

REVIEW OF SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES – STUDENT EXPERIENCE

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:

Student experience

- All studies report high levels of satisfaction among students with their experience of FE.
- FE colleges compare favourably with other sectors.
- Group discussions, as opposed to survey data, revealed that one major difference between FE and HE is that FE students report a high level of disruptive behaviour in class (seen as due to wider access policies). Though this finding cannot be generalised, it does raise an important issue for further enquiry.
- Students lack involvement in the design and delivery of learning.

Student representation

- Practice is patchy across colleges in the area of student representation; best practice in this area could be shared more widely.
- Student representation on Boards of Management is particularly problematic (SFEFC to fund research in this area).
- Representation of hard-to-reach groups needs improvement.

Inclusion

- Equalities issues do not appear to have a bearing on levels of satisfaction, however possibly the small numbers of disabled and ethnic minority students in survey samples makes it difficult to gather information on these groups.
- The 'Count me in FE' study of students in England and Wales with disabilities and/or learning difficulties confirms that this group are generally satisfied with their learning experience. However, some of these students feel under-stretched academically
- A significant number of FE students in England and Wales with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are excluded from social and representational activities.
- The positive impact of the BRITE Initiative.

Research considerations

- Overall, there is an abundance of data, particularly from surveys, on the student experience of FE in Scotland, therefore we would advise against another general survey. Further, more focussed, research could cover issues which are:
 - 1) lacking prior/more in-depth investigation, e.g. on equality groups, the range of student services and facilities.
 - 2) highlighted as particularly problematic in previous research, e.g. student representation on Boards of Management (though this is being investigated by SFEFC and in the 'governance and accountability' strand of the college review).
- The research shows the importance of maintaining a balance between survey and qualitative methods of gathering student perceptions, e.g. the findings from the group discussions on the issue of uncommitted learners (reported above)
- Care should be taken to avoid repetition of previous studies
- Future research could systematically gather best practice in areas, such as student representation, to be disseminated more widely.
- The new SFEU/SFC Equalities Unit will be launched in April 2006 and this may have the potential to undertake research.
- The Executive are still considering the responses to the Finding Practical Solutions to Complex Needs consultation.

Introduction:

This short literature review examines findings from recent studies of FE in Scotland and the wider UK (see **Annex** for details). The focus is on three areas of the research findings:

- Student experience of FE
- College representation
- Inclusion in FE

The review highlights key findings, particularly areas for further improvement and suggests issues which may need of more detailed investigation.

A. STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEYS

1) Survey of student experience in Scotland 2005 (previous 2001, 2003). TNS/SFC for Further and Higher Education. The study compares the FE and HE sectors.

a) Levels of satisfaction

- The main findings were that **92% of college students were satisfied with the overall quality of their learning experience and 91% were satisfied with the college as a whole**. The corresponding figures for HE institutions were 88% and 90%.
- As in 2001 and 2003, the number of contact hours that students have with staff is identified as being the most important for quality of learning.
- In the group discussions, a small number of students reported some dissatisfaction with the quality of their learning experience.
- There are no significant findings with regard to levels of satisfaction and gender, ethnicity, subject group, disability, or year of study (although first year students tended to be more satisfied than other years, while over 35 yrs students were more likely to say they were 'very satisfied').
- Over 80% of college students were satisfied with the:
 - number of hours contact they had with teaching staff;
 - size of the group in which you are taught;
 - adequacy of access to computer facilities;
 - relevance of the course to the job they hope to do;
 - balance between the amount of formal attendance and private study time; and
 - adequacy of general help, learning support and guidance they received with their studies from teaching staff.
- Levels of satisfaction on other matters were:
 - needed books being available in libraries (71%);
 - adequacy of advice and support with financial and other personal issues (70%);
 - receiving appropriate advice about careers and job vacancies (66%); and
 - the quality of equipment in labs or workshops (63%).

Qualitative findings show:

- A minority made up of part/time students and those with parental responsibilities who have restricted time are negative about the availability of computers.
- One major difference between FE and HE is that FE students complain of disruptive students; this was seen as a direct result of wider access policies. It should be noted that this issue was not revealed by survey measures.

