



Quality Times

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Welcome to the third issue of our quality-focused newsletter

In this issue, we reflect on the importance of Ofsted's decision to retain the separate high needs judgement and hear from two Natspec colleges who took part in pilot inspections under the new framework. Trinity Specialist College shares its journey from Inadequate to Good while Hereward College explains how it has built up its supported internship provision. Bernie White of The Seashell Trust and Chair of Natspec, reiterates the importance of good quality CEIAG in specialist colleges and Tracy Gillett from Condover College introduces herself as Natspec's new director of quality. We also share our plans for the recently announced Natspec Awards and explain how we see them contributing to quality improvement within the specialist FE sector.

We want Quality Times to be relevant to all Natspec members and include articles from a wide variety of sources, so if you have ideas for articles or good news that you want to share, please get in touch. We would be particularly interested to hear how you are preparing for - or your experiences of - inspection under the new framework, your approaches to curriculum development and review, and effective practice in observing teaching, learning and assessment and using the findings to support quality improvement.

We hope you will find the articles in this issue interesting and informative and that they will help you continue to drive forward quality improvement in your own settings.

Tracy Gillett – Director of Quality

Ruth Perry – Senior Policy Manager



Contents

A warm welcome to our new Director of Policy – Quality	3
The separate high needs judgement survives!	5
Learning from pilot inspection	7
Careers Education and Guidance	10
Trinity Specialist College – our journey from inadequate to good	13
Supported Internships: an opportunity for learners and specialist colleges	16
Natspec Awards: a catalyst for quality improvement	19

A warm welcome to our new Director of Policy – Quality



Tracy Gillett, Head of Education at Condoover College, introduces herself as Natspec's new policy director for quality.

I've spent my whole career to date working in post-16 special education. I always say that I fell into special education by accident, initially drafted in to deliver a drama lesson one morning a week as a lecturer in a General Further Education (GFE) College. Working within what was termed the "transition department" with a wide range of young people with mild to moderate special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and many who were previously not in education, employment or training (NEET). I realised very quickly that this is what I wanted to do for the rest of my life as I'd well and truly been bitten by the special education bug. Over the years I have discovered that our sector is filled with people like me, who unintentionally found themselves working with our young people in an education or care setting and instantly fell in love with their new career.

After four years I was approached to take up a post at an independent specialist college. This opened up a whole new world for me. I started out as a tutor, where I was given open access to training and development opportunities beyond those that would ever have been available to me in a large GFE college. By the time I left 10 years later I was in the role of deputy principal.

There are so many timetabled sessions that I have thoroughly enjoyed over the 14 years that I was teaching. However, one particular year sticks in my mind, where Tuesday was the highlight of my week. In the morning we had a dance teacher supporting us in the Drama session that I taught; she was teaching the students (and staff) how to tap dance for a performance that we were putting on for the end of year celebrations. In the afternoon I was working with a group undertaking the Duke of Edinburgh Award who were learning to ski for their physical skill. I vividly remember thinking, 'they are paying me to do this and I'm having the time of my life'. It's just one small example of how varied, exciting and highly motivating a strong curriculum can be. Of course, now, as the head of a college, I don't get to deliver the very exciting lessons anymore, but I do get to enjoy the things I have been able to introduce as a college leader vicariously through the reactions and feedback from the staff and students.

As a specialist college, like so many of you, at Conover we have a wide range of learning, therapy and support activities available to our students that make up our curriculum, which we hope is as diverse as our learners. Each year we seem to add new subjects, enrichment activities, or introduce a therapy or teaching and learning approach. The profound and complex needs of our students mean that our education focus is centred around the development of the individual needs of the students, to develop and improve their independence. Independent living skills for our students can range from learning to activate a switch to operating a piece of everyday equipment, such as a blender to make a fruit smoothie or a hairdryer to style your hair, to learning to access public transport safely and appropriately.

