

Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee

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Skill Wales: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities Evidence to the ELLS Committee on Transition for young people with statements of Special Educational Need

About Skill Wales

Skill is a voluntary organisation promoting equality of opportunity for people with any kind of disability in post-16 education, training and into employment. Skill Wales has been funded by the Big Lottery Fund to develop Skill's work across all of Wales until December 2007.

Skill works in three ways:

Information. Skill provides a free phone line for disabled people, their families and friends, answering queries relating to accessing learning post-16. We also produce a range of 31 booklets with more detailed information, for example on funding for HE, access to the physical environment, a student's guide to the Disability Discrimination Act, and how study can affect benefits. Skill Wales is currently amending and translating Skill's booklets into Welsh, and 3 Welsh-language booklets are available. Skill also publishes the "Into" range, a series of careers guides, which include information on routes into specific careers, implications for disabled people, funding to train for specific careers, case studies of disabled people who work in that area, and lists of relevant contacts. Examples of "Into" titles include "Into Teaching", "Into Nursing and Midwifery", "Into Law", and we are currently planning "Into Sport".

Our Membership. Skill membership is made up of Higher and Further Education Institutions and other post-16 learning providers, individual students, organisations of and for disabled people, and professionals working with disabled students. Skill Wales runs and attends several networks across Wales, sharing information and knowledge between professionals, and we provide advice, training and consultancy to education institutions.

Policy. Skill Wales provides an independent voice for disabled students aged 16-plus during policy consultations in Wales and across the UK. We regularly input into written consultations and give evidence to reviews. Most recently, Skill Wales gave evidence to the Graham Review of Part Time Study, resulting in a recommendation to widen the scope of Disabled Students' Allowance to include students studying 30 credits or fewer.

Skill's remit is all ages post-16 and pan-disability, and includes disabled people who may not have a

statement of special educational need.

Transition in Wales: Areas of Concern

Low Expectations

Skill Wales would like to reiterate the point raised by the Disability Rights Commission and others on the low expectations of disabled people, which can include the expectations of parents and professionals as well as young disabled people themselves, and which restrict ambition and growth. As the DRC pointed out, sometimes these low expectations are couched in terms of "compassion". During the past two years, a small but significant number of teaching staff from various post-16 institutions in Wales have asked Skill Wales questions displaying this attitude. The disabilities and the courses in question vary, but the theme is always the same:

"What's the point of allowing a disabled person to undertake this course? They will never get a job at the end of it; don't we have a duty to be honest and tell them not to bother? Isn't it wrong to raise their hopes?"

At times this question has developed into:

"There are non-disabled people waiting to get on this course who are capable of having a career in this area, why should we deny them a place in favour of a disabled person who will never get a job?"

This negative approach appears to be widespread in schools too. In 2002, NOP conducted a survey of disabled people aged 16-24 in England and Wales. Of those who did not attend higher education (the majority), 24% said they were advised not to go on to higher or further education by their school.

Skill Wales recommends that all staff at education institutions participate in disability awareness and equality training, and are made aware that legislation protects the rights of disabled people in education and employment.

Transition to Employment

Staff at education institutions may display these concerns about the future careers of their students because have experience in attempting to arrange work placements for disabled students. Anecdotal evidence from Skill member institutions in Wales suggests that employers willing to make adjustments even for brief periods of work experience are few and far between. Some institutions have resorted to allowing their disabled students to "shadow" estates or administrative staff within the college, as no meaningful work placement could be found. At best, this is a poor second to the experience non-disabled students gain. At worst, it fosters an attitude of gratefulness at the "generosity" of employers in providing placements for disabled people, reinforcing the view of disabled people as passive recipients of charitable assistance, and quashes any sense of ambition or personal choice. Barnado's Cymru undertook a consultation of young disabled people in 2003, which included the following quote: "At the moment I'm doing work experience in Tesco's. I don't like it. And after that I have to go to either Kwiksave or Woolies which I don't want to do either. I've told

the teachers but they say I have to go – it's nice of them to let us go to these shops."

In a survey undertaken for the DRC in 2004, 45% of small businesses said that it would be "quite or very difficult" to employ a disabled person. This is a significantly higher percentage than that found when asked about employing older people, women or those from ethnic groups.

Skill would suggest that considerable work needs to be done on informing work-placement providers and employers of the requirements and rights of disabled people, and the need to make reasonable adjustments to ensure accessibility.

Transition to Higher Education

The statutory right to a transition review is invaluable to young people aged 14+. Skill has long been concerned that young people who were identified as having additional needs at school lose the right to a transitions plan when moving from FE to HE. This becomes apparent when students are asked about their future plans when leaving college. Skill Northern Ireland produced a "Student Voices" report in 2000, which included the following quotes from three disabled students in FE:

"I don't know what my options are"

"I haven't been given much information about what to do next"

"I am a bit in the dark about the future"

Without support, disabled students may worry about how to apply to university, or what awaits them once they arrive. In the 2002 NOP survey, 60% of young disabled people who did not attend HE said they felt that there would not have been sufficient support in place for them to succeed. Without a transitions planning review, no-one would have told them otherwise. Skill Wales received a query in 2005 from the parent of a 16 year old with dyslexia who had recently begun FE. The parent felt that because of the young person's impairment, the process of applying to university at 18 would be difficult and that preparation should begin as soon as possible. The parent asked Skill Wales to provide a list of those HE institutions in Wales which discriminate against people with dyslexia so that they would not waste time applying to them. Such evidence suggests that transition to HE for students with learning difficulties and disabilities is perceived extremely negatively, with an assumption of little support and a fear of the unknown.