Trends (2003-05)

- The number of areas where students were very satisfied increased significantly over time.
- Levels of satisfaction in FE is higher than HE.

b) Policies and procedures

Complaints

- Just over half of students (57%) in FE had an awareness of the complaints procedure; although the figure for HE was only 44%.
- Older students were more aware of how to make complaints.
- Arts students in FE were significantly less likely to know than business or IT.
- More FE than HE students knew about having a complaints procedure.

Feedback

- Most felt student surveys were useful, but some felt there was an over-use of feedback forms on occasion (e.g. subject, lecture, course etc).

Equal opportunities

- Three quarters were aware of this policy, though 21% were not (FE slightly higher than HE).

2) Longitudinal Survey of Students: Sweep One 2004 – Scottish Funding Council (SFC)

The findings from this survey show that:

- Overall, learners rate their learning experience positively, with relatively few poor ratings. This corroborates the findings of the *Survey of Student Experience 2003 and 2005*. However it should be noted that perhaps due to the different methodologies and profile of students, the overall ratings are lower in this study.
- The majority (69%) of learners were inclined to believe that the course they have recently completed will be relevant to the job they hope to do with just 5% saying it was poor in this regard. This is a particularly positive finding since the ‘relevance of the course to the job they hope to do’ was one of the aspects of the learning experience most likely to be cited as ‘important’ by respondents to the *Survey of Student Experience 2003*. The most positive appraisals come from those whose courses led to Postgraduate Certificates or Diplomas (80 per cent), those studying to SVQ Level 3 or equivalent (81 per cent) and from those studying in colleges (71 per cent) as opposed to HEIs (65 per cent).
- As with the *Survey of Student Experience 2005* the majority (60%) of learners rate as ‘good’ the number of hours they have in contact with teaching staff although views are less positive among those who studied Humanities and Arts (14% of each being dissatisfied in this respect), and there is considerable variation in opinion across different levels of course, with those at HEIs twice as likely to be dissatisfied (16%) than those in FE colleges (7%).
- There is mixed opinion about the facilities available to learners within intuitions, but to some extent this will reflect the relevance of each to their courses. 66 % of learners rate access to computer facilities as good, with 8% saying this is poor, with little variation across groups of learners, and no difference between further and higher education institutions.
- Criticism of the books available in libraries is more widespread. This is considered to be poor by around 17 % of learners although almost half (48%) regard this as good, therefore this issue may need further consideration.

- For many learners, there would be no need to use laboratories or workshops during their courses. However, overall, 41% rate the quality of equipment in laboratories and workshops as good with only 7% rating it as poor.¹
- Most (63%) learners consider the general help, support and guidance they get from teaching staff to be good, with 11% thinking it poor. Those in HEIs are more critical in this respect (15%) than are those in FE colleges (8%), and this is the issue that most strongly defines those who are, overall, dissatisfied with their courses.
- Many learners have no view on the availability of advice or support with financial or personal issues. However, those considering this to be good outnumber those rating it poor by 2:1. Learners in HEIs are generally more critical in this respect (19% consider it poor, compared with 12% of those in FE).
- The more vocationally-oriented a course is, the more likely the learner is to consider the relevance of the course to the job they hope to do to be good. Learners in colleges (71%) are significantly more likely than those in HEIs to consider relevance to be good (65%). Those studying for SVQ Level 3, HN level, and Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma all rate relevance as good, more so than those studying for Ordinary and Honours Degrees.
- Learners studying for qualifications in Business, Sport Leisure and Care and Science Maths and Engineering are also much more likely than those studying Humanities or Arts subjects, to consider relevance to be good.

3) The Student Experience of Further Education (2005). Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), DFES think piece to feed into Foster Review.

Though this study reports evidence for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, it has relevance to Scotland in highlighting best practice and issues of more general concern.

Evidence

- The LSDA study is of the view that there is a good deal of robust evidence concerning the perceptions of FE students due to:
 - a universal commitment to surveying student opinion regularly and systematically (since mid-1980s);
 - the funding methodology for FE involved significant incentives and penalties to encourage this;
 - student satisfaction levels with their experience of college are closely related to the extent to which formal qualification or other learning goals are achieved; and
 - inspection grades are based on levels of retention and achievement.

Levels of satisfaction

- Levels of satisfaction in FE compare favourably with other sectors.
- There is a high level of satisfaction with the quality of teaching and levels of support received.
- Student experience and levels of satisfaction were high and consistent over 3 years (NOP National Learner Satisfaction Survey 2003/2004).

