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Inclusivity in Further Education in England

**An Integrated Post-16 Curriculum in Residential Specialist Education as a
Pathway to Full Inclusion in Employment, Education or Training**

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ABSTRACT:

The Royal National College for the Blind (RNC), founded in 1872, has maintained a position as a leading and innovative college offering Residential Specialist Education to adults (post-16) leading to independence and employment. The mission statement of the college is to “enable people who are blind or partially sighted to achieve their full potential”.

The RNC curriculum reflects a conviction that, to participate fully in society, some people with a visual impairment need to develop a range of skills to ensure that they can live and learn as independently as possible. Experience and progression of RNC learners demonstrates these can be most effectively developed in a learning environment where peer support and high expectations maximise achievements. Learners are also able to achieve vocational and academic qualifications in preparation for employment, self-employment, training or university.

The RNC integrated curriculum has three main strands:

- Academic/vocational - the same qualifications as mainstream colleges but provided in a learning environment where needs are negotiated and *specialist* teachers have extensive experience in supporting learners with a visual impairment.
- Individualised skills training: mobility training; independent living skills; enabling skills and skills for employment.
- Residential curriculum - leisure and social skills, individual access to counselling and support.

In a national climate where, for historical reasons, “specialist education” had become synonymous with “segregation”, the need to have a continuum of provision to meet the needs of individuals has now been recognised. The government is investing in residential colleges, such as RNC, which can demonstrate high quality and value for money; acknowledging the success that learners offered this experience are demonstrating by becoming fully included in an earning and learning society.

1. CONTEXT

RNC is one of a group of residential specialist colleges each of which has a particular target group. These colleges share the common aim of facilitating the inclusion of people with disabilities by supporting the development of a portfolio of skills and knowledge that will maximise independence. They are independent colleges but provide programmes for students funded by the appropriate agencies of the four *countries* (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and are subject to inspection by these agencies. In addition there are some overseas students who are privately funded from a variety of sources.

These colleges are managed by a variety of charities some of which operate in a wider field (schools and other community activities) such as RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind) and RLSB (Royal London Society for the Blind). RNC is a charity whose sole activity is to run the college. Most of these colleges have a lengthy history, but the profile of the learners in specialist education in UK has changed considerably since the publication of the Warnock report (1979) which was the cornerstone of the 1981 Education Act. Under an earlier Act, local authorities were expected to provide for “handicapped pupils” in special schools and were merely *allowed* to do so in ordinary schools if circumstances permitted. The 1981 Act exactly reversed this situation: the ordinary school was declared to be the normal place of education for all pupils, and special schools were only to be used when necessity dictated. The Tomlinson Report, (implemented in the 1992 Education Act), sought to promote inclusive learning in Further Education (Tertiary) education. This report did, however, recognise that specialist colleges have an important role to play and can promote inclusion for some learners with more complex needs.

2. THE STUDENT POPULATION

Typically students at RNC are drawn from the following populations:

- students who have been in specialist schools and need a further period of supported study before the final transition to independent adulthood
- students who have been successfully supported in mainstream schools with specialist units to support learners who have a visual impairment but whose needs cannot be successfully met in this setting post-16
- students who have been supported in mainstream, but for whom this placement has been unsuccessful - perhaps because of bullying, lack of autonomy or inappropriate support. They present as under-achievers both academically and in independence
- students who have recently experienced either the onset of, or deterioration of, a visual impairment (such as brain tumour, accident, or a degenerative conditions)
- students whose visual impairment has not been previously identified as a significant factor in their learning needs, perhaps because of another learning disability or difficulty.
- students with a disability or difficulty in addition to a visual impairment

3. FUNDING METHODOLOGY

Up until the 1992 Act, learners in specialist post-16 education colleges were funded by their Local Education Authority (LEA). These authorities were not consistent in their approach and this, together with a zeal to promote *integration*, did not always promote *inclusion*. The 1992 Education Act resulted in the formation of a single “Further Education Funding Council” (for England) with a Welsh counterpart (FEFC Wales). This meant that a single government body was funding all learners and ensured a consistent approach to the needs of

learners with disabilities. The FEFC was disbanded in 2000 and became the Learning and Skills Council for England. The parallel organisation in Wales is Education and Learning Wales. Students from Scotland and Northern Ireland continue to be funded by the LEAs.

