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**"Planning for Students with Learning Difficulties
and Disabilities in Colleges of F.E."**

INTRODUCTION

Occasional Paper No. 1 "Colleges of F.E. - Incorporating Students with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities", looked at issues of readiness for incorporation on April 1st 1993 when colleges were no longer the responsibility of local education authorities (LEAs). This paper addresses the issues for colleges in planning for students with learning difficulties and disabilities (SLDD) following the end of the transitional period of 16 months, from August 1st 1994.

Legislation and Background

The Education Act of 1988 (Education Reform Act) required LEAs to produce a three to five year strategic plan for further education (F.E.). Individual colleges were further required to produce their own development plans, to demonstrate how they would implement that produced by the LEA. Both LEA and college plans were expected to include provision for SLDD.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education (FHE) Act established the Further Education Funding Councils for England and Wales (FEFC). The same legislation severed the ties between LEAs and colleges of further education and the responsibility for future planning rested squarely on individual colleges, with guidance from the FEFC. The FEFC was also charged with seeing that the further education and training needs of SLDD were both assessed and provided for.

The pace of change within the F.E. sector since the 1992 Act has been furious, and has been further affected by a range of other factors, which also have implications for SLDD. The combined effect has meant that strategic planning has been that much more difficult to undertake with any real certainty.

Such factors included:

- The government endorsed **National Targets for Education and Training (NTETs)**, formulated as a result of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report "Towards a Skills Revolution", set out target numbers for the achievement of nationally recognised qualifications by the year 2000. They also require all education and training to develop students' self-reliance, flexibility, broad competencies and specific skills.

The consequence has meant a reappraisal of curriculum provision offered in colleges, an expansion in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and more vigorous marketing to attract new client groups.

- The introduction of **Training Credits** for all those 16 and 17 year olds leaving full-time education, at a time of low economic growth, has potential problems for some SLDD. Under the scheme, managed by the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) for the Employment Department, young people will be issued with a credit card which can be used to pay for training whilst being employed. SLDD may also receive a Training Allowance if they are not employed. However there is an expectation that students will achieve at least a level 1 NVQ or its equivalent, in order for the trainer to attract additional - output-related - funding. As some SLDD will not achieve these levels, future college provision must be at risk because insufficient funds will be forthcoming.

Employers are also expected to make a contribution towards trainees' allowances. As SLDD trainees already make additional demands on employers in terms of time and support, there is evidence of a reluctance to comply with these expectations. Without an employer contribution a SLDD lacking the ability to achieve an NVQ cannot attract funds to cover the training provider's costs.

- Colleges have been told that they should aim to increase their student enrolment numbers by 25% over a three year period. This has been complicated by the government's allowance in the 1993 Education Act, for schools to consider making sixth form provision where none had previously existed. In particular, schools are being encouraged to offer post-16 vocational courses including GNVQs. Both schools and colleges in an area could find themselves competing for the same students. Colleges are therefore looking at new client groups.

- The extension of **Local Management of Schools** to special schools (LMSS) in April 1994 has signalled a wish by some to retain students in school who might previously have been expected to transfer to the F.E. sector. This must raise doubts about the impartiality of advice given to students and their carers. The **Code of Practice**, with the emphasis placed on the first annual review following a young person's 14th birthday, the involvement of external agencies and the careers service, and the requirement of an individual pupil's **Transition Plan**, might allay such fears.

- Whilst there is a strong requirement and commitment to provision for SLDD in the sector, slight variations in emphasis have been detected in FEFC circulars. The Draft Guidance on funding for 1994-95, in its conditions of funding stated:

"...the college shall endeavour to provide for at least the same number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as in 1993-94..."

This is significantly less strong than the statement in Circular 93/05 which in addressing the issue of recurrent funding allocations for 1993/94 stated:

"The Council is likely to make it *a condition of funding* that colleges continue to make at least the same level of provision for SLDD."

Council News Number 14 however changes the word *endeavour* to *expected*:

"...colleges will also be expected to:

- enrol at least the same number of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as in 1993-94..."