¹ Studies of student services generally ask questions about the provision of library books or computers. There is often little reference to other facilities, such as sport or childcare. One study, 'Lone parents in Further Education Colleges' (2005) highlights the importance of childcare services, for example, to this group.

- Survey findings show that perceptions of teaching and learning have the biggest influence on overall satisfaction levels.
- Among the minority of less positive learners, issues raised include:
 - a majority remarked on ‘wasted’ time during lessons;
 - lack of advice prior to entry;
 - doubts about choice of course; and
 - students were least satisfied when they felt they were not being listened to/ or complaints not addressed.
- There are no significant findings with regard to levels of satisfaction and gender. Survey data shows no substantial difference in levels of satisfactions according to ethnicity, though ‘white’ respondents seemed more ‘extremely satisfied’. However, it should be noted that the survey stated that it was difficult to gain perceptions due to small numbers involved in the surveys. The data also indicated that Bangladeshi and Pakistani students are under-represented in FE.²
- 45% of learners who experience mixed age groups prefer this to age segregation (only 10% take opposite view).
- The data reports more students with disabilities ‘extremely satisfied’, however it should be noted that the survey highlights that making precise judgements is problematic due to difficulties with the correct identification and measurement. (The data on disability reported by LSDA come from the ‘Count me in FE’ study reviewed below)

Where action is most needed

- Unjustified funding differentials (not discussed in detail here).
- Buildings and equipment – greater funding needed.
- Arrangements for students’ learning and support should be based on need. (disadvantaged, lower levels of prior attainment).
- Curriculum and staff development aimed at improving student experiences and outcomes should have a higher priority (current limited supply of those with sufficient knowledge and expertise to provide it).
- Students should be involved in the design and delivery of their learning.

² Interestingly, the LSDA in this UK-wide study which reports evidence for England, Wales and Northern Ireland shows that Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities are under-represented in FE. However, evidence from Scotland’s colleges suggests that students from ethnic minority backgrounds attend college in numbers far above their level in the population. In 2004/05 they represented 4% of college students, as opposed to 2.1% of the Scottish population (FE in Scotland Baseline Report 2006, *unpublished draft*). The Learning for All report also states that ethnic minorities participate in further and higher education at a higher level than the average.

B. STUDENT REPRESENTATION

1) Student Representation in Scottish Further Education Colleges (2006) – Scottish Funding Council/HMIE

Boards of management (boards)

- Few students had any experience that prepared them for their role on boards; membership sometimes intimidating for younger/less-experienced students – effective induction, training and support needed.
- Poor continuity in student representation from year to year; discussion of financial and estate matters especially problematic.
- Students showed a low level of awareness of their college's board, its role and its membership, often because of a perception that board membership was unimportant or communication lacking from the board itself
- Support for students' association by senior management an important vehicle for communication.

Committees

- There was a wide range of approaches among colleges to student membership of committees.
- Overall, learners were not widely involved in cross-college committees.
- Most significant contribution to college committees was through representation on programme (course) committees; effective membership dependent on commitment, experience and skills of student members, but hampered by high turnover of student representatives.
- Except for academic boards, few student were members on other college committees.

Course representation

- Participation was generally valued, but missing input from hard-to-reach groups (e.g. p/t students, online learners and outreach students, as well as apprentice engineering and craft students). Systematic arrangements to include these students were lacking.
- Few colleges had a written remit for student course representation.

Barriers to participation

- Lack of student interest and irregular participation.
- Students' inhibitions, particularly where only one student rep.
- Relative infrequency of programme team meetings and delays in staff feedback on outcomes.
- Focus of students input on practical matters, particularly lack of discussion of learning and teaching issues.

College promotional activities to boost course representation

- A number of colleges carried out activities such as promotion during induction, college diaries, student handbooks and websites, as well as work with student associations.
- Some colleges allowed several students to attend meetings of the programme committee.
- One college offered a certificate recognising participation.

Raising awareness and training

- NUS and SPARQS jointly providing residential training for student board members.
- Uptake of SPARQS training for student reps erratic.

- Many students had no knowledge of SPARQS.