4. THE 16 PLUS TRANSITION

Every child with a learning disability or difficulty has a “Statement of Special Needs” which operates throughout his or her *school* education. This is subject to an annual review and sets out the full range of support, agreed by an independent team of professionals, as appropriate to facilitate full access to the curriculum. This is likely to include classroom support (teacher’s aides), equipment and provision of learning resources. The emphasis is on a team approach which includes the parents and the Social Services. At the first Annual Review after the child’s fourteenth birthday a Transition Plan is agreed that considers the provisions appropriate for post-16 education, and a programme of visits and assessments is commenced. The key person in this plan is the ConneXions Personal Adviser (SNPA). (The ConneXions service is the Careers Service.) This system works well for children with a continuum of disability but does not always work well when the onset of the disability occurs in adolescence. Some of these learners slip through the net, sometimes because school and family are anxious to avoid compounding the emotional issues by minimising the impact of the disability.

As part of the transition plan the child (with his or her parents) will have the opportunity to visit both local mainstream colleges and specialist colleges to consider the range of available courses and support. If the decision is made that specialist residential provision is the most appropriate option, then arrangements are made for an assessment. This assessment theoretically takes place about nine months before proposed enrolment. This is realistic and practical in some cases - but often the decision to consider specialist education is only made by parents half way through the academic year, perhaps when mainstream options become clearer.

At RNC this is a two day process -the students are interviewed individually by appropriately qualified and experienced staff covering:

- independent living skills (including mobility and orientation)
- working medium
- visual impairment
- personal issues
- academic/vocational aspirations.

As a result of this assessment, a report is written which provides the basis for the funding request. The assessment report also incorporates other information provided by schools, social services and family. In order to agree the funding this report is sent to the SNPA who is supporting the application. The Learning and Skills Councils agree funding on the basis of a funding matrix with 48 cells. The disability of the learner is identified 1-6 where 1 is a single disability such as a straightforward visual impairment and 6 is a complex, severe and life-threatening condition. The support required is then agreed on an A-H scale for each of the following categories:

- Tuition
- Independence Training
- Personal Care Support
- Therapy and Counselling

- Equipment

For example, under Tuition: A is “access to curriculum support”; D is “specialist teaching support for three hours per week, curriculum staff: learner 1:4” and H is “learner requires constant support for learning”.

Independence Training: A is “encouragement in independence”; D is “learner requires a structured programme to facilitate independence training”; H is “may require one or more member of staff for independence training”.

The final matrix cell selection is determined by “averaging” the letters from the matrix and this forms the basis for the funding for that student at *any* specialist college. A student assessed at A to C would be unlikely to be appropriately placed at a specialist college. Most RNC students are E to G.

5. INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PROGRAMME

The assessment report proposes the initial framework for the ILP (Individual Learning Programme). This covers all areas of the curriculum including:

- enabling skills support
- independent living skills
- mobility and orientation training
- personal development
- leisure programme
- adult life skills
- preparation for transition to other education or employment - this includes the same nationally accredited academic or vocational qualifications that are undertaken in all UK colleges.

The ILP is dynamic and new short and long term targets are set regularly by the “Primary Learning Team”, which consists of the student, the Personal Tutor and the Residential Key Worker. A simple recording system on the college network is used and each learner has access to his or her own ILP.

The ILP outlines long-term learning goals and short-term learning targets. It uses a clearly documented process that links together the pre-entry assessment, the on-programme progress reviews and the end of programme evaluation. It also provides evidence to the funders that there is compliance with their requirements for inspections and audits. It is fundamental to the operation of the ILP that the student has ownership so all documentation is accessible to the student. All staff working with the student can suggest targets but they are discussed within the Primary Learning Team before they are incorporated into the ILP.

6. CASE STUDIES (NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED)

6.1 Tim

Tim presented at assessment as a very successful product of a mainstream education who had received appropriate support during the primary and secondary phases of his education. He was predicted to achieve the highest grades available at GCSE (16 plus examinations). His visual impairment seemed to have had very little impact on his learning - he was able to

access print with appropriate aids and use a PC (with adaptive software) confidently and competently. His reading speed was adequate for study purposes. He had no additional disabilities or difficulties.