Across our sector, specialist colleges have experienced a more diverse range of learners applying for placements since the SEND reforms and as a result, many of us have been on a journey of curriculum review for a while now. This means that training is an ongoing theme in our college. There's always a new skill, approach or resource to learn how to use and apply and that's what makes our job so exciting and interesting. No two days are ever the same at Conover College – even if we wanted them to be, and it makes for a very rewarding job.

Undertaking curriculum review also requires a good degree of patience, tenacity and honesty. Nothing ever works perfectly straight away, especially as our learners like to be discerning and take their time to decide if they like something or not. Then there are the amazing and inspired ideas that we are convinced will be the best thing since sliced bread, but no matter how hard we try, it just doesn't work – that's when we need to be honest with ourselves, give it up and move on. Maybe it worked fabulously for that other specialist college down the road – but one size will never fit all!

Of course, the curriculum review is only the beginning of the journey because then we need to ensure that our RARPA processes complement and capture the variety of experiences our new curriculum provides. And so our work continues...

Aside from my day job as Head at Conover College, I've also been working as an inspector for Ofsted since 2016. I am looking forward, in my Natspec director role, to using my previous skills and experience to help drive up the quality of provision across our sector and bring people together among the specialist colleges to share best practice and expertise.

The separate high needs judgement survives!



Ruth Perry, Senior Policy Manager, at Natspec looks back on the campaign to keep the separate high needs judgement in the new Ofsted Education Inspection Framework and explains why it was worth fighting for.

I'm not sure if I was more excited or relieved when I saw that Ofsted had decided to retain the separate high needs judgement in FE and Skills inspections. Natspec had lobbied hard to convince the inspectorate that it was vital that they held onto this judgement. We worked with others, including the Association of Colleges (AoC), to educate and inform as many people as we could about the proposals and to share our concerns with them. We encouraged members and partner organisations to respond to the consultation, ensuring that Ofsted understood the volume and scale of the objections to this proposal in a set of reforms that for the most part we otherwise supported.

So, it felt like a real victory when Ofsted backtracked. We had spoken and they had listened. (I should say here that I see this as a mark of great integrity on their part. We have all experienced consultations where, however great the groundswell of opinion against a proposal, the original plans are pushed through regardless.) But why had we gone at it with such gusto? Did it really matter that much, particularly given the much stronger emphasis on SEND across all judgements in the new inspection framework? I would say, yes, it mattered very much.

Although it's easy to get distracted by the many ways in which the SEND reforms are not working, it is undoubtedly true that standards of high needs provision across post-16 have improved in recent years. It is much more common now to encounter principals of general FE colleges with a genuine interest in and commitment to SEND provision. And you're far less likely than was once the case to find the supported learning department housed in portakabins tucked away at the back of the site. In fact, there is plenty of really excellent provision out there. Ofsted has played an important role in driving up standards and the separate judgement has been critical to this. Their inspections are, after all, just about the only way that providers are held to account for meeting their statutory duties under the 2014 Children and Families Act.

Inspection reports are also the only objective source of information about the quality of high needs provision that learners and families can draw on when they are making choices about their post-16/19 options. They also help them make comparisons between different providers. Unless there is specific reference to high needs provision in a non-specialist setting, how are learners and their parents or carers meant to know whether that setting is any good at working

with people with needs like theirs? They would have to pick through the detail of a full report, looking for glimpses of relevant information – rather than being able to identify the separate grade and a dedicated set of findings in a single section of the report. This was the point that members stressed most strongly when we held our consultation focus groups. They felt that it would be possible for learners and families to unwittingly select (or be persuaded into accepting) provision, the quality of which might be misrepresented by the college's overall effectiveness grade. There were also concerns that specialist colleges, whose whole inspection is focused on high needs provision with nowhere to hide, would be disadvantaged by the lack of specific high needs information in general FE college inspection reports.

We can tick this one off as a battle won: the separate judgement remains. Now we have to get our heads down and ensure that we understand the detail of the new framework. As we know, that's where the devil tends to lie!

