Chapter 12
Supporting Learning in Further & Higher Education in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

The research, on which this chapter is based, was undertaken to provide baseline details which would help determine the nature and level of support required by the Further and Higher Education sectors in Northern Ireland in advance of the Special Educational Needs Disability Order Northern Ireland (SENDO NI) which became law in September 2005.

The fieldwork for this research took place at the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005 and the research addressed the following questions: How much progress has been made by the main adult education providers in Northern Ireland towards providing a whole institute strategic approach which will ensure equity of access to all services for adults with a disability? What represents best practice in both the Further and Higher Education sectors? What further action is required in the Further and Higher Education sectors to further improve the nature and level of support for people with a disability?

The findings would suggest that while much progress has been made across both sectors in terms of physical accessibility much work is still required particularly across the further education sector to establish a strategic approach to the provision of a high quality service which meets the requirements of the SEND legislation. Aspects of a high quality service were found in both sectors, however, with regard to funding, policy and planning, management of service and resourcing the Higher Education sector demonstrated best practice most often. In the research it is recognised that the sharing of best practice and the establishment and extension of structures to improve regular communication within and between sectors is crucial. Input from external specialists is also identified as vital in the drive to provide a high quality service accessible by all students with a disability who require support.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline the circumstances in which a need for research was identified, research that would outline the changing context of disability support in Northern Ireland, describe approaches to disability support in both the Further and Higher Education sectors and identify associated best practice, good practice or needs. It will set the context examining the scale of engagement and relevant funding mechanisms. It will then outline the findings of the research in the following areas:

- Policy & Planning
- Management of Service
- Physical Accessibility
- Resourcing
- Staff Development
- Referral
- Initial Needs Assessment
- Teaching and Learning
- Assessment
- Quality Assurance
- Communication and Networking

The chapter will outline the perceptions of disability support amongst staff and students and examine the evidence-based recommendations which evolved from the findings of the research. It will detail a range of significant differences between the Further and Higher Education sectors. It will analyse the findings of the research in terms of the distance to travel before either sector can confidently claim to be fully prepared for the implications of the SEND legislation. Finally the chapter will briefly outline the main sector-wide changes made in the FE sector since the research in 2005 as well as changes made at institute level at the Belfast Metropolitan College (previously Belfast Institute and Castlereagh) which was at the time of the research and remains the largest college in Northern Ireland.

BACKGROUND

As adults with disabilities are increasingly included in all aspects of mainstream society so colleges and universities in Northern Ireland have made significant progress in ensuring that students with a disability have access to the full curriculum offer of each institute as well as all related student support services. This is immediately obvious in terms of physical adjustments, the existence of a disability support unit in each establishment and statements on marketing materials. It can now reasonably be argued that this process of ‘inclusion’ has greatly enriched the adult education environment in our colleges, university colleges and universities for all students and staff.

The debate around the medical model of disability versus the social model is an important element of the drive for inclusion. Barbara Waters, in an address to the ‘Universities UK Policy Conference’ (Waters, 2002) suggests that there is now wide acceptance of the social model of disability which suggests that disabled people’s restricted participation in society is no longer as a result of physical limitations or impairments but a socially created barrier, where people are disadvantaged by their environment and the policies, practices and procedures associated with the delivery of services. This model is preferred by a range of organisations across the UK including the Red Cross who explain that “instead of emphasising the disability, the social model puts the person at the forefront and emphasises dignity, independence, choice and privacy.” (Red Cross, 2010) The Office of Disability Issues HM Government (ODI) which leads the UK government’s vision of achieving equality for disabled people also uses and encourages others to use the social model of disability. (ODI, 2010)

Many of the improvements and adjustments made in the FE and HE sectors to date fit into the social model of disability and it is of course important that the removal of physical barriers continues and that access remains a key element.