Other channels of representation

- Informal communication with staff was considered the most effective way of communicating concerns, but there was acceptance that not suitable for communication on whole-college matters.
- Informal channels particularly important for p/t and outreach students.
- Regularly timetabled guidance periods considered effective in identifying concerns.
- Informal contact was highly valued, but issues raised not usually collated at central level.

Support for student representation

- There were varying degrees of support, including funding for f/t sabbatical post for the president in a small number of colleges.
- Strong links between course reps and student association supported better centralised support for course representation, a more coherent approach to college-wide issues and stronger links with staff.
- Support most effective where nominated staff member acting as link between students' association and college.
- Poor communication between staff and students and among students reduced effectiveness of student reps in many colleges.

Student contribution to HMIE college reviews

- Arrangements were revised to include meeting between the managing inspector and the students association to inform students about process prior to the review (student briefing leaflet also revised).
- During first phase of the review, subject reviewers meet a group of course representatives and a group of non-rep students.
- Subject reviewers also meet class groups after observing lessons.
- Meeting with different groups of learners held to discuss issues such as guidance and support, resources, quality improvement and the work of the board.

Data Gathering

- Questionnaires most commonly used – good for providing statistics on client satisfaction, trend information, and identifying strengths and weaknesses, well as capturing the views of students unable to participate in other arrangements for representation.
- Different methodologies used to distribute and analyse questionnaires (online, during class time, sampling students). There was also variation in times of administering questionnaires.
- Topics usually covered by questionnaires, including facilities and resources, guidance, aspects of learning and teaching, equal opportunities and assessment.
- Results typically collected centrally, analysed and distributed to departments and programme committees for consideration; comments on specific aspects of provision given to responsible individuals. Overall, results were often published in annual reviews.
- Staff used questionnaires for programme and unit evaluation, but in many colleges there was a lack of consistency from year to year and across departments; few staff used these to initiate discussion on learning and teaching with students.
- College support staff made wide use of questionnaires to evaluate aspects of provision, e.g. guidance, library services.

- Students had mixed views on questionnaires; while they valued being asked for their input, they sometimes found questionnaires were superficial ‘tick lists’, and not always completed with due consideration.
- Many colleges used discussion forums or focus groups to give more detailed feedback on specific issues, such as induction, childcare provision.

Student self-evaluation arrangements

- There was a wide range of means for indirect self-evaluation, such as questionnaires, focus groups, contributions to programme committees and staff-student liaison meetings.
- Learners were not often directly involved in self-evaluation at subject or section level due to a lack of a forum for this.
- A schedule for completing annual reports in late summer or early autumn in most colleges worked against any real involvement by learners. Therefore, the student influence on self-evaluation of subject areas almost always indirect and mediated by staff.

Evaluation of learning and teaching

- A lack of fully informed and evaluative discussion with students on learning and teaching was noted in a number of HMIE reviews, due to either students’ lack of experience, confidence to interact with tutors, as well as staff encouragement to participate.
- End-of-unit questionnaires by individual teaching staff were not used consistently across colleges

Decision-making

- Student representation on college boards or on academic boards did not mean they were widely involved in decision making, except for issues seen as the responsibility of the students’ association.
- Most students did not think student members of boards exerted much influence at this level.
- However, the student presence on boards focussed attention on the student experience.
- Students had more impact on the workings of the board committees.
- Some individual learners and class groups had been able to influence developments that affected them directly.

Four recommendations from HMIE in 2002:

- i) **SFEFC to review practice of gathering national data from standard student questionnaires**
 - All colleges now expected to develop appropriate feedback mechanisms as part of their internal self-evaluation process; this now forms part of the evidence base for HMIE college review.
 - SFEFC and SFC have now commissioned national student satisfaction surveys and a longitudinal study of 2004 leavers.
- ii) **Colleges should provide guidance to course committees on systematic review of student evaluation data and existing good practice to be disseminated more widely**
 - In 2004, colleges started to adapt guidance to programme committees to take account of the revised framework introduced by HMIE in May 2004, particularly for reporting student evaluation data.
 - However, there was not sufficient in-depth analysis of data from student evaluations at programme or unit level, often due to raw data not being available at this level.

