



Inclusion in Further Education

Natspec's perspective

Our vision for an inclusive further education system

An inclusive further education (FE) system is one that has an appropriate mix and balance of provider types to meet the needs of all learners to equally high standards.

The primary purpose of all further education for young people, is to support them to gain the knowledge, skills and behaviours that will enable them to lead successful adult lives. For the vast majority of learners, including those with learning difficulties and / or disabilities (and where this is the young person's preference) this should be achievable in a mainstream setting. By 'mainstream' in this context, we mean 'a further education provider offering a breadth of courses to a wide range of post-16 learners.' All mainstream settings should be welcoming places for learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities. They should be resourced to meet their needs and flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of differences.

A small minority of young people with more complex learning needs may require a specialist FE provider to support them to gain the knowledge, skills and behaviours that will enable them to lead successful adult lives. These settings should be specifically designed for that purpose, with the environment, curriculum offer and expertise to meet their learners' very specific needs.

The prevailing place-based assumption that inclusion means 'all learners being educated in a mainstream setting' risks denying some young people with the most complex needs the specialist further education they need. It could even lead to those young people whose needs cannot be met by a mainstream FE college being excluded from further education altogether, and instead referred to a social care setting straight from school. We must not allow the principle of educating all young people in a mainstream setting to take priority over the right of learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities to a learning experience of equally high quality to their non-disabled peers.

So, when we talk about inclusion in education, it is the **system**, rather than individual settings, that must be able to accommodate and provide high quality provision for **all** learners.

Underpinning principles of an inclusive FE system

Our vision of inclusion in FE is underpinned by three key principles.

1. Equality of opportunity and access

All young people should have an equal opportunity to access the further education they need, and this must be needs-led and person-centred. Decisions about where a young person's education and training takes place should be governed by an understanding of the type of curriculum, learning environment and expertise which will best enable their progress and achievement. For example, some learners will need a setting that offers specially designed low-arousal environments and / or integrated therapeutic and education programmes shaped by life-skill and personal development goals.

2. Learners' own views on inclusion must shape the system

Learners must feel **included** rather than simply **placed** in a setting. Feeling included in their place of learning contributes to their sense of wellbeing. By working in a person-centred way, it should be possible to enable the vast majority of learners to feel included in a mainstream setting. However, for a small minority, this feeling may not be achievable within the mainstream. Many learners in specialist colleges report a strong sense of inclusion derived from

the fact that provision is centred around their specific needs and those of their peers who share similar life experiences and with whom they feel a strong bond. Learners' views on what it means to be included and to feel included must play a significant role in ensuring an inclusive FE system.

3. Further education should prepare young people with learning difficulties and / or disabilities to be included in society

Education is widely recognised as a gateway to wider social inclusion. Positive experiences of further education, resulting from a fit-for-purpose curriculum, learning environments and expert teaching and support, are key to building learners' self-esteem. They enable the young people to prepare to take up their rightful place as active citizens, welcome in and contributing to their communities. FE providers also have a role to play in helping to educate and inform local communities so that they know how to include people with learning difficulties and / or disabilities.

For some young people, spending their final few years of full-time, publicly funded education surrounded by peers with similar needs, life experiences and aspirations for the future can be critical to building self-esteem and confidence as well as skills. Learning in a specialist setting is not about separating off young people with learning difficulties and / or disabilities from society. Instead, it is about providing them with an environment and support specifically designed to help them develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to lead successful post-college lives, fully part of their communities.

Continuous reform

Inclusion is an evolving process. Although we already have in place the basic building blocks of an inclusive FE system, learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities are not yet as fully included as they could be. Mainstream settings are currently not meeting as a wide range of learning needs as fully as they could, and some young people with more complex needs are not accessing the specialist provision they need.

To achieve greater levels of inclusion, reform of provision for learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities in FE should focus on:

- breaking down the binary system whereby a young person is placed in either a mainstream or a specialist setting and instead start with the learner's needs, building provision around the learner by drawing on the services of both provider types, as appropriate
- resourcing mainstream settings to increase their capacity to meet a wider range of learning needs and ensuring external constraints do not prevent them from working flexibly to include as many learners as possible
- ensuring young people with more complex needs have access to specialist settings with the expertise, facilities and resources to support their progress and achievement.