Learning from pilot inspection



Mark Dale, Principal of Portland College, reflects on their experience of a pilot Ofsted inspection ahead of the introduction of the new Education Inspection Framework in September. He also includes the views of Lisa Duncalf, Principal of Bridge College, the only other specialist college to go through a pilot inspection.

Here is a surprising thought: the opportunity to have an Ofsted inspection was too good to miss. I trust everyone reading this will know that Ofsted is introducing a new Education Inspection Framework this September after four years on the current Common Inspection Framework.

Portland College was invited to try it out, which we did with the usual two days' notice in early February 2019. A few weeks later, with Ofsted having a bit more learning under its belt, Bridge College volunteered to do the same thing. We are not going to describe the new framework here, rather, we will offer some insights into how the inspection process has evolved, compared with what you are used to now and offer some suggestions about how you might prepare for that.

Portland went through a pilot of the full inspection process (three inspectors for three days) and Bridge a short inspection model, with an afternoon planning meeting followed by inspection by two inspectors over the following two days. From this we conclude there are no plans to radically alter the current approach to inspection in terms of the allocation of resources. One innovation is to have an on-site meeting with the lead inspector on the afternoon prior to inspection proper. This happened at Bridge, but for diary reasons was not possible at Portland and was done by telephone in the old manner. Prior documents focused on the self-assessment report, quality improvement plan and college plan. *[Editor's note: Ofsted have now dropped the idea of introducing a planning meeting the day before inspection proper begins, on the basis that providers found it too time-consuming.]*

Portland's planning phase was further complicated because the lead inspector adopted a traditional approach, requesting a dozen or more structured meetings – this was abandoned completely on the first day when the inspectors recognised that they weren't really operating in the spirit of the new approach. For both colleges, this planning phase proved challenging and it is going to be essential that you have good timetable information and know where individual students are at different times and to anticipate any risks pertaining to those individuals.

Having navigated planning, the fun really started. The inspection process was 'bottom-up'. The inspectors case-tracked a sample of students (12 in Portland's case) and wanted to meet with those students, see them in different learning environments, including external work experience, lunchtimes, enrichment and so forth. The inspectors wanted to talk to students and teachers and subsequently triangulate information with the individual student files. After that they challenged managers and senior leaders on whether the data in management reports and the areas identified for improvement correlated with what they have found on the ground.

In this process, teaching and support staff were repeatedly put on the spot and expected to explain what individual students were doing and justify why they were doing particular things on that day and how these related to the overall sequence of learning. In the future, these inspection interventions could sometimes mean the inspector will stop a session to ask specific questions. At Portland, staff who were unfamiliar with this approach, and perhaps less confident to talk to inspectors were unsettled, if not to say rattled, by this. It also means that other staff may be needed to sustain a session whilst the teacher speaks with the inspector.

Going forward, we are planning CPD with staff and engagement with students and parents/carers to explore the curriculum and to make everyone fully aware of what an individual is learning and why. Ofsted's espoused theory of learning places a lot of emphasis on sequencing learning so that what should have been previously learned is "locked-in" and the learner is then building further on that. Observation of teaching, learning and assessment is a good opportunity to prepare teaching and support staff for that type of questioning and particularly to become more familiar with the way inspectors may talk about learning. When it comes to actual inspection, unless you have a very large management team, you won't be able to micro-manage the inspection process, so you need to trust your staff and let them get on with it.

Managers are likely to be challenged on how achievement and progression data is compiled and moderated and how that data is used proactively to ensure individual progression. Senior leaders will need to clearly demonstrate their analysis of the overall impact of curriculum delivery and show how curriculum is being developed to respond to those findings, and to anticipate the needs of the cohort.

Both Lisa and I thought that the new approach gave inspectors a more authentic view of the real learner experience and more opportunity for teaching and support staff to contribute their views. Assuming key issues like safeguarding are satisfactorily covered, inspectors will probably not spend long on them; we felt that leadership and management was really being judged in the context of the quality of education and that it was this area that will drive the grading. We concluded that the separation of behaviour and personal development gives specialist colleges an extra chance to demonstrate their strengths.