- There was a lack of sharing good practice across the sector on ways of improving student representation.
- iii) SFEFC to consider commissioning further research into learner representation issues to facilitate greater student involvement in boards and college self-evaluation**
- SFC providing funding for SPARQS to help colleges and students improve student engagement in quality processes, particularly training of representatives.
- iv) HMIE and SFEFC to review reporting of learner representation issues in published review reports**
- HMIE introduced a revised review model in January 2005 which included improvements to the method and extent of engagement with learners, to encourage more systematic and structured discussion with learners.
 - The revised review model also provides scope for reviewers to report on learner representation issues.

2) Further Education in Scotland Mapping Exercise Report (2006) – SPARQS

- This exercise is largely repetitive of the findings of the study reviewed above. It should be noted that only 22 out of a possible 46 student associations responded to the survey.
- The study does, however, offer some further data on:
 - committee membership, sabbatical and non-sabbatical officers;
 - information on the operation of Course Team Boards (or their equivalents) and the adoption of the HMIE framework in guiding their work;
 - channels of communication between students' associations and course representatives and issues shared at meetings between them, particularly the lack of discussion of teaching and learning, as opposed to more general elements of college experience;
 - student involvement in best practice events;
 - preparation of students for HMIE reviews;
 - training and support for course representatives; and
 - the development of students associations.

3) Higher Education in Scotland Mapping Exercise Report (2006) – SPARQS.

- The mapping exercise carried out by SPARQS into the Higher Education sector reports that generally the systems of student representation found in HE appear to provide useful feedback from students, and students representatives are encouraged to participate in decision-making at all levels.
- Two thirds of student representatives can be described as either providing engaged and informed contributions or reps who had to be encouraged by a variety of devices to give the student perspective.
- One third did not attend committee meetings, and where the rep was nominated by the students' association, no name was given to the institution.

The **strengths** of student representation in HE are reported as:

- Student engagement is encouraged by fostered informal contacts between staff and student representatives.
- A greater understanding of the national framework has enhanced engagement in decision-making by student reps.

- Both institutions and student associations use a wide variety approaches to encouraging students to comment on their teaching and learning, particularly in newer institutions
- At the departmental or programme level, the course representative system appears to meet the needs of staff and students in relation to quality issues affecting f/t students
- The issue of how to incentivise and recognise student reps is receiving a great deal of attention, though there were significant differences of opinion among students and staff on what acted as an incentive or barrier to involvement or what might be appropriate in terms of recognition.
- Many institutions and students' associations have focussed over a number of years on training and support for course reps.

The **weaknesses** outlined in the report are:

- Faculty-level representation is particularly poor at near all institutions
- As reported in the two studies above on FE representation, HE systems for collecting feedback from more hard-to-reach students, e.g. p/t students, distance learners, postgraduates and international students is patchier across the HE sector.
- The most significant issue affecting for student associations was communication with course representatives.
- The 'resource' of course representatives could be harnessed by institutions and students' associations more effectively, to allow a greater focus on the wider student experience beyond learning and teaching in an individual department
- More attention could be paid to the induction of student reps into institutional policies and practices, particularly at faculty-level.
- There is a need for improvement in the provision of clear information for all students on student representation.

4) Next Steps

- In light of the findings of the two SPARQS Mapping Exercises, the SPARQS steering committee have identified the following six areas SPARQS which will undertake project and development work during 2005-07. Each of the projects will run for one academic year, in each academic year there will be a project which focuses on the FE sector, another on the HE sector and a third that is applicable to both sectors.

2005-6		
1	FE Project	Supporting engagement from students not undertaking full time studies
2	HE Project	Supporting effective engagement of students at the 'faculty' level of the institutions.
3	FE & HE Project	Focussing discussion at course level meeting on learning and teaching issues rather than on the generic experience.
2006-07		
4	FE Project	Effective representation in engineering and construction subjects.
5	HE Project	Effective engagement of postgraduates, particularly research postgraduates, in institutional systems.
6	FE & HE Project	Issues of communication between representatives creating a system of student representation.

