

A SURVEY OF TRANSITION-TO-ADULTHOOD EDUCATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN THE UK

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Introduction

Transition-to-adulthood education (TAE) in the UK is an under explored area of provision for young people with developmental disabilities, generally presented through a wide range of courses and modules. Transition to adulthood education seeks to have a positive effect on the lives of the young people, helping them to become more independent members of the community. This in turn has relevance for their families and carers. In its purpose, methodology and content, transition to adulthood has similarities to personal and social education (PSE).

At the further education stage many students with developmental disabilities may find themselves guided towards courses concerned with aspects of transition to adulthood. A survey of the student population with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in Further Education found that 5.7% of the student population, approximately 85,500 students, had

learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and that just under 50% of these students were following discrete courses (Meager, *et al.*, 1996). Johnstone (1995) has pointed out that most discrete courses are related to independence training and transition to adulthood.

The study programmes in this research are therefore mostly understood to be either 'discrete courses', implying non-modular programmes related to independence training and aspects of transition to adulthood, and possibly using self-developed or composite materials, as identified in a preliminary survey (Pavey 1997), or 'modules', implying elements of input with specific frameworks, time limits and assessment, processes that are likely to be linked to an external accreditation scheme. The provision of such programmes has become established, nevertheless underlying issues, such as those concerned with purpose, assessment, content, and quality, remain unresolved. It is rather an indictment that Hornby

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and Kidd (2001) found that only four out of a group of twenty-four former further education students with developmental disabilities rated their college years as the most useful part of their education.

References in the literature have indicated concerns about the quality of some transition to adulthood education. Summarising a number of inspection reports Huxley (1996) found that although in some areas there was strong commitment to providing suitable further education for students with developmental disabilities, in others the provision was poorer, lacking information about achievement or quality assurance, and with an over reliance upon teacher-led activities including simulation and pencil and paper tasks. There were fewer opportunities for students to take responsibility for their own learning, or to learn through real life experiences. Of quality assurance Huxley stated:

Provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is, and must be an integral part of the college's quality assurance system. However, inspectors found that often these arrangements have little impact on the quality of teaching and learning or on students' achievements (Huxley 1996; 11).

This concern about quality was echoed in the Tomlinson Report, which found that within further education for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, quality assurance was variable (Further Education Funding Council 1996). A key purpose of the research was therefore to enquire about how quality was addressed within transition to adulthood education.

An earlier enquiry (Pavey 1994) showed that transition to adulthood edu-

cation was well established within mainstream further education. At that time most provision had developed internally within the individual colleges. It covered a range of aspects, including personal and social education-related topics, and practical activities aimed at independence training. Further research was undertaken to increase understanding of the provision, to note whether it had changed, and to consider how its quality might be developed at a time when further education overall was aiming to develop and improve (Learning and Skills Council 2002, 2003).

Quantitative research was carried out in the form of surveys using postal questionnaires. The surveys included pilot studies, a preliminary survey and a main survey of 69 colleges within three further education regions in England. This paper reports the findings of the main survey. Two research questions were identified, focusing on how quality in transition to adulthood input could be judged and how it could be improved.

Method

A postal questionnaire was chosen because of its capacity to collect consistent data from a wide range of sources, minimising the effect of any one response. This method is limited by dependency upon its respondents, so that the interests of the researcher and respondents may reduce impartiality and affect objectivity. Also, the need to structure questions may affect their capacity to elicit information. However, Cohen and Manion (1989; 308) also point out that postal questionnaires are useful because errors are limited to the instrument and the sample, rather than interpretation or cod-

ing, and because data can be processed without relying on the more intensive data reduction necessary in the coding of responses to interviews. They suggest that the overall reliability of the questionnaire as a research method is fair.

The questionnaire design process: the questionnaire was designed following recommendations by Cohen and Manion (op.cit.;106-12) citing Hoinville and Jowell (1978). Apart from careful consideration of the content, these recommendations cover the nature, structuring and layout of the questions, and also suggest methods for maximising the response rate. Two pilot studies, involving six colleges each, were conducted in two regions separate from those chosen for the main survey. The pilot studies checked clarity in content and questionnaire format.

The questionnaire sought to determine the nature of PSE-related transition to adulthood education (APPENDIX 1). Some questions aimed to identify how it was delivered, and what was described within the term transition to adulthood education. Other questions arose from a review of the literature; these included questions about assessment and evaluation, quality assurance and content. There was also the intent to discover whether educational aspects concerned with the emotions, identified as important in the literature (Bloom *et al.*, 1964; Kinchloe and Steinberg, 1993; Pring 1984), were acknowledged in transition to adulthood education.