Colleges will need to proactively plan to meet the challenges of the new approach but there is time to adjust and at our recent annual conference, Ofsted's national lead inspector for high needs signalled that there will be a transition period to help us get used to the new inspection process.

Careers Education and Guidance



Bernie White, Head of Education at Seashell Trust, explains their broad interpretation of 'careers education' and how this has led them to adopt an approach that focuses on planning for the future, including for employment – but not exclusively so.

Learning to make informed decisions

One of the distinct features of the careers work we undertake at Seashell Trust is the integration of personal social and health education. We define careers education as "learning to make informed decisions". Our students face decisions about their futures that include work, but also how they would like to be supported, services they need to access and living options.

The interconnection of careers and Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education enables our students to learn social rules, emotional awareness and management, establishing and managing relationships with others, recognising and expressing preferences, and building skills and confidence at self-advocacy. Whereas young people without Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) can be assumed to develop these aspects throughout their daily lives, with limited structured teaching, this is not the case for students with severe and complex learning difficulties.

Using the Gatsby benchmarks

The Gatsby Benchmarks are as relevant to students with profound and multiple learning difficulties as they are to any student. They offer organisations a clear framework to plan and deliver individually tailored learning opportunities in lessons. A well-structured careers programme framed by the benchmarks, that provides encounters and experience of work, enables students to make or participate in decision-making and base these decisions on first-hand experience.

By assessing ourselves against the benchmarks, we have identified opportunities to strengthen our careers programme; we are working in partnership with Conover College to enhance the independent support and advice to young people about their options and we are working to improve information for families and young people about supported employment, voluntary work and supported living.

To help strengthen impartial and independent careers advice, we now put our staff through CEIAG qualifications, to make sure we give the best support possible in line with benchmark 8: personal guidance. We have appointed a careers leader for the Trust who is working to shape

careers education, find work experience and support families. Finally, we completed the Compass tool to assess our progress against the Gatsby benchmarks which showed us the need to build links externally; we are now working with another specialist college to pool resources and anticipate securing an enterprise adviser for the college from The Careers & Enterprise Company.

Listening to student views

As with other post-16 providers, we put great emphasis on the right to make decisions in line with the Mental Capacity Act (2005) and the Children and Families Act (2014). If young people lack capacity to make decisions, then their participation in decisions is secured by gathering pertinent information through first-hand experience and logging reactions systematically, so that their views are not overlooked. This ensures decisions are made in their best interest.

Young people at the Trust learn to use their voices. Often arriving with limited functional communication and no established communication method, they are supported by a multidisciplinary team to develop their individual communication system.

Taking an individual approach to personal development

We take a holistic approach to planning and delivering education and support; personal development is often the key to successful outcomes. Each phase of education approaches career guidance and the curriculum differently. In a school, there is a long-term programme that complements the PHSE curriculum, guiding young people through from their status as a child to a young adult.

In further education, students are with us for a relatively short time. This drives a sense of purpose that shapes the identification of learning priorities and our curriculum offer until the time comes for them to leave. For residential students, they learn to carry out daily living skills in the home setting, live alongside others and extend their social interests and prepare for progress to supported living settings.

Supporting students into employment

In order to help young people achieve their aspiration to progress to supported work, the Trust has developed a supported internship programme that caters for students with severe and complex needs and helps them achieve voluntary or paid employment.

There needs to be a high level of transition planning for all our students. Seashell has a team of transition coordinators and employment officers to work with the young people, their families and their home social services to align plans for living, community support and work. We established the role of employment officer in 2011 and find it a valuable role in the Trust as it extends support to students in their first stages of being in work. We have a well-established

system of tracking the destinations of our leavers and this has shown us that positive outcomes are sustained, helping us to continue with this model of extended support.

What next?