- The new **funding methodology** based on individual student tariff units and the notion of funding following the student, is largely welcomed. However for SLDD there are attendant complications surrounding the interpretation and completion of Annex A proforma for additional tariff units. There is evidence that the lowest band, - Band 0 - at £200 is too high to trigger minimum in-class support for a student. Similarly, the highest band - Band 5 - at £5,600 is too low to support a student with profound and multiple difficulties or a degenerative condition.

- The future funding of both LEA and external **support services** is another area of concern, which requires both time and funding from within colleges to secure.

The establishing of the FEFC Specialist Committee on SLDD under Prof. Tomlinson, demonstrates a clear undertaking that the area of work is a high priority. The committee recently issued a "**Call for Evidence**", which allows all those with a legitimate concern in the area of work to make their views known.

It should also be borne in mind that whilst all the above influences were at work, at the college level there was considerable discussion taking place about staff contracts and conditions of service.

Guidance on Planning

The first FEFC circular (92/01) issued on 28 February 1992, made specific reference to the importance attached to both provision for SLDD (para 30) and to strategic planning (para 34). Since then there have been a number of Circulars and other information on both subjects.

FEFC guidance on strategic planning contained in the Circulars, included the requirement that colleges should start with a corporate **Mission Statement** and that a **Needs Analysis** of the locality be carried out. Colleges were specifically requested:

"...to include within their needs analysis consideration of:

- provision for those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including the identification of organisations consulted, such as special schools, local authority social services departments and careers services..."

Colleges were advised to carry out a **Risk Analysis** of the effect which possible external and internal factors may have on planning. These might include: changes in local school sixth form provision, LEA changes in transport policy, and discretionary awards.

Stage One of the FEFC's strategic planning had taken place within a short period of time at the end of 1992 and the beginning of 1993, when colleges' first plans had been submitted. **Reviews of Stage One plans** were undertaken to highlight any variations or to explain any changes in student enrolments.

The three-year **Strategic Overview** contained the following elements:

- a. Corporate objectives - derived from the mission statement
- b. Provision - an outline of intended provision within each programme area
- c. Staff planning and development
- d. An accommodation strategy
- e. National issues - brief statements of response to external reports
- f. Council initiatives - A statement of objectives relating to:
 - i. SLDD
 - ii. Learning and technology

The White Paper "Education and Training for the 21st Century" which paved the way for the 1992 FHE Act, emphasised the primary role of colleges in securing quality. Colleges were therefore asked to state their arrangements for **quality assurance**, and for those which had been inspected, to include comments on the findings.

Included with the college's strategic plan would be indications of **projected student enrolments**, a **financial forecast** and an **operating statement**. This latter to specify action for the coming year, the resources required and arrangements for monitoring and reviewing.

THE STUDY

Four colleges of F.E. and one tertiary college, took part in the research. They differed from each other in both size and geographical setting. The evidence was largely gathered from semi-structured interviews with four college principals, one vice-principal, the SLDD named person for each of the colleges and two of their heads of division, and one learning support coordinator. In only one college did the named person for SLDD also fulfil the role of co-ordinator for learning support. The interviews were conducted on two agendas: one based on FEFC circulars and the requirements of strategic planning; the second on current issues pertaining to SLDD. They were conducted during the period January to April 1994.

One of the colleges agreed to act as a case study, where more time was spent in strategic planning meetings and discussions.

All the colleges involved variously supplied copies of their mission statement, their strategic plan commentary and other papers such as minutes of meetings and submissions to colleges' Academic Boards.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study are grouped under those issues concerned with the planning process and the requirements of the FEFC, and the common issues across the colleges that presented themselves concerning SLDD.

Planning

- **The Mission Statement**

All colleges made reference to the educational and training needs of, and opportunities for, **individual** students in the community. One emphasised that "...age, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, marital or parental status, religion, sexual orientation or social class..." should be no bar to enrolment. Two colleges made specific reference to their positive encouragement of SLDD.

- **The Needs Analysis**

Four of the colleges referred to the close working relationships which they had with their local social and economic community: schools and other education and training providers, employers, and their local TEC. The analysis of local need was therefore a matter of drawing together the information already to hand. One college, however, did undertake a major consultation with the local community.