Participating colleges: the choice of colleges was limited to mainstream further education and tertiary colleges, as these catered for the majority of students with developmental disabilities, but also had a generic client group. The further education regions were taken from

Meager *et al.*, (1996), and the individual colleges were identified through the Education Year Book (Vermont *et.al.*, 1996). The regions were chosen because they were distant from each other and had no shared boundaries, and because they had not been used in the earlier studies.

The postal procedure: the special educational needs coordinators in 69 mainstream further education and tertiary colleges were circulated with postal questionnaires. Following this first round, further copies of the questionnaire were circulated to non-responding colleges. Respondents were assured that their replies would remain anonymous and confidential.

The questions: the two research questions, concerned with how quality in transition to adulthood could be judged and improved, were broken down into more specific questions and accompanied by others that provided context and an overview of the field. Together these questions provided information as to: (1) whether transition to adulthood input was offered as discrete courses or modules or via other courses, or was not offered at all; (2) whether the courses and modules were accredited, and if so, by whom; (3) what the courses and modules were called; (4) how frequently the lessons, lectures, or sessions were held; (5) their average duration; (6) how quality of transition to adulthood input was assessed; (7) how content was decided; (8) how successful completion of the course or module was gauged; and (9) the importance of particular areas of the transition to adulthood curriculum. Respondents were also asked about the changes they would like to see in current transition to adulthood practice (10), and similarities and differences between the three

regions were examined. Data derived from the answers to the questions were presented as descriptive statistics.

While speed and ease of completion may make for spontaneity and, hopefully, honest answers and may bring about a high return, they may also operate against allowing for more reflective thought and more complex answers. For this reason the final question, fourteen, is an open-ended question in which respondents are invited to say what they would like to change about the transition to adulthood education input in their own college. Cohen and Manion (1989) advise against using open-ended questions, however it seems to this researcher to be a useful way of asking respondents whether they have anything further they wish to add.

Results

From the three regions a total of 52 colleges responded, representing a return of 75%, all answering question 1. Five of the colleges answered that no such courses were offered. Thus the number of usable returns for subsequent questions was 47, representing just under 70% of the original 69 questionnaires. Since some of the respondents did not answer all of the questions, the return was smaller for some items.

Eleven out of 16 colleges replied from Region A, 19 out of 24 colleges replied from Region B; and 22 out of 29 colleges replied from Region C. A chi-square test indicated no significant difference in the proportion of returns for each region ($X^2 = 140$, DF -2). Triangulation through the use of three distinct regions, together with the level of returns and the lack of significant difference in their proportion,

was felt to support the reliability and validity of the research.

When data processing was carried out it was noted that the different size of the samples influenced their power to affect the findings. To compensate for this, responses were weighted so that each nomination carried the same power to affect the total. It then appeared that there was a considerable level of agreement between the unweighted and weighted regional choices. There was a change in the order of one or two items only, the top two or three choices not being affected. Variation was therefore, in most cases, a matter of degree rather than absolute difference of choice. The findings of the survey indicated that:

1. The majority of mainstream Further Education colleges (47 colleges or 90%) offered transition to adulthood education in some form. Almost two thirds of mainstream further education colleges (33 colleges) offered discrete, transition to adulthood education.
2. The majority of the discrete courses (27 out of 33 courses, or 82%), and most of the transition to adulthood input overall, (37 out of 47 colleges, or 79%) were accredited. The main accrediting bodies were the Open College Network and the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN). Both schemes were in use in all three regions. These accounted for over two thirds of the accreditation.
3. There was a very wide range of titles used for the courses, some of which reflected the names of accredited modules while others described a subject-related area or a route for progression. Most frequent nominations included Independent Living,

Personal Development, Self Advocacy, and Work Preparation.

4. Over half of the transition to adulthood input (in 26 colleges, or 55%) was delivered in sessions that took place more than once each week, and in 11 of the colleges (23%) the sessions were held once a week.
5. Most of this input occurred in sessions lasting one to two hours (in 34 colleges, or 73%).
6. Quality was assessed by the teachers or lecturers delivering the input, by regular review and evaluation, by student satisfaction feedback and, for some colleges, by comparison with the requirements of accreditation.
7. Content was decided by the assessment of student needs, by professional judgment, and by student satisfaction feedback.
8. Successful completion of the course, module or element was gauged by student self-appraisal, by professional judgment, and by the completion of assignments; and for some colleges, by meeting pre-decided criteria.
9. The most important curriculum elements in this area were independence preparation, personal identity, personal relationships, and communication.
10. The changes that special educational needs coordinators in further education would like to see include better resourcing and more inclusion of vocational and community elements.