C. INCLUSION

1) Scottish Equalities Unit

- A new Scottish equalities unit will be launched in April 2006, its aim will be to support colleges and universities enhance their work in equal opportunities . The role of the unit, including staffing, remit, and the name of the unit will be determined by the implementation group ahead of the unit's launch. The unit will be co-located with the SFEU at its offices in Stirling .
- The implementation group is chaired by the Scottish Funding Council and comprises of Laurence Howells, Director Learning Policy and Strategy at the Scottish Funding Council (Chair); Jenny Duncan, Women's Officer NUS Scotland; Mary Senior, Assistant Secretary STUC; John McCann, Depute Chief Executive Scottish Further Education Unit; Seona Reid, Director of Glasgow School of Art; and Matt Mochar, Principal Clydebank College.
- The new unit will be led by an Advisory Board which will determine the strategy for the unit and monitor progress on this. In October 2005, Rowena Arshad agreed to be Chair of the Advisory Board until April 2008. In addition to her roles at the University of Edinburgh and for the Equal Opportunities Commission, Rowena sits on the Board of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), the Advisory Board for the British Council in Scotland, and an SFC Council member. Dr Chris Robinson has recently been appointed as the first Director of the unit.
- The new unit will receive recurrent funding of around £500,000 for 2006-07.

2) Finding Practical Solutions to Complex Needs Consultation (2006) Scottish Executive

- On 22 June 2005 the Scottish Executive published a consultation paper - Finding Practical Solutions to Complex Needs inviting comments on options being considered for changing the arrangements for supported further education places and funding arrangements for students with complex needs. The consultation period closed on 31 October 2005.
- The consultation aimed to find out about the current practices of local authorities in relation to providing funding for students with complex additional support needs. In doing so the consultation :
 - investigated current policies and practices of local authorities in relation to provision of funding for students with complex additional support needs attending further education provision outwith Scotland;
 - sought the views of local authorities on their role in relation to funding students with complex additional support needs, who chose or need to study outwith Scotland;
 - gathered information about the needs of young people that could not be supported through current provision in Scotland;
 - gathered information from young people and their parents or carers about their experiences in relation to obtaining funding or study outside Scotland and the impact the availability of funding has on the young person's ability to access further education provision; and
 - measured the likely demand for places of specialist provision that does not currently exist in Scotland, over the next 10 years and estimate the cost of meeting that demand.

- The Executive is carefully considering the issues raised in the consultation process and will announce the next steps as soon as possible.

3) **Learning for All** The Report of the SFEC/SHEFC Widening Participation Review Group (2005)

The findings of the report stated that:

- Most disabilities do not affect potential to benefit from lifelong learning and therefore expect disabled people to be about as likely to participate in lifelong learning as the rest of the population.
- In colleges, for those students for which there is data in relation to disability, in 2003-04 about 6% of students aged under 30 reported that they have a disability. There is no definitive data on the proportion of people in Scotland with a disability, however, data from the Scottish census suggests that an estimate of the number of people aged under 30 with a disability would be between 6% and 9%.
- The proportion of people reporting disabilities and the proportion receiving Disabled Students Allowance in Scottish FE colleges and HEIs has substantially increased in recent years.
- The FE sector plays a particular role in supporting people with disabilities, many of whom face major difficulties accessing learning. This is supported by SFEFC's extended learning support weighting for students with additional support needs to cover additional expenditure incurred by colleges in order to meet student needs which arise from specific disability categories (about £28.8 million in 2004-05).
- SFEFC set up the BRITE Initiative (Beattie Resources for Inclusiveness in Technology and Education – £221,000 in 2004-05) to provide colleges with training and advice on the use of assistive technologies and the assessment of learners' support requirements. A recent HMIE review found that the initiative had contributed significantly to FE colleges' ability to meet the needs of learners and recommended that this work continue, since further improvements could still be made.

4) **Count me in FE – Learning and Skills Development Agency** (2003). This study includes colleges in England and Wales³)

Overall:

- Student experience is positive – most students are happy with learning programmes and support

Positives:

Pre-college experience

- Link courses, 'taster days' and open evenings very useful for course choice and discussing support. Other factors were proximity to the college, where other family members were students at same college.
- Advice given by previous schools, careers officers and social workers influential. Parents often played a key role in initiating contact, deciding college and course.
- Good collaborative links between many schools and colleges.

³ Statistics for Scottish students with a disability/learning difficulty can be found in 'Social Focus on Disability' (2004) Scottish Executive National Statistics. The Scottish Executive has also recently carried out a consultation exercise on funding for students with complex needs, 'Finding Practical Solutions to Complex Needs' 2006.

