

College barriers

We noted that the complex nature of funding and staffing structures in colleges of further education can create many potential barriers to effective inclusion for students with learning difficulties. We became aware that the supported learning department in one college was staffed by a huge number of staff, many of them hourly-paid, part-time tutors and support staff without permanent contracts. Support for these staff was not always evident and they often seemed to feel isolated and lacking in appropriate training. These individuals were commonly on temporary contracts and would be unaware of their contract renewal from year to year. Often, they would not be informed of their teaching allocation before the September of the academic year in which they were to start work. Staff were disheartened at their inability to work with students in the ways they saw best as professionals and were frustrated by not being able to plan for progression and continuity in their courses over the longer term and from year to year. Staff in colleges may, it seems, develop expertise and resourcing for one course, only to be moved to a completely different course the following academic year. Often staff would have to start again, developing new subject skills and essential resources as a short-term response to new challenges.

For students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities or additional needs, these discontinuities were deeply unhelpful and counter-inclusive. Essential transition planning was often impossible because staff were unable to confirm the sustainability of courses or personnel. Individual members of staff we met were very knowledgeable about the principles of effective preparation and phased support for their learners in times of transition, with familiar people and consistency of approach being key factors in ensuring success. They knew that effective support for transitions was a crucial element in the lives of many young people with learning difficulties. However, because of staffing and course uncertainties, staff found it very difficult to support students appropriately in any transitions – from one year to the next; from one course to another; or from college into adult life.