Returning from the Natspec Conference filled with ideas from colleagues in other colleges, alongside our own self-assessment of the careers support in the college, we have identified a number of areas for development:

1. Effective working with parents: we recognise that we need to build on the work done to date to involve parents successfully in the planning and execution of ambitious plans for students with complex needs. Although parents' information events about the supported internship and progression to supported work are well-attended, there can be a lack of confidence for some families at the point of transition each year, resulting in some young people who were anticipating progressing to a work role not taking up a position and going to day service support instead.
2. We need to bite the bullet and understand the potential value of Access to Work (AtW) funding for young people on the supported internship programme. At Seashell, supported internships lead to part time job-carved roles and because of this we know that we need to examine very carefully the implications of accessing AtW funding for young people and their families. In consideration are the recognition that shared costs would be welcomed by the Local Authority, and the impact on the young person's/family's overall income and the college income.

Trinity Specialist College – our journey from inadequate to good



Peter Hannah-Smith, Operations Manager, at Trinity Specialist College shares the bumpy ride (and the blood, sweat, tears and sheer hard work) that has seen the college improve from 'inadequate' to 'good' in just under three years.

We really couldn't have been more optimistic following the call (you know the one!) as we welcomed Ofsted for our first inspection back in March of 2016, absolutely convinced that they were going to have to come up with another level of excellence above 'Outstanding' in order to categorise us. Imagine our shock then, when we were considered to be 'Inadequate' across the board. We were devastated, but we weren't about to give up!

The Senior Leadership Team had vision, passion, and drive, in spades, coupled with a broad experience of skills and comprehensive background in the sector. We thought that was enough to get us to at least a strong 'Good'... but it didn't. So, what we were doing wrong?

The core of our problems was in our teaching, learning and assessment. We weren't identifying clear enough starting points for learners from their baseline assessments, which made it extremely challenging to demonstrate the levels of progress the learners had made. The curriculum wasn't broad enough and timetables weren't individualised enough. We had learners working towards accredited courses who should have been more focussed on developing greater independence and we had learners who weren't studying at the levels that were set out in their EHC Plans. There were other issues to consider but they were relatively easy to remedy by comparison.

Over the next 14 months we worked tirelessly and with added support from Ofsted in the form of Nigel Evans HMI who vigorously carried out our monitoring visits, but also brought ideas to the table to help with improvements to bolster our performance (only ideas though because as we all know, Ofsted does not prescribe!). We invested in a costly Management Information System creating a great deal of work for our admin manager in populating it. We further invested in our staffing teams because we knew that their performance was the real key to driving the changes we needed to achieve. It was starting to work...

Our second inspection took place in May 2017 and 14 months of blood, sweat and tears (oh, and one heart attack!) was beginning to pay off. Our combined team effort had got us to an overall grade of 'Requires Improvement' with Personal Development Behaviour and Welfare

graded at 'Good'. We were heading in the right direction and our confidence was boosted, even though there was still a long way to go.

We realised, though, that without more resources, given the complex needs of our young people, we were not going to be able to progress further and achieve the college's true potential. So, we took the initiative and went to the local authority to request further funding for an additional SLT member. We were able to convince the LA that they should contribute towards the cost of another member of the SLT and at the end of November 2017, our new Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) Manager started in post. We ensured that her focus was purely on TLA – no distractions, no digression. We were also supported by Dr Joyce Deere who did our initial Natspec new member quality support visit, and then subsequently worked for a period alongside our new TLA manager in a consultancy capacity.

So how did we set about addressing our quality issues?

We introduced a new quality cycle calendar which meant staff knew what would happen at different times of the year, alongside a set of quality standards. We reviewed our curriculum and aligned it with aspects of the Education Health and Care Plans and the Preparing for Adulthood framework, which resulted in learners having a clear focus and staff finding it easier to create individualised timetables. We introduced RARPA to help us recognise non-accredited achievements, offering in-house certificates that are meaningful to individuals, and the AQA Unit Award Scheme for learners working on maths and English

We also reviewed the initial assessment process, linking it to aspects of the Education, Health and Care Plans, which allowed us to clearly identify learners' starting points and consider long term outcomes related to Preparing for Adulthood. We also introduced an initial Education, Health and Care Plan review after the six-week initial assessment period.

