

Inclusive *FE*

The report of the **Further Education Funding Council** Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee chaired by Professor John Tomlinson

CSIE

Summary

‘We believe that learning can only be fully effective if it is inclusive’

A new vision of inclusion, based on a better match between learning requirements and provision, is at the heart of far-reaching proposals for improving further education following the first national inquiry in England into FE provision for students with disabilities and/or difficulties in learning.

The Tomlinson Committee's Report *Inclusive Learning* is based on evidence from providers, parents, carers, organisations and services and is strongly influenced by the views and experiences of students. It finds that while some colleges have made great strides towards an inclusive approach, overall the quality of learning for students with disabilities and/or difficulties is poorer than for other students, and many disabled people are not receiving any further education at all.

The definition of inclusion used in the report is based on obtaining what the committee describes as the greatest degree of match or fit between individual learning requirements and provision.

It does not incorporate human rights considerations and covers both discrete and separate specialist provision. Decisions about whether the greatest degree of match or fit is obtained in mainstream or segregated settings remain under the control of education and training professionals (as did the membership of the Tomlinson Committee). As the Committee itself points out, legislation governing further education does not explicitly establish rights for disabled students or outlaw discrimination.

However, the report does contain major proposals to improve colleges' capacity to respond to different approaches to learning and to take student's views seriously which will hopefully lead to rapidly increasing opportunities for placements in the mainstream.

This free CSIE summary focuses on the report's approach to inclusion and identifies the committee's key recommendations towards developing its new concept of inclusive learning.

A New Approach to Learning

According to the report the old approach to learning, which focuses on making students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities different from or more special than other learners, has not worked.

The inclusive approach adopted by the committee avoids a viewpoint which locates difficulty or deficit within the student and focuses instead on the capacity of the educational institution to understand and respond to individual learners' requirements. It moves away from labelling students towards creating an appropriate educational environment.

Re-designing learning, assessment and organisation to fit objectives and learning styles of students may mean introducing new content to courses, adapting access or both. This approach is quite different from offering courses and then giving students with difficulties some additional human or physical aids to participate.

'The aim is not for students to simply take part in further education but to be actively included and fully engaged in their learning. At the heart of our thinking lies the idea of match or fit between how the learner learns best, what they need and want to learn and what is required from the FE sector, the college and teachers for successful learning to take place.

By inclusive learning therefore we mean the greatest degree of match or fit between the individual learners

requirements and the provision that is made for them.

Learning Environment

The report sees an individually-designed learning environment or 'learning ecosystem' as the best way of securing this match between provision and individual learning styles and goals. An individual learning environment would have the following components:

- an individual learning programme
- a curriculum which promotes progress in learning
- effective teaching
- counselling, guidance and initial assessment
- opportunities for students to discuss and manage their own learning
- support for learning
- support for learners such as creche facilities
- procedures for assessing, recording and accrediting achievement
- learning materials and resources
- technical aids and equipment
- learning technology
- trained staff
- physical surroundings, for example teaching rooms, canteen and library

Implications of Inclusive Learning

To bring about the match between student's requirements and learning environments, some learners might have more time or resources allocated than other learners.

Inclusive learning places a new responsibility on teachers for close individual observation and skilled

assessment as a basis for devising learning environments which match learners' requirements. The challenge for colleges will be to pursue a corporate approach to learning and to develop their capacity to respond to different approaches to learning and to identify individual learning goals.

It will be important for the FEFC to strengthen necessary safeguards for students with disabilities or difficulties in learning without labelling at the same time as promoting inclusive learning. All students will gain from the focus on inclusive learning. However students with disabilities and/or difficulties will probably gain most because provision for them generally tends to be of poorer quality.

Meeting the particular requirements of students with learning disabilities and/or difficulties would be part of the college's usual arrangements rather than an additional or different activity. The college would be expected to demonstrate that the learning it provides is inclusive rather than students being expected to make a case for the right to learn alongside other learners.

Recognising Disability

The report stresses that an inclusive approach to learning does not involve glossing over disability or learning difficulty or pretending disabilities or difficulties do not matter provided teaching methods are changed. Rather inclusive learning means teachers focus not on the disability itself but on what it means for the way people learn or are helped to learn more effectively. Their

central concern is the way individuals learn and how they can be accommodated.

The report also stresses that inclusive learning is not synonymous with integration. The best environment to match students' requirements will often be an integrated environment - and increasingly so as the capacities of the FE system grow - but it will sometimes be a mixture of integrated and discrete provision or totally discrete provision as in specialist colleges.

A Shared Vision

The Committee recognises that its thinking about inclusive learning owes much to the pioneering work already underway in some colleges and in other services. Colleges understood readily that the concept of inclusive learning was the logical next step in the evolution of further education provision for students with disabilities and/or difficulties.

The concept of inclusion is used increasingly both here and in the USA by other services working with people with learning difficulties. These services often share the committee's vision of bringing about a pluralistic society, inclusive of all people. Health and social services and voluntary organisations face the same challenge as further education - that is how to individualise the planning of housing, employment, supported living and training in order to provide tailor-made personal services. The aim of all provision must be inclusion in our communities.

Inclusion, meaning full and active participation in society, is also part of

academic and legal debate on issues of gender and race.

We have used the term inclusive learning to signal a change in thinking about further education students with learning difficulties or disabilities. As this new thinking is refined and developed by colleges and others, we expect the language used will change.

Key Findings and Recommendations of the Tomlinson Report

- The central recommendation is the development of a more inclusive further education sector.

Other key findings and recommendations towards that goal include:

- Develop an adequately funded, nationally co-ordinated staff training initiative for inclusive learning to cover teacher training, management training, and organisational development.
- Encourage colleges to produce long-term strategy and action plans on inclusive learning.
- Encourage colleges to establish inclusive learning managers.
- FEFC to continue recognising the costs of providing effective individual student assessment, promote wider understanding of its funding methods, and consider allocating funds to cover new costs which may arise as a result of ensuring effective assessments for inclusive learning.
- FEFC to ensure its funding arrangements continue to enable colleges to meet the costs of individual support for learning.
- New regional sub-committees to recommend funding new provision where there is evidence of emerging need and/or it can be done more effectively than at specialist colleges.
- Any review of funding methodology should promote inclusive learning and participation.
- Colleges to measure their progress towards inclusive learning through self-assessment.
- Colleges to be inspected on how they provide learning which is inclusive.
- Recognise all students' achievements within a national framework which gives value to their learning, including developing a pre-foundation award called Skills for Adult Life relevant to all students.
- Take a wider view of the meaning of progression to include transferring and maintaining knowledge, skills and understanding.
- Create and define a framework for collaboration between the FEFC, government departments and other agencies to provide a 'seamless robe' of provision and support services and opportunities to move in and out of learning as needed.
- Colleges to be required to take more systematic account of local needs and to receive help with strategic planning to take account of under-represented groups of adult learners, including those with multiple difficulties, mental health difficulties, and emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Copies of the full report of the Tomlinson Committee are available from HMSO, price £17.95. A free FEFC summary is available from FEFC, Cheylesmore House, Quinton Road, Coventry, CV1 2WT

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