programme can be devised, costed and submitted, to stand alongside other priority bids. Some of the areas which might need to be addressed are: General staff awareness; working with other Agencies, Professionals and Support Services; Counselling and Guidance; Curriculum Design and Development; Assessment, Action Planning, Recording and Reporting.

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*OxSpec* is a joint venture between Oxfordshire Education Authority and Oxford Brookes University School of Education.

It undertakes collaborative research into aspects of provision for pupils with special educational needs and students with disabilities & learning difficulties.

OxSpec Occasional Papers are produced as a contribution to debate and discussion on SEN issues. They do not necessarily reflect the policies or practices of supporting institutions and Services.

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