

Further education for people with learning difficulties

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) brought major changes to the way that continuing education is delivered for adults. The 'Still A Chance to Learn?' project explored the impact of these changes specifically on adults with learning difficulties. The study found that the Act has had a mixed impact, with younger people and those with less severe learning difficulties often gaining, while the position for those with profound learning difficulties has worsened. The research found that:

f Funding has stayed the same or increased in most areas. Provision has boomed for people with moderate learning difficulties, with 60 per cent of colleges reporting increased numbers. However, one in ten places have faced cuts, particularly for those with severe or profound/complex learning difficulties.

f 'Schedule 2' is a list of particular types of courses which are eligible for Further Education Funding Council funding. The new emphasis on accreditation and progression required for this provision was thought by one in three respondents to exclude adults with learning difficulties from continuing education. Most of these respondents expressed particular concern about the exclusion of people with profound/complex learning difficulties.

f The curriculum has narrowed as providers have steered their provision to fit in with Schedule 2 requirements. There was a heavy emphasis on literacy, numeracy, skills for independence and vocational courses. Non-vocational courses have faced cuts. Examples of courses lost include art, drama, music and a women's group.

f Ninety-two per cent of LEAs and two-thirds of colleges felt that essential support to enable some adults with learning difficulties to participate in education (such as transport, equipment or help at lunch times) is not well-developed.

f Colleges felt that the planning framework has disintegrated and relationships between colleges have deteriorated as they have become competitive businesses and there is little planning or joint working between colleges.

f The experiences of students with learning difficulties were mixed. People with learning difficulties enjoyed learning but also reported bullying, intimidation and health and safety risks.

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (the FHE Act) introduced great changes to the way in which continuing education was delivered in colleges and local education authorities across England and Wales. The 'Still A Chance to Learn?' project researched the impact of these changes specifically on education for adults with learning difficulties. Further education for adults with learning difficulties offers them the opportunity to learn a wide range of skills and can increase confidence and self esteem. The project explored the implications of the Act by asking college and LEA staff about changes in their provision as a result of the legislation and asking adults with learning difficulties their views/experiences.

In the legal terminology of the Further and Higher Education Act, learning difficulties is used in a wide-ranging way to refer to people with *all* sorts of learning difficulties and disabilities. However, this research covered education in colleges and LEAs only for adults with moderate, severe or profound/complex learning difficulties.

The Further and Higher Education Act (1992)

The FHE Act caused a major restructuring of the way that adult and continuing education was organised and funded. The FHE Act set out responsibility for the then newly formed Further Education Funding Councils (FEFCs) to "have regard" to the requirements of people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Local Education Authorities already had this responsibility.

The Act gave colleges independence from local authority control. Two Further Education Funding Councils were set up, one each in England and Wales, to fund college provision and to monitor the quality of the provision. (Scotland was not covered by the Act.) Under the Act, colleges of further education have a duty to provide courses funded under Schedule 2. This explicitly refers to students with learning difficulties over compulsory school age; they are eligible for funding under the heading of "courses in independent living and communication skills for students with learning difficulties". They can also study other Schedule 2 courses open to all learners, which include vocational and academic courses as well as literacy and numeracy. Evidence of progression must be demonstrated.

While colleges have a *duty* to provide Schedule 2 courses, they also have a permissive *power* to provide other courses. The reverse is true for Local Education Authorities, which have a duty to provide adequate

provision for all forms of non Schedule 2 adult learning but also have the power to offer Schedule 2 provision. The responsibility for funding since the Act has therefore been split according to what is being learned.

Positive aspects of the changes

The FHE Act has undoubtedly achieved the following for adults with learning difficulties:

- Funding has been put on a secure footing. The majority of colleges and local education authorities have retained or improved their levels of funding for work with adults with learning difficulties since the Act was implemented.
- Fifty-seven per cent of colleges have upped enrolments for people with learning difficulties.
- Sixty-five per cent of colleges and 42 per cent of LEAs report an increase in funding.
- Opportunities have increased, for people with moderate learning difficulties in particular: 60 per cent of colleges report growth in the moderate learning difficulty sector.
- Funding has been freed up so that integrated learning can be more flexibly funded. The additional resources can now follow the individual rather than being tied to segregated classes for disabled people, as was previously the case. Twelve per cent of colleges report a decrease in segregated learning.
- Funding for support has increased: 1 in 3 colleges considered their support well developed.
- A much needed clarity of purpose and professionalism has been introduced to this area of work, with an emphasis on students' progression.
- The status of the work has been raised. The importance of education for adults with learning difficulties is recognised in the FHE Act and consequently has attracted resources from the two Further Education Funding Councils for Schedule 2 work in colleges and Local Education Authorities.