We worked closely with staff, taking time to build positive relations and investigating their strengths and ways of working. We recognised that confidence levels were low, so we reinstated learner and staff recognition celebratory events. We implemented the 'what went well, even better and areas to develop' model for staff *and* learners so that feedback was de-personalised and developmental. We empowered staff by involving them in the decision-making, asking for their feedback and their own new ideas. The teachers' weekly meeting became a breakfast meeting and sharing good practice was added to the agenda.

We also delivered training for staff in areas such as SMART targets, initial assessments and planning timetables, acting on feedback from observations and learning walks, which now included observation of therapists as well as teaching staff.

A few things stand out as being particularly powerful in helping us achieve the changes that we needed to make:

- asking staff to grade the college against the Common Inspection Framework and noting what they felt they needed to get to a 'Good'
- preparing learners to talk to unfamiliar people (yes, we mean Ofsted!) about their programmes, ensuring they understand their individualised curriculum, how English and maths is embedded, and how it relates to their long-term aspirations
- investigating and utilising different feedback methods appropriate to learner needs
- having high expectations of staff and learners and providing solutions rather than just identifying the barriers
- the senior leadership team being on the case - having clear expectations, providing immediate and ongoing feedback to staff and learners, and celebrating good practice
- giving staff the guidance and autonomy to do their jobs.

The journey has not been completely smooth – we've certainly had our ups and downs but when Ofsted came back for the third time in early 2019, we achieved a solid 'Good' across the board. We recently asked our learners why they thought Ofsted graded us as Good. This is just a selection of their responses:

- I get to do lots of different courses that are of interest to me.
- The staff challenge me and make me work hard
- I have my own timetable, just for me
- I have work experience at a hairdresser's because when I leave college, that's what I want to do
- My work is different and more challenging than everyone else's with other abilities.

We are really pleased with our Good, but it's still not enough... the quest for Outstanding has begun!

Supported Internships: an opportunity for learners and specialist colleges



Paul Cook, Principal & Chief Executive of Hereward College, explains how the college has built up its supported internships from three learners to over forty starts planned for September, positioning Hereward as a strong regional growth partner in the process.

Background

When the Government set out its vision for disability and employment in 2013 as part of the reforms to the SEND system within the Children and Families Act, it was responding to an over-complicated system that delivered very poor education and training outcomes to young people with special educational needs. In particular, the number of young people with SEND achieving paid employment was abysmally low.

Supported internships were introduced in 2013 as a 16-19/25 study programme specifically aimed at young people with an EHC Plan to help them achieve employment, by giving them the opportunity to acquire the skills they need for work through a combination of learning and experience in the workplace, job-coaching support and time, either at work or in college, to consolidate their learning, including English and maths, where appropriate.

The Department for Education states in its guidance for providers:

“All young people should be helped to develop the skills and experience and achieve the qualifications they need to succeed in their careers. The overwhelming majority of young people with SEN are capable of sustainable paid employment with the right preparation and support. All professionals working with them should share that presumption.”

To further reinforce this position, in 2017 the Government announced £9.7m for local authorities to increase the number of supported internships and other pathways to employment for young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

The role of specialist colleges

As specialist colleges, supporting learners with SEND to achieve aspirational outcomes, including employment, is our core business. We need to ensure that our courses focus on preparing students for work and offer clear pathways to employment. A key component is to identify those skills that employers value and help our young people to develop them. At Hereward College we have a sincere focus on embedding a culture of employability and offering

a curriculum which is directed towards independence and paid work outcomes. These paid work outcomes are now achieved mainly through our supported internships – a programme which the college has been developing in partnership with regional employers since 2014.