Whilst the school was pressuring Tim and his parents to remain in the Sixth Form (16-18) in order to take his A levels (HSC) his SNPA recognised that, at this point, Tim needed to improve his socialisation skills and develop the independence skills appropriate to his age and intellectual potential. Tim was able to identify and articulate some of these problems during the assessment. He explained that he was at a school with a specialist support unit for learners who have a visual impairment but this involved being taxed out of his local community. He had no friends in his home village because he was at school outside it and none from school because of his lack of ability to travel independently. As well, probably unrecognised by Tim, although he was not obviously visually impaired, he was very tall for his age and had a stooping posture. He was vulnerable to bullying by his peers. Tim appeared to be articulate, intelligent and confident but had many mannerisms and attitudes that were unusual in a sixteen year old. Although very confident with adults, he was less sure of himself with his peers. Tim said he wanted to take his A levels in an environment where he would not need to “train the teachers”, whilst developing his independence skills. He felt that this would give him the best possible chance to progress to a “good” university and achieve his career aim - to become a journalist.

There were considerable difficulties in securing funding for Tim to attend a specialist, residential college in spite of the wishes of his parents and the support of his SNPA. However, funding was eventually agreed as 1D and he an A level programme in September 2000. As well as the academic content of his programme, Tim had tuition in independence training and IT. By the end of his first year, Tim was a confident and extensive traveller - having learned how to use the train system, he used it to travel far afield in search of interesting historical sites. He learned how to cook and how to do his laundry. At the end of the first year, he obtained very high grades in all his subjects. He had also become a “guru” for his peers - they often turned to him as a quick fix for knowledge about world affairs rather than look things up for themselves. He had certainly earned the respect of his peers and was visibly more comfortable with them. His father attended Tim’s review and was able to talk very movingly about the developments that he had observed and Tim’s greater confidence and independence. He also said that, had Tim remained at home, he would not have had the same encouragement or opportunities to develop many of the independence skills.

Tim continued to do well during his second year, visiting universities across the UK independently in order to make the right choice about the next stage of his education. He also extended his independence skills by making personal choices - he travelled First Class on trains and refused to eat in the “fast food” outlets, preferring good restaurants.

At the end of his second year Tim obtained A grades in all his A levels and secured a place at a well-known university. He left RNC confident that he would be able to cope with all aspects of university life - both studying and living and looking forward to the opportunity of meeting new people. Had he remained in his school, he would certainly have achieved the same level of academic excellence. I am sure, however, that he would not have had the same opportunities to live and travel independently in a setting where he could share his problems with others and learn from them.

6.2 John

At assessment, John presented as a low achiever with very limited potential to progress. He was not clear about his future aspirations other than to “work in an office”. John had undertaken his education at a specialist (non-residential) school for children with a visual impairment where he did not have the opportunity to benchmark his achievements against those of his sighted peers. He had a brain tumour which, as well as affecting his vision, also restricted his growth. This small stature together with his “cute” appearance resulted in him sometimes being mistaken for a girl leading to bullying and low self-esteem. It was clear that John had considerable difficulties with the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and IT. Without addressing the deficit in these skills, John would be likely to fail on a course leading to office work so his ILP emphasised the development of these skills in very small groups. There were no difficulties in securing funding for John as both his learning needs and his potential vulnerability were clearly recognised by his SNPA. He was allocated to 2F, as he had medical problems needed intensive support in some learning areas.

During his first year John made excellent progress in the areas of literacy, numeracy and IT. An integrated approach to IT and literacy ensured that he was motivated in both areas. John was a keen and energetic learner. His ILP included Dance. This module is often included in an ILP because it improves spatial awareness, confidence, posture and self-esteem as well as offering an outlet for creativity without exposing weaknesses in basic skills. John had a natural sense of rhythm and musicality and quickly became a key member of the dance sessions. The opportunity to perform in college performances and later in the local community theatre in front of the general public enhanced his self-confidence and self-esteem. Later in the year, drama was added to his ILP. This provided a further motivation to develop his literacy and IT skills. The flexibility of the curriculum at RNC enabled John to end his first year with a number of units towards a first level Performing Arts diploma although he had initially been aiming at a Business Studies course.

During the break between his first and second year, the growth hormone treatment began to work and John. His general appearance also matured and became more “manly”. His literacy skills remained insufficient to access the theoretical units of a second level diploma but John was successful in all the practical components of the course.

John has now commenced his third and final year at RNC. He has already taken part in holiday workshops run by professional Dance companies in his home area. He will not achieve a full second level diploma but he will do sufficiently well in the practical units to progress to a third level course alongside his sighted peers. He has confidence in himself and integrates well with his peers.

7. CONCLUSION

Whilst during the early 1990s, the numbers of young people in specialist residential education was declining, the number of such students at RNC has been increasing for the last four years. This is due to a number of factors

- successful outcomes
- a more positive image being projected in the media
- the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act

together with government agencies recognising the wisdom of investing in facilitating the independence of people with a visual impairment.

8. REFERENCES

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