- **Guidance & Consultation**

Within the planning cycle already established, but influenced by FEFC requirements, each college had ensured that all staff, both teaching and non-teaching had been consulted. The guidance issued from senior management varied in style:

Two colleges adopted what might be described as devolved management or collegiate styles - staff were required to consult and to produce development plans, but the methods of consultation were left to them.

Two others used a structured or "top-down" model - senior management laid down guidelines and timescales.

The fifth style was highly structured - a published annual timetable and a sophisticated set of proformas.

In all cases, divisional or departmental plans were discussed with members of the senior management team and issues adapted before being incorporated into the colleges strategic or operational plans.

- **Strategic Plan Commentary**

Each college was required by the FEFC to produce a commentary in March, giving an overview of projected student enrolments for the coming year, and proposed changes in provision. Two such **Strategic Plan Commentaries** were received and verbal extracts pertaining to SLDD from a third. The issues raised were amongst those already mentioned above: the avowed intention of colleges to maintain the level of provision for SLDD and in the case of one college to increase it, the need to improve the physical access and general accommodation for SLDD, the concern that with the introduction of Training Credits, students with SLDD may become disenfranchised, and the intention to foster closer working relationships with Social Services.

SLDD Issues

- **Commitment to SLDD**

In line with FEFC directives, all those interviewed reaffirmed their commitment to providing for SLDD and to the maintenance of numbers. One college's intention was to increase numbers with the introduction of provision for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

- **Definition of SLDD**

Historically, provision for students with special needs was largely on discrete courses and was funded differently from Learning Support, which was provision for supporting the learning needs of students on other courses. The 1992 FHE Act did away with the term "special needs" in favour of LDD to emphasise the continuum of need and the continuum of provision. However, in four of the five colleges, there was a different member of staff responsible for each area of work. In only one college was the whole area of SLDD work under one co-ordinator.

- **Cross-College SLDD Group**

Recognising the fragmentation of support provision for SLDD, three colleges had set up representative groups to address the issues. Included on the groups were variously: the SLDD named person, the learning support co-ordinator, the student /college counsellor, and representatives of outside agencies such as the LEA, educational psychologists, Health and Social Services. The objectives of the groups included: maximising student potential, facilitating full access to college curriculum and facilities, monitoring and evaluating provision for SLDD, receiving regular reports from representatives within college, liaising with outside agencies and services, and keeping abreast of changes in legislation.

As part of the strategic planning discussions in one college, such a group was proposed and a paper written for the Academic Board. Whilst the group would be formed with a nucleus of representatives, it would function as an open forum to facilitate wider discussion.

- **Policies on SLDD**

Practice on Equal Opportunities and SLDD policies varied. Three colleges had well developed whole-college policies which were under continuous evaluation by a standing committee. One college had a policy which was currently under review. One had a statement of intent and was currently setting up a body to develop the policy.

All colleges were developing their college charter in the light of The Charter for Further Education issued by the Department for Education, this being a requirement of the FEFC. Practice again varied between a senior member of staff writing the charter to a group specially convened for the purpose.

- **Increased Integration**

Two colleges had been inspected within the last few years, one by HMI and the other under the FEFC inspection framework. As a result both were looking at alternative curriculum arrangements to maximise integration and student potential. The other three were also looking at ways of breaking down traditional courses and increasing individualised provision.

- **Progression & Accreditation**

All colleges recognised the importance of accrediting course provision for SLDD and of demonstrating progression routes. There was significant development in the areas of the Vocational Access Certificate and the use of the Open College Network in writing submissions for accreditation. Wordpower and Numberpower and elements of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were being incorporated where appropriate and applicable. There was also an intention in two colleges that Foundation GNVQ would be offered from September 1994.

- **Staffing Structures**

Staffing structures for SLDD in three colleges were currently under review. These were partly due to the general developments in colleges brought about by recent legislation and FEFC requirements, a new funding methodology, and partly due to the change in emphasis towards increased entitlement and integration for SLDD.

- **Accommodation**

Four of the five colleges in the study expressed concerns about aspects of accommodation for SLDD. In one case the issues had been raised during inspection and an accommodation strategy had been drawn up. In another case, the college was currently carrying out a rooming analysis. Similarly another college was looking at ways of improving the quality of provision. The fourth had particular ongoing problems with its intended provision for students with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The FEFC had been unable to help financially, since funds had been allocated according to the findings of the Hunter Survey on upgrading existing accommodation - there being nothing left for new building.