There was a lack of support for some areas of content within transition to adulthood education. These included religious and philosophical awareness, occupational development, political awareness, controversial issues, moral code,

parenthood, economic awareness, and health issues. The education of the emotions ranked tenth out of twenty items, indicating some support but not high priority for this area.

Discussion

In order for courses to develop improved opportunities for students with developmental disabilities, the nature of available provision must first be understood. In the process of the research reported here, weaknesses were revealed. In addition to the limitations of postal questionnaires as a research method, there were limitations resulting from the way questions were framed by the researcher, and from the conceptualisation of the answers by the respondents. There were other limitations caused by assumptions underlying the terms used, such as those describing content areas, so that they may have been understood differently by respondents. However, in spite of its limitations, the information gathered during this survey reveals a useful picture of a part of further education that has gained legitimacy through the need to provide services for people with developmental disabilities and to fit them into the lifelong learning model.

Some colleges have taken a full inclusion route and do not offer transition to adulthood in any form. The survey showed that these colleges were in a minority. The majority of colleges offered transition to adulthood provision, the majority of the provision were separate (discrete), and the majority of that separate provision were accredited. Transition to adulthood courses and module sessions are generally short, lasting between one and two hours, and occur once or twice a

week, giving rise to questions as to how much real-life experience can be slotted into such short time frames.

In contrast to the earlier provision, courses are now module based, external suppliers now providing course content, methodology and accreditation requirements. Professional judgment figures highly in the ways in which quality is assessed, content is decided, and successful completion is agreed, although accreditation requirements also play a part in these processes. Direct perception of the students' needs may be a factor in providing transition to adulthood education, but other factors are also involved. These may include matters of resourcing, management and working relationships with suppliers.

Decisions about content may favour broader, safer topics rather than controversial, difficult ones but also, content is likely to be that decided by the accreditation scheme. The first choice for content is the area of independence preparation, an area that might conceivably range from making one's own hot drink to asserting one's voting rights. This captures the fundamental difficulty of transition to adulthood education; its potential is so broad that it may be difficult to know how to proceed, what to include, what to leave out, and how to do it justice within the time and resources available. Certainly professionals are aware of the limitations of transition to adulthood education. The changes that they seek indicate a wish for an increased level of real-life experiences, supporting Huxley's (1996) recommendations.

There remain inherent difficulties with transition to adulthood education, related to decisions about content. The scope is so wide that arguments can be made for a vast range of different topics and learning outcomes. In addition there are ethical considerations regarding inva-

sion of privacy where personal matters are raised. The guidance of accredited schemes can be valuable, but the identified needs of individuals must also be taken into account. There is a need for further research in this area in order to consider how improvements may be made, and how more difficult or controversial areas of transition to adulthood may be addressed, so that young people with developmental disabilities may be supported in moving towards a more active participation in the life of the community.

It may also be beneficial to conduct research into the provision offered by colleges that do not offer specific, focused transition to adulthood education for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Comparisons could shed useful light on the purpose and value of transition to adulthood in further education.

Practical Application

It seems likely that transition to adulthood education will continue. Understandably, the first suggestion for improving quality is to improve resources, however resourcing is not just a question of funding. If more real life experiences are to be provided, as the survey responses and the literature recommend, there are implications for resourcing in the form of good staffing ratios, increased time and a wider use of location.

The possibility exists that transition to adulthood education will continue relatively unchanged unless challenged, and aided, to develop. The improvements sought within the Learning and Skills Council consultation paper (LSC 2003), being concerned with learner numbers,

employer engagement, success rates, teacher qualifications and performance assessment, are unlikely to make a significant difference for young people with developmental disabilities. If transition to adulthood education is to fulfill its potential, there is a need for closer attention to be paid to this area, and for further research.

Summary

A survey of transition to adulthood courses, modules and input in three further education regions, casts light upon the input that is offered to young people with developmental disabilities with the intention of increasing their personal maturity and capability as community members. Although there are some small regional differences, all three regions display a similar pattern of provision.

Students attend courses or modules once or twice a week for one or two hours. The input provides a focus upon aspects of adult life, usually through the activities directed by a pre-designed, accredited module. The main providers of such modules are The Open College, and ASDAN. An exploration of the content supported by special educational needs coordinators in the colleges suggests that there is a focus upon those aspects of adult life that are broadest and safest, and lacking in controversy. Decisions about quality, content and successful completion are usually the result of professional judgment and student feedback, mediated by module and accreditation requirements.