Learning support

- College's reputation, particularly for learning support (LS) important in choosing college.
- LS effective when planned in advance.
- Students were comfortable when LS made commonplace within the college.
- Students were clear that without support, they could not cope.

Social inclusion

- Information about social events was available in accessible formats.
- Staff present in areas where students experienced anxiety, such as refectories.

Representation

- Some colleges with student councils had representation from each tutor group and/or feedback arrangements were in accessible formats. One college set up a 'buddy' system to encourage participation in the student council meetings.
- Some students felt listened to, particularly by support staff, and that action had been taken to meet their demands, sometimes by approaching senior staff.

Work experience

- Students enjoyed experience of working and meeting new people, despite some students believing they would not gain employment due to physical impairment, parental opposition or concern over losing benefits.

Disability awareness

- Study support by tutors worked effectively where training had been given in advance
- In some colleges, proactive union officials checked accessibility for trips and events, and arranged additional support to encourage social inclusion.

Post-college experience

- Students on mainstream programmes were usually clear about plans. To some degree, students on vocationally-focused discrete programmes were similarly clear about their progression.
- Some colleges offering one-to-one support for researching university provision and assisting with applications
- Staff were kept up-to-date through a regional 'Inclusive Learning Network'; meetings and events rotated round colleges.

Negatives:

Pre-college experience

- Prior planning for the transition to college was not always taking account of some students wariness of telling others about their needs.
- Some students were minimally involved in their decision to go to college, rather parents, social workers or college staff made the choice for them.

Learning support

- Some students expressed concerns about control exercised by LS assistants.
- The presence of LS assistants sometimes masked the need for tutors to change their practice.
- Students reported a lack of choice in being allocated an LS assistant; several students were interested in interviewing LS assistants and preferred assistants of similar ages and personalities.

Social inclusion

- Significant numbers of students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities experienced some form of social isolation; students on mainstream programmes have difficulty participating in activities outside the class room, while students with learning difficulties

on discreet programmes felt socially isolated through a fear of bullying or harassment within the wider student body.

- Transport arrangements can cause difficulties for some students; because of not fitting with course timetables, inability to join friends in spontaneously arranged activities.

Representation

- Very few students (disabled and non-disabled) were involved with the student union.
- Some students, particularly with learning difficulties, were not clear about procedures for giving feedback, other than through tutors.
- Few students were aware of outcomes of satisfaction surveys.

Learning experience

- Some students were not on courses of their choice.
- Some students with high support needs had to fight to apply for courses at a higher level than those advised by career staff.
- There was a significant difference in the content and purpose of tutorials on mainstream and discrete courses appeared to create unequal experience.
- Learning goals on discrete programmes lacked focus.

Work experience

- A few students were disappointed that a successful placement had not led to permanent employment.

Disability awareness

- Institutional-level training is not always seen as a priority; especially if not seen as immediately relevant, or if LP assistants being used to mask difficulties.

Post-college experience

- Some students on discrete programmes, with more severe learning difficulties, were unclear about the duration of their courses and potential progression routes, especially because their studies involved extending their general education.
- Careers advice was sometimes lacking, late or of poor quality; some students were unclear about procedures for getting careers advice.
- There is a nucleus of students attending a succession of courses which can sometimes increase dependence on college provision, as well as a fear of moving on.

ANNEX: Research studies included in this review

1) **Survey of student experience** (2005) (previous 2001, 2003). Scottish Funding Councils for Further and Higher Education

http://www.sfc.ac.uk/library/06854fc203db2fbd00000106ee833b1f/student_survey_report.pdf

2) **Longitudinal Survey of Students: Sweep One 2004, Scottish Funding Council.**

http://www.sfc.ac.uk/library/06854fc203db2fbd0000010456c8569f/sfc_on_track.pdf

3) **The Student Experience of Further Education** (2005). Learning and Skills Development Agency, DFES think piece to feed into Foster Review.

http://www.dfes.gov.uk/furthereducation/fereview/downloads/StudentExperienceThinkPiece_LSDA.doc

4) **FE in Scotland Baseline Report** (2006). Scottish Funding Council – *unpublished draft*

5) **Lone parents in Further Education Colleges (2005) Scottish Executive**

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/11/17154735/47387>

6) **Student Representation in Scottish Further Education Colleges** (2006) – HMIe

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