- **Inter-Agency Co-operation**

All colleges recognised the importance of close working relationships with outside agencies, support services and professionals. Recent legislation in Education, Health and Social Services had all emphasised the importance of close cooperation, but had at the same time complicated the issue. Before the advent of incorporation, this support had been locally developed. Since incorporation and colleges' independence of the LEA, concern was expressed about the possible lack of networking without a named contact. There was also uncertainty about future funding for the LEA support services of educational psychologists and sensory impairment. Similarly with the reorganisation of Health with its purchaser and provider split, there was confusion expressed about future funding arrangements for the support services of speech, occupational and physiotherapies.

A positive aspect had been the rationalisation in some colleges of non-FEFC funded 19+ provision and the possible future funding by social services.

- **Funding**

All colleges had concerns about funding apart from those mentioned above of accommodation and support services. Others included: the accurate completion of the FEFC form for additional support tariff units; the levels of the highest and lowest additional unit bands; the resourcing of provision for some students outside the college budget; the cost of and recoument for pre-entry assessment; the cost of internal

monitoring of students' progress and the problems of 19+ non-schedule 2 provision - provision which does not comply with FEFC funding requirements. Staff development budgets to fund SLDD training and awareness was also raised.

There was a good deal of discussion concerning the involvement of Social Services, the European Social Fund (ESF) and the TECs' financial involvement.

- **Training Credits**

Three of the colleges were involved in the recent introduction by one TEC of Training Credits. All three had concerns: that the level of funding might lead to a closing down of provision; that the requirement for a trainee with special training needs to achieve NVQ level 1 or its equivalent was unrealistic, and that the expectation of employers to make a contribution towards trainees' allowances would not be realised.

- **Staff Development**

Apart from funding for staff development mentioned above, there were other issues raised by four colleges. These included: awareness raising for mainstream staff where restructuring of SLDD provision and increased integration was planned, and skills training for lecturers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), particularly those taking students with profound and multiple learning difficulties.

The three colleges which mentioned the issue of mainstream awareness raising, also mentioned the problems of logistics. Colleges are large and complex organisations. How do you arrange inservice training across a college? "You always end up talking to the converted." One college was hoping to introduce a number of inservice days: SLDD was to be high on the agenda.

One interviewee raised the question of possible implications for staff appraisal of SLDD issues identified in the strategic plan.

- **Quality Assurance**

The primary responsibility for quality control rests with colleges, and as such they will set their own aims, objectives, targets and criteria for success and have a policy and strategy for monitoring and enhancing quality.

One college was currently undertaking a review of quality and evaluation issues.

Another college had recently been inspected and had drawn up plans to implement the recommendations. Two colleges mentioned that they undertook course evaluations as part of the college planning cycle. This involved staff looking at how provision had progressed since the last evaluation and invited students to comment personally.

One interviewee expressed a need for preparation for inspection of provision for SLDD.

CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubting the colleges' commitment to SLDD. All have consulted widely on provision and have made recommendations in their strategic and operational plans for increased integration and individual student entitlement. There is a recognition that there must be a wide spectrum of provision to meet the wide spectrum of SLDD. As such the various strands of support need to be managed as a whole, either by an individual, but more likely by an overseeing group. As a result of the changes in philosophy, so there will be changes in staffing structures. Accommodation for SLDD in some colleges is still an issue, but one which is being actively investigated.

There are issues of funding, of which colleges are aware. FEFC is also aware and needs first-hand evidence upon which to base any proposed changes. But the positive effect of tighter control over what provision FEFC will fund, has led to an emphasis on curriculum development and the national accreditation of provision. In parallel with this development is the focus on the need to show a progression route for both students and courses.

There remain concerns about the future of Training Credits, provision for adults with SLDD post 19, links with the LEA and its support services, links with Health and its support services, links with Social Services, issues of staff development and quality of provision. All these are actively being discussed in the relevant quarters and with continued co-operation and goodwill, they will be resolved.

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