At Hereward, we consider the supported internship programme to be one of the most exciting developments in specialist education. We have embraced it fully. Since launching the programme in 2014, Hereward has seen a year-on-year increase in learners applying for a supported internship and a consistently high number of interns have moved into work. We started with just three interns; in September 2019 we will have forty internship starts. Last year 55% of supported interns achieved paid employment with those employers where the internships took place, against a national average for people with learning disabilities in employment of just 6%.

Ensuring the quality of supported internships

Partnership-working is critical to achieving high quality supported internships. Without the huge support from the organisations we work with, we would not be able to run a successful programme. Hereward College is fortunate to have developed partnerships with employers who are completely behind the supported internship concept and are keen to improve the diversity of their workforce and challenge existing recruitment practices.

The commitment from business to providing high quality, meaningful work experience opportunities is fundamental to the success of the internships and positive outcomes for our learners. Providing support to our employers through relevant training has been key to maintaining the partnerships, it has also helped to raise the profile of disabilities within their businesses. We run disability awareness courses for all of our supported internship partners to enable them to support the young people they are working alongside more effectively.

“Our partnership has developed over the past few years with fantastic results. The work placements have been a resounding success and the students have developed in communication skills, working within a team environment to deadlines and adding value through their newly gained skills on the job. Off the back of a highly successful supported internship with Hereward, we are now looking at Assisted Apprenticeships.”

– **Group HR Manager**

Learner feedback confirms the value of supported internships to the individuals who experience them:

“I have developed so many customer service skills and am excited to have gained a full-time job here. I owe all this to everyone who has supported me over the year. The



Internship has allowed me to become a better, more confident person who is ready for work." – **Ellie**

"I am happy being at work, I have done lots of training and learnt new skills. I'm really pleased to have found a job and would recommend this experience to my friends as it might inspire them to do something they enjoy and they might just get a job out of it." – **Luke**

"I have such IMMENSE pride in my job. I walk in each day feeling so lucky and still struggle to realise it's really happening. I have a job, that fits the way my brain works – thank you for giving me my dream." – **Joey**

Future direction

Supported internships have given us, as a specialist college, a vehicle to highlight our expertise in assistive technology, workplace assessments and transitions to work. Through identifying industry skills gaps and providing a unique offer for young people with disabilities, we have gained national business investment, and have been able to position the college as a strong regional growth partner for key issues that affect the region.

Natspec Awards: a catalyst for quality improvement



Ruth Perry, Natspec's Senior Policy Manager, explains how the recently launched Natspec Awards could help drive quality improvement across the membership.

At this year's Natspec National Conference, we launched a new awards scheme for Natspec members – awards that are intended to celebrate innovative practice in the specialist FE sector. As an organisation, we believe that specialist colleges are the home to a wide range of expertise and deserve to be recognised for the excellent work they do. However, we are also aware that there is always room for improvement and while some members have excellent practice in some areas, very few (if any) have excellent practice in all areas. That's why we also want our Awards scheme to act as a catalyst for quality improvement.

We intend to focus some of the awards categories on aspects of specialist provision that members have identified as priorities for improvement across the sector. We will be keeping the categories dynamic, introducing new ones as new improvement priorities emerge. We plan to share the good practice identified through the awards process across the sector and will be asking entrants to commit to helping Natspec develop and disseminate case studies, videos, tools or resources. Where appropriate, we may also invite category winners to help us develop and/or deliver a Transform or TechAbility offer such as a CPD session or webinar.

To keep the focus on innovative practice, rather than business as usual, we will require entrants to put forward evidence that relates to practice introduced in the previous 18 months to two years. The practice will need to have been evaluated and we will be looking for evidence of positive impact on learners, including first-hand feedback from learners.

In the first year of the awards, categories will include:

- innovative use of technology
- creating successful pathways into employment
- effective capturing and use of learner voice
- effective wellbeing support or mental health initiative
- effective inter-disciplinary working



- partnership-working to maximise opportunities/outcomes for learners.

Details of how to enter along with the criteria for each category will be posted on the Natspec website in early autumn 2019, with the deadline for admissions being end of January 2020. Winners will be announced at Natspec's National Conference in May 2020.