



OxSpec: Occasional Papers
Oxfordshire Special Needs Research Project

April 1993

Number 2

Special School Heads' Perceptions of F.E. Provision for Students with Learning Difficulties & 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 a wide range of 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.

During the past 10 years, the Authority has sought to develop provision in Colleges to reflect this philosophy.

Also from April 1st 1993, Special Schools are taking part in a pilot phase for the extension of LMS. The Formula for delegation of funds is likely to include an element "...in recognition of the value of Link Course attendance at FE college..."

In preparation for these changes, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Oxfordshire Special School Heads or their representatives and with the Heads of the Sensory Impairment Service, the Hospitals Education Service and the provision for Autism.

FINDINGS

This short paper identifies the general issues which were raised and suggests a need for a more focused dialogue between Schools and Colleges - about the expectations each has of the other and about the need to develop a Transitional Curriculum.

Policy

Within the seven responses which referred to issues of Policy, there was a wide divergence of opinion. On the one hand it was felt that the Policy was "...too clear cut..." and that some students were not yet ready for college, whilst on the other hand, Oxfordshire did not *have* a policy, but simply "...a set of principles". Two Heads vigorously supported the policy of transfer to College at 16, whilst four argued that it contravened students' Equal Opportunities and their right to choice at 16. However it was queried whether "...equal opportunities was an issue of quality rather than of policy". "...it must be good enough to stand up in court."

Some of the other reasons why the policy was not supported, were given as:

- Colleges were thought to be too big and too violent for some students.
- The loose structure was seen as inappropriate for autistic students and for those with emotional and behavioural problems.
- Whereas pupils with severe learning difficulties were integrated into local mainstream schools, often they were isolated when they went to college, particularly the segregation of students with profound and multiple difficulties “...students are going backwards”.
- College provision is often far from a student’s home “...they need community integration.”

Link Course Provision

The experience of College Link provision is very mixed. Whilst all Heads saw its value in terms of assessment and transition, there was a great variation in enthusiasm for the status quo. The most positive comments came from those schools which negotiated the Link requirements with the college as part of the curriculum and where there was “quality teaching”. There was enthusiasm for individually arranged Links and for the involvement of college teaching and support staff.

Other experiences were less positive. “...overlap of curriculum...” “...would rather pay for supported work experience...” “...purely social, not curriculum orientated.”

Funding arrangements varied considerably: “...no payment, it’s subsidised by the College...” Others hoped to continue Links “...if we can afford it...” “...until the money runs out.” In some areas TVEI funds have supported Links. But there remains a real concern that college charges for Links, will be too high, to be met by the schools’ LMS Formula.

One positive suggestion was for an exchange of school and college staff. What is needed is a “...discussion with colleges about progression.”

Transfer Arrangements

All schools had developed a similar programme of assessment and transitional arrangements. With variations, these included: Statutory 13+ Reassessments, Year 10/11 Annual Reviews and Leavers’ Conferences, attended by the student, their parents and supporting professionals: Parents’ Evenings when college staff and Careers Advisers may be present: the college Link provision, college visits and Open Evenings, standard or specific college Enrollment Forms and Admissions Panels. Other benefits were derived from the use of individual videos and rebus diaries, teachers’ Pen Profiles and Records of Achievement. These latter however it was felt, were not being used by colleges.

Visits by college staff, whether to attend annual reviews or to talk to Parents’ Evenings, seemed to depend not on the colleges per se, but on the staff of individual courses. Some Heads spoke highly of the involvement of college staff visiting schools and hearing about potential students’ needs. Three, however said they had never had a visit from a college.

12 of the schools reported “good” to “superb” *general liaison* with colleges, while two made reference to their being “...no input from colleges”. The best practice was one school/college liaison, sharing and exchanging staff and accommodation and negotiating a Transitional curriculum on individual programmes. They were also involved in joint staff development with the local Training Centre and with Health and Social Services.

Concern was expressed about the future and the pressures post-April: who would be expected to fund formal or informal liaison meetings? “We must work to maintain close associations”.

Curriculum Discussions

Specific liaison on curriculum matters was poor, except where individual integrated provision was negotiated. One Head noted that “...we work closely on individual programmes” and another remarked that “...college competencies are translated into Rebus and practice in school.”

Whilst there was an expressed willingness to be involved in curriculum discussions with colleges, 10 out of the 12 Heads said that they had never been involved. The most commonly asked questions were “What are the colleges’ objectives?” and “What do colleges want of schools?”

One Head had offered to be involved in curriculum discussions and further integration, but with no response, which prompted the question, “...is it Senior Management?”

More specifically, one Head commented that schools “...need to be involved in NVQs and GNVQs” and “...colleges are not aware of Duke of Edinburgh work.”

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

1. There was general agreement that school/college cooperation was valuable, but depended upon genuine negotiation and quality provision, at the right price. There were some examples of excellent practice, but much that left scope for shared improvement.
2. One area of concern was that of colleges being perceived as an inappropriate environment for some students with learning difficulties and disabilities. This was refuted by one Head who said that this was an excuse for lack of knowledge and a problem of educating staff attitudes.
3. The main concern was one of curriculum. “There is no written curriculum, no progression. College staff need to know schools’ curriculum.” Several Heads regretted that students were “...put on a course” rather than having an individual programme. “A modular programme built on flexibility and individual needs, in their local community”.
4. More specifically there were several references to one college unit which “...needs to be broken down and the students integrated”.
5. There was expressed disappointment that on two courses there was no further help with reading, no keyboarding skills and no work experience, all of which students had been following at school. Students were “...being treated as adults” when in fact some of their management was regarded as inappropriate for *developing* adults.

6. One positive suggestion put forward, involved clusters of Special and Mainstream schools with a College jointly developing a modular approach to Transition on an individual student basis.
 - a. Special School: independence, social skills, advocacy
 - b. Mainstream: academic, social and pre-voc. work skills
 - c. College: adult world, choices, tasters
7. The theme of “partnership groupings” and “curriculum forums” was suggested by several Heads” but “...not TVEI groupings which are Secondary dominated”.
8. Some students are brought back from residential schools at 16 and transferred to college, whilst some continue at school. It was felt that the funds expended on residential school placements post 16 could be spent on in-County residential accommodation attached to college provision. This would serve the dual provision for those who need residential accommodation and for those who need “...to be weaned off it.”
9. Despite the future uncertainties of funding for Support Services, there was a strongly expressed desire for them and by them to be involved in the F.E. Sector.
10. Whilst there is an evident desire expressed by the Schools to work with the Colleges, one question remains “What happens after college?” This will involve working closely with other agencies - Social Services, Health Authorities and Voluntary Organisations.

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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.

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