

Report summary

Progression post-16 for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

Too few young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities progress from school to complete programmes of learning in post-16 settings which develop greater independence; lead to further study, supported or open employment; or provide skills for independent living. A recent longitudinal study reported that an estimated 30% of young people who had a statement of special educational needs when they were in Year 11, and 22% of young people with a declared disability, were not in any form of education, employment or training when they reached age 18 in 2009 compared with 13% of their peers. Current figures from the Labour Force Survey show for quarter 1 of 2011 that 41% of men and 43% of women designated longer-term disabled were economically inactive.

Between October 2010 and March 2011, inspectors visited 32 providers to evaluate the arrangements for transition from school and the quality of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities up to the age of 25. They conducted 111 detailed case studies of learners in a range of settings including colleges, independent providers of work-based learning and local authority providers of adult and community learning. Inspectors observed discrete provision for groups of learners who were mainly studying programmes at foundation level (pre-GCSE). They also assessed the quality of additional support provided for individuals on a range of education and training courses up to level 3 (A-level equivalent), including full-time and part-time vocational programmes and apprenticeships.

In order to plan the survey and capture a wider range of evidence than was possible from the small sample of visits, inspectors held two focus groups with key stakeholders prior to the fieldwork. During the period of the survey, inspectors held two further focus groups at a national conference for teachers and other specialist staff working in the post-16 sector; met with representatives from national organisations; and conducted structured telephone interviews with senior managers in 13 local authorities and in nine colleges involved in projects for these learners.

Key findings

- The local authorities' arrangements to provide learners with a learning difficulty assessment as the basis for their transition to post-16 provision were not working effectively in the provision visited. In two thirds of the case studies where it should have been available, the providers had not received an assessment, and where they were received they were often lacking in specific detail or arrived late. The timing of the local authority arrangements for assessment was not aligned to the post-16 providers' recruitment and induction procedures, and providers continued to rely on their own assessments.
- The recommendations for further study at post-16, made in the learning difficulty assessments, were not sufficiently objective or based solely on need. Work-based learning provision was rarely considered as an option.
- Information provided by focus groups and local authorities, and evidence from visits to providers, demonstrated that the availability of provision at post-16 varied considerably. Very little provision was available locally for learners with the highest levels of need. The current arrangements resulted in inequities in the placements for learners.
- Recent reductions in budgets for adult learning had further reduced the options available for adult learners.
- The colleges visited had well-established and effective transition and initial assessment arrangements, which included the flexibility to respond to late referrals, and in circumstances where no local authority learning difficulty assessment had been received. The independent providers of work-based learning and adult and community learning providers visited had fewer specialist staff but their initial assessment arrangements had also worked well for the learners in the case studies.
- Learners on mainstream provision, including apprenticeship programmes, who were receiving additional support, were well supported. When learners had their support needs discussed with them and reviewed, it was common for adjustments to be made to the support provided and for learners to become more independent in their learning.
- Foundation learning programmes were successful for learners whose main goal was to progress to level 2 provision or higher. But for those learners for whom this was not a main goal, they were too narrowly focused on accreditation. The programmes seen offered too few meaningful opportunities for work experience and other practical learning situations in which to develop skills.
- Unlike in schools, foundation learning in post-16 settings could only be funded for around three days a week. This did not provide sufficient time to prepare learners effectively for other destinations, in particular some form of employment.
- Evidence from the focus groups and the case studies, identified that when learners reached age 19, the changes in the arrangements between children's services and adult services, and in moving from the Young People's Learning

Agency to the Skills Funding Agency funded provision created additional difficulties. Insufficient advice about personal budgets, the requirement to pay fees and uncertainty about benefit entitlements were identified as potential barriers to participation when learners transferred from local children's to adults' disability services.

- Half of the sessions observed were good or better, and examples of good teaching and learning were seen in all the settings visited. In the most effective sessions, learners' capabilities were built upon, their support needs were met unobtrusively and the session furthered their main long-term goals.
- In the less effective sessions, areas for improvement included poorly planned support, low expectations of learners and too much focus on achievement of units, rather than generic goals such as social skills that would prepare learners for their future destinations.
- Where learners had made the transition to the post-16 sector, the success rates for supported learners in the providers visited compared well with those of their peers. This reflected the national picture. The success rates for supported apprentices in the survey visits were mostly high, and sometimes above that of other apprentices. This was better than the national success rate for supported apprentices, which in 2009/10 was four percentage points lower than those for their peers.
- Too little is known about the destinations of learners once they leave post-16 provision, particularly once they reach the age of 19 or 20. The providers visited were beginning to collect destination information, but funding agencies and local authorities did not have systematic procedures to collect this data to monitor the effectiveness of this provision in supporting progression.

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