One co-ordinator who has seen provision develop and flourish in his college sees the FHE Act as "a real tool and a weapon". Whereas previously students with learning difficulties attracted the sympathy vote, now "we've actually got rights and we've got the same rigour as every other course..."

Negative aspects of the Act

Equally the FHE Act has had a number of detrimental effects, namely:

- The curriculum has been skewed to focus on literacy, numeracy, vocational courses and skills for independence, which are all Schedule 2 courses and hence eligible for funding from the Further Education Funding Council. Non-vocational courses such as music, art and drama have been lost in many areas. There was a concern that funding mechanisms rather than the needs of learners have started to drive the curriculum.
- Opportunities for people with severe or profound/complex learning difficulties have been cut or reduced, with one area in ten making cuts. There were fears that these groups of students were losing the right to access further education.
- 1 in 3 respondents said that accreditation has excluded people with learning difficulties from continuing education. The new emphasis on progression and achieving outcomes was felt by many to work against the interests of people with learning difficulties.
- Support, such as help with transport or care needs, is still lacking. Two-thirds of colleges thought support was only adequate or under-developed, as opposed to well developed. Ninety-two per cent of LEAs considered support was not well developed.
- Older learners have been disadvantaged as provision for them is not growing as rapidly as for younger learners.
- Liaison between colleges has been undermined. Collaboration has been lost as colleges have become private and competing businesses. One interviewee reported: "Contact between colleges has clearly changed - liaison is worse. If someone from [another local college] rings up to ask about something, then I'll say I'm unwilling to talk about that, which is crazy, isn't it! But there is now much more strategic secrecy ... that Act has changed the way we work."
- Strategic planning has been lost: there is no longer a coherent overview of continuing education provision on a local/regional basis. Local Education Authorities have lost their traditional co-ordinating role while colleges are no longer collaborating effectively. As one respondent described it: "The infrastructure was disbanded. It went from a situation where there was a cohesive LEA planning unit to a situation where it's every

man for himself. The overall coherence has gone. The planning has been totally ignored."

- Bureaucracy and administration has increased, particularly with the considerable paperwork required by the Further Education Funding Council. As one person said: "I don't have time to organise other things now, as my day is so taken up with administration and dealing with Schedule 2".
- Some staff were experiencing low morale and several made comments such as: "The changes have caused incredible frustration" and "It's a traumatic time for people going through it".
- There is a danger that people with learning difficulties have become profitable, "seen with pounds signs on their heads" as one person said. Rather than responding to the needs of disabled learners, there is a fear that a few places are developing provision purely because it brings money into their colleges.
- Funding and bureaucracy has in some cases promoted segregation as it is easier to put on separate classes than to do all the paperwork to obtain individual support for students. Staff at one college with a proud tradition of inclusion are under pressure to set up a segregated course because "the college can't afford not to".

The views of people with learning difficulties

People with learning difficulties have a mixed time at college, as the following contribution from one self-advocacy group demonstrates:

They liked:

- Getting certificates
- Friendly staff/people
- Wide choice of courses
- Good lunch food
- Improvements to the building
- Giving suggestions on courses
- Staff listening to complaints and taking action

They disliked:

- Noisy refectory
- Verbal abuse
- Poor access
- Overcrowded rooms
- Poor transport

A game of snakes and ladders?

There are clearly aspects of the implementation of the FHE Act which have been very successful for people with learning difficulties. The Act has led in the majority of cases to a growth in the volume of education for adults with learning difficulties. This in itself is a major achievement. However, other effects of the FHE Act clearly give cause for concern, from the evident skewing of the curriculum to fit the Schedule 2 criteria to the marginalising of already vulnerable groups, such as those with profound and complex learning difficulties. The loss of overall planning and coherence is a serious gap.

About the study

The project was a collaboration between NIACE and the Norah Fry Research Centre at the University of Bristol. The research took place in 1995, two years after the Further and Higher Education Act was implemented in April 1993.

Detailed questionnaires were sent to all colleges and local education authorities in England and Wales, of which 60 per cent responded. Interviews were held at eight sites with staff and students, while self-advocacy groups were also invited to send in their stories. Tapes, letters, phone calls, drawings and poems were received.

Further information

A full report of the research, *Still A Chance to Learn?*, is published by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. It is available from NIACE, Publications Section, 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE, Tel: 0116 255 1451, Fax: 0116 285 4514 (price £5.99 inc p&p, ISBN 1 872941 99 0).

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