

RESEARCH ABSTRACT

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PARTICIPATION BY AND PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND/OR DISABILITIES (SLDD) IN THE FURTHER EDUCATION SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The research was carried out by Peter Rafferty of DTZ Piedad Consulting, and Trevor Rowan of Trewen Associates.

The research was commissioned in 1998 to quantify the current levels of participation by and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the further education sector in Northern Ireland, and to identify the extent of need.

The research aimed to mirror a study carried out in England in 1996 to provide a baseline of participation by and provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and to allow comparison with participation and provision in England.

The ability of the project to identify the level of participation accurately across the colleges was dependent upon the colleges' own ability to identify and record students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on their systems, either manually or through computerised means. The results are, therefore, at best an estimate based on what colleges could provide.

All colleges see the identification and recording of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as a major issue which needs to be tackled across the sector so that agreed criteria and descriptions can be established, both for internal management and returns to the Department for differential funding purposes.

Some of the key findings of the report are as follows:

PARTICIPATION

- While the overall participation by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is around 4 percent, the percentage of those identified in each college as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities ranges from less than 1 percent to over 18 percent of total enrolments. Participation in England was nearly 6%.

- Figures for the participation of full-time and part-time students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities vary across the sector ranging from no participation to almost 12 percent of full-time enrolments and just over 20 percent of part-time enrolments.
- Of those identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities across the sector only 11 percent are attending full-time programmes while the equivalent figure in the English survey was 45 percent.
- There is considerable variation across colleges in the age profile of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities even though the overall profile suggests that 75 percent of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are aged over 18 years. In England the number of students aged over 18 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is 67 per cent. The proportion of those aged 16-18 years identified as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities is lower in NI colleges. This is likely to reflect the differences in participation in full-time provision.

NATURE OF PROVISION

- There is considerable variation among colleges in the proportions of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities following mainstream, discrete or combined programmes, and two thirds of colleges have more students on discrete provision than on mainstream provision.
- The distribution of levels of accreditation obtained by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities varies across the colleges.

EXTENT OF NEED

- All colleges state that there are students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in their colleges who are not formally identified. Colleges could not provide an estimate of these unmet needs. While several colleges state they have systems in place to record cases where potential students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities cannot be enrolled, there is no evidence in the sector that a systematic approach is taken.
- Overall, colleges have little knowledge of how other local providers meet the needs of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. While a number of colleges claim they have ways of identifying the potential unexpressed demand for participation, no systematic approach or estimate of numbers is evident. Interviews with support agencies reveal that there is no systematic link with the further education sector which assists in the identification of unmet needs.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The research project was commissioned in 1998 by the (then) Department of Education Northern Ireland at a cost of £14,900.
2. A questionnaire was issued to all colleges, based on appropriate extracts from the English mapping questionnaire supplemented by questions on policy and quantitative matters. Colleges were asked to complete the statistical questions and to consider their responses to the other questions in advance of a meeting with the project team members.
3. Printed copies of the full report are available from the Department for Employment and Learning, priced £5.

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Alternatively a copy may be downloaded from the Department's website:

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