Skill recommends that young people with identified educational needs are given continued advice and support during transition from FE. It must be ensured that the young person's decision about what to do next is an informed and genuinely open choice.

The Post-16 Perspective

To inform its response to the Review, Skill Wales has taken anecdotal and verbal information from its members and supportive institutions in Wales on their experience of the transitions process, focusing on the transition from school to further education (FE) in particular. This evidence is not a

comprehensive survey of transitions practice, but provides a general portrait of the process across Wales from the point of view of the learning support/disability officers in FE who ensure further education is inclusive and accessible.

Further education institutions which feel the transitions process works well have learning support staff who are involved in the transitions planning process from year 9 onwards, receive a copy of the young person's transition plan, and are informed of what arrangements have been put in place for the pupil whilst in school. Our anecdotal evidence suggests such situations are rare, though not unknown, in Wales.

Skill Wales members and supportive institutions in Wales have named the following factors as key to success in transition:

Commitment to sharing information. Effective transitions require that schools and LEAs are willing and able to consistently pass on relevant information about the support requirements of young people with special educational needs to the FE sector. The post-16 provider should be invited to transition planning meetings as a matter of course and receive a copy of the transition plan.

Careers Wales. Skill members felt that a consistent, long-term, effective relationship with Careers Wales is an important factor when transition is successful, and therefore successful transitions from school to further education.

Relationships with schools. Successful communication between schools and post-16 providers regarding young people with statements takes place where the SENCO has been in place long-term and is known. Clarity of understanding regarding what information can and should be provided by the SENCO is also necessary.

Evidence from our members and supporters suggests that the transitions experience varies widely across Wales. In most cases, the difficulties arise due to lack of information provided to the further education institution on individual students' needs. Some institutions, particularly smaller or rural ones with fewer feeder schools, are able to build up strong and close relationships with SENCOs, Careers Wales and Local Authorities, and information sharing is consequently smooth and consistent. Others, for example those dealing with a large number of students from several Local Authority areas and many different schools, find that the information they receive on students' needs varies widely and communication differs in efficiency.

The following areas were of concern to the further education institutions in Wales which Skill contacted:

Inconsistency and poverty of information sharing. Some Skill members and supporters report a "hit and miss" approach to receiving information on new students. The Data Protection Act is often cited as a reason for withholding such information, and some members feel no consensus has been reached regarding what information can legally be passed from schools and Local Authorities to further education institutions regarding young people's support needs. Skill members from across Wales reported wide variations in the efficiency of information provision; some post-16 providers report

receiving information on the needs of students with a statement in nearly 100% of cases, some in fewer than 50% of cases.

Young people from outside the usual catchment area. Where young people arrive from England or other parts of Wales, the post-16 education provider will not have information on their SEN status from their school, Local Authority, Careers Wales or Connexions advisor.

Young people with interrupted schooling. Young people may miss out on transitions planning meetings, or on receiving a statement at all, due to interrupted schooling. This applies to disabled young people whose condition means they are hospitalised or unable to attend consistently, as well as travellers, home-educated young people, looked-after children or young people who are carers. When these young people enter further education there may be incomplete records available from their school, or, in the case of home-educated young people, no records at all.

Young people without statements. Skill members expressed concern that those young people who may have identified special needs but no statement are missing out on effective transitions planning. There is no statutory requirement for a transition plan for such young people, and information is not passed on to the new education provider, potentially leaving the young person without sufficient support.

As a pan-disability organisation, Skill Wales is particularly concerned about this last issue. Without a statement, young people may struggle through school and transfer to further education without the new education provider knowing of their needs. In some cases, the student is embarrassed about disclosing their impairment or is worried they will not be accepted on to a course if they do so. In many cases specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia are not detected until the student reaches Higher Education (HE) and begins to struggle writing essays or, particularly, dissertations. Anecdotal evidence from Higher Education institutions in Wales suggests that failure to diagnose dyslexia until HE is worryingly common. There is no way of knowing how many young people with an undiagnosed additional learning need never make it to HE.

Conclusion

Skill Wales is concerned that transition for young people with special educational needs is inconsistent; at times failing the very young people it is supposed to assist by being approached as a legal "requirement" rather than a process to benefit the person. This legalistic view can mean that the Data Protection Act is invoked to prevent information being passed on, and the individual is left without appropriate support.

The statementing system also has an inadvertent negative impact on young disabled people who are not given a statement, as their information, advice and guidance needs can be neglected.

The poor coordination of transition planning has been reported widely by Government, the public and private sector and young disabled people and their parents (Department of Health, Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Contact a Family to name but a few). There is an acceptance amongst policy makers and agencies involved in transition that more collaborative

working is needed to improve young disabled people's experiences of transition from school to adulthood.

Recommendations

Skill Wales would welcome a commitment to person-centred planning for transition for all disabled young people, both at 14+ and 18/19+, followed up with reviews and progress meetings. Sector-wide Disability Equality Training and follow-up sessions would enable education institutions to provide truly open options to their students, free of assumption or ignorance.

Clarity and consensus must be established around the sharing of information between Local Authorities, schools, SENCOs and FE institutions to smooth the process of transition to FE, including information on students with identified needs who do not have statements.

To strengthen the provision of advice and guidance available to young people during the transitions process. In addition, advice and guidance needs to be accessible to those professionals in an advisory role. Adequate provision of tailored advice and guidance will help to broaden options and prevent the restrictions and limited life choices that face so many young people.