While the question has been raised as to the value and effectiveness of transition to adulthood education for students with developmental disabilities, this should not

detract from the efforts of the professionals who teach in this area. Special educational needs coordinators would like to be able to provide more meaningful experiences for their students. The research suggests that transition to adulthood courses are modules and input form an established part of further education provision, and it seems likely that they will continue. Further research is needed to support quality improvement of the area in ways that aid young people with developmental disabilities to take an increasing part in community life, and to clarify the value and purpose of transition to adulthood education in further education.

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APPENDIX 1
Postal Questionnaire for the Survey of Three Further Education Regions

Dear Special Educational Needs Coordinator,

I would be most grateful if you could spare a few minutes to complete the enclosed questionnaire. I am researching into Personal and Social Education-related transition to adulthood, or skills for adult life, course for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and I would like to know your views.

My interests are in how the content of such work is decided, how it is assessed or evaluated, and how it is developed and maintained. It may not be easy to generalize across a range of courses or modules, so please feel free to customize the form if you wish.

Completing the questionnaire should not take more than ten minutes. All data will be kept anonymous, and I will inform you of the findings when the questionnaire is complete.

Yours in thanks

Barbara Pavey

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please tell me about the Personal and Social Education-related, transition to adulthood, or skills for adult life, work carried out in your college. Please feel free to omit any questions or parts of questions where you feel unable to make a judgment.

1. Does your college offer a discrete, PSE-related transition to adulthood or skills for adult life, course for young people with LDD (Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities)?

Yes

No- but PSE-related input offered via other courses

No PSE-related input offered to LDD students

2. Is/are the course(s)/module(s) accredited, and if so, by whom?

.....

3. What is/are the course/module title(s)?

.....

.....

.....

4. Generally, how often are PSE-related transition to adulthood or skills for adult life, lectures/lessons/sessions held?

- Fewer than once a week
- Once a week
- More than once a week
- Other (please give details)

.....

5. For how long does the average PSE-related transition to adulthood or skills for adult life lecture/lesson/session last?

- 1 hour or less
- 1-2 hours
- Approx. 1/2 (half) a day
- Approx. 1 day
- Other (please give details)

.....

6. How is the quality of PSE-related work or courses assessed? (tick as many as you wish)

- by the Special Educational Needs Coordinator
- by tutors/lecturers teaching the PSE-related work
- by those in college with quality responsibility, eg. quality team, quality manager
- by a regular review/evaluation process
- by student satisfaction feedback
- by external assessment, e.g. inspection
- in accordance with accreditation requirements
- by feedback from other involved persons, e.g. parents, carers, other services
- by matching to previously decided criteria
- Who decides the criteria?
- Other (please give details).....

7. Which of the above do you think are most important, in assessing quality? Please put 1,2,3 next to those items that you consider top be most important (1= of greatest importance)

8. How important are each of the following in deciding content of the course/module/PSE-related input?

	very important	quite important	not very important	not at all important
Professional judgment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Input from others (parents, carers)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Schedule 2 funding requirements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students' suggestions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
College development plan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assessment of students' needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Requirements of accrediting body	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluation of a previous course	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
FEU publications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other input inc. books, schemes, audio-visual aids	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Requirements of quality measures in college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Availability of resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student satisfaction feedback	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Which of the above do you think are most important, in assessing quality? Please put 1,2,3 next to those items that you consider top be most important (1= of greatest importance)

10. What tells you whether the student has completed the PSE-related course/module/element satisfactorily? (tick as many as you wish)

Student's level of attendance	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lecturer's professional judgment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's mature behaviour	<input type="checkbox"/>
Completion of specific assignments or tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student's self-appraisal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Completion of specified time on course	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students' appraisal of each other	<input type="checkbox"/>
Meeting of particular criteria, e.g. based on competency statements or checklists	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents'/carers' judgment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details).....	<input type="checkbox"/>

11. Which of the above do you think are most important, in assessing quality? Please put 1,2,3 next to those items that you consider top be most important (1= of greatest importance)

12. How important are the following items, in a PSE-related, transition to adulthood or skills for adult life, course/module/element?

	very important	quite important	not very important	not at all important
Personal identity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Controversial issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environmental awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Morality/moral code	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parenthood	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Analytical/thinking skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independence preparation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Occupational development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Economic awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prejudice and stereotypes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious/philosophical awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal relationships	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Disability issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Students' personal interests	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education of the emotions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please give details)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
.....				

13. Which of the above do you think are most important, in assessing quality? Please put 1,2,3 next to those items that you consider top be most important (1= of greatest importance)

14. Within your college PSE-related transition to adulthood, or skills for adult life, course/module/element, what, if anything, would you like to be able to do differently?