



Supporting Learning

**in Further and Higher Education
in Northern Ireland**

May 2005

Preparing for SENDO 2005
A review of the systems and strategies
employed to support students with
disabilities and/or additional support need

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However, we would like to confirm that the interpretation of the data and the recommendations made are entirely the responsibility of the research team.

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Pauline Dowd

Research Manager

ABBREVIATIONS

FE	Further Education
HE	Higher Education
SEND O NI	Special Educational Needs Disability Order Northern Ireland
ANIC	Association of Northern Ireland Colleges
DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DETI	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
MLDD	Moderate Learning Difficulty/Disability
SLDD	Severe Learning Difficulty/Disability
DSA	Disabled Student Allowance
ASF	Additional Support Fund
ETI	Education & Training Inspectorate
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FEDA	Further Education Development Agency
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
SMT	Senior Management Team
RNIB	Royal National Institute of the Blind
RNID	Royal National Institute for Deaf People
IDP	Institute Development Plan
LSDA	Learning and Skills Development Agency
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
IQRS	Improving Quality Raising Standards

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TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has commissioned Belfast Institute to co-ordinate a project, which will:

- Carry out a scoping study into current initial assessment practices and the arrangements for the support and development of staff across the 16 Further & Higher Education colleges and the three NI universities and, based on the findings of the study, to recommend a number of key actions.
- The scoping study will engage with the relevant colleges and institutions at a range of levels from senior managers and policy makers to staff in a variety of operational roles.
- The study will also engage with a range of learners across the institutions. The aim will be to increase awareness of learner expectation and levels of satisfaction with initial assessment and support.

The study will:

1. Identify current practice in relation to assessment and support across the different institutions and sectors taking into account a range of factors including:
 - levels of and modes of study
 - funding systems
 - geographical context
2. Identify exemplars of best practice in relation to the level of study, mode of study, funding available and geographical context.
3. Provide a critical analysis of best practice, highlighting the potential for transfer of this practice to other institutions/colleges or to other stages of the learning pathway (in the context of the learning pathway and the range of learner needs).
4. Make recommendations in relation to
 - dissemination of best practice
 - future structures and systems for staff training and support
 - funding

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 Context

- 1.1 This project was commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in the autumn of 2004, to determine the nature and level of support required by the Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) Sectors in Northern Ireland in advance of the introduction of the Special Educational Needs Disability Order NI (SENDON), scheduled to become law in September 2005.
- 1.2 The project was led by the Belfast Institute and managed by a project team comprising senior representatives of Higher Education Institutions, Belfast Institute, Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC), Skill NI and DEL.

2 Methodology

- 2.1 The research underpinning this report was conducted during late 2004 and early 2005 and all 16 Institutes of Further Education and all 5 Higher Education Institutes in Northern Ireland participated in the research.
- 2.2 Since the aim of the project was to gain as full a picture as possible of best practice, systems and processes a range of research tools was used including:
 - Preliminary desk top review
 - Institution survey
 - Staff survey
 - Student focus groups
 - Student survey
 - Board of Governors' survey
 - Semi-structured interviewsThis facilitated the triangulation of findings.
- 2.3 Participation in the institution survey was high, with 12 of the 16 FE Institutes participating and 4 of the 5 HE Institutions. 490 staff from across the sectors contributed views to the research and a total of 250 students contributed through either focus groups or the survey.

3 Aims and Terms of Reference

- 3.1 The research aim was to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of the practices and procedures currently in place, which actively support participation of students with a disability in further and higher education.
- 3.2 The terms of reference therefore were as follows:

The Department for Employment and Learning commissioned Belfast Institute to co-ordinate a project, which will:

- Carry out a scoping study into current initial assessment practices and the arrangements for the support and development of staff across the 16 Further & Higher Education colleges and the three NI universities and, based on the findings of the study, to recommend a number of key actions.
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4. Make recommendations in relation to
 - dissemination of best practice
 - future structures and systems for staff training and support
 - funding

4 Findings

- 4.1 The percentage of the disabled students participating in mainstream provision in Further and Higher Education Institutions in Northern Ireland varies considerably. In Further Education the percentage of disabled students ranges from 1% to 4%. In HE, participation of students with a disability varies from 2% to a high of 6.8%.
- 4.2 In 2003 the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment (DETI) estimated 10.5% of the 18-30 age group had a disability and 20.5% of the population of working age had a disability.
- 4.3 All 12 of the FE Institutes participating in the Institution Survey offer discrete provision for students with MLDD or SLDD. The majority of the students on discrete programmes are enrolled on Level 0 provision with smaller numbers on Level 1 and 2 courses. There is no discrete provision in the HE sector.
- 4.4 Students with disabilities are funded using different methodologies depending on level of study. Students at HE level receive the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) while students in the FE Institutes taking courses other than at HE level are funded through the Additional Support Fund (ASF). Differences in these funding methodologies were identified as having real significance and of impacting on the overall quality of services provided to disabled students.
- 4.5 A particular shortcoming of the ASF identified is that it does not encourage nor indeed allow FE institutions to engage in forward planning.
- 4.6 The DSA funding system is considered to be a more satisfactory method of funding disability support.
- 4.7 There is a significant variation in the extent to which a whole institution approach to the inclusion of students with a disability is driven at all levels within all the organisations surveyed.
- 4.8 The research indicated that there is considerable evidence that significant investment has been made to improve physical access to educational buildings and facilities. Physical access issues therefore did not dominate student feedback. The extent to which a consistent review of accessibility is in place within the various institutions surveyed, varies with practice and is generally better in the HE sector.

- 4.9 In both the FE and HE sectors a variety of resource constraints were identified as significant. Issues varied from the availability of suitable accommodation for the service provision in FE to a need for investment in more significant staff development in HE.
- 4.10 The survey findings highlighted staff development and training as key to the success of learning support services for disabled students. In the Staff Survey 71% of support staff in FE and 55% in HE stated that they have had no training in this area for 2 years. In the Institution Survey 9 FE Institutions and 3 HE Institutions stated that they offer academic staff appropriate staff training. The fact that 43% of all staff across the FE sector and 29% across the HE sector stated that they were not aware of staff training in this area or that it was not a high priority for them was identified as a cause for major concern.
- 4.11 SENDO requires that all institutions offer multiple opportunities for students to disclose a disability. The survey showed considerable variation in the quality and availability of practices and processes around disclosure and referral. 9 FE Institutions and 4 HE Institutions stated that it is likely that some students are not identified by the current referral systems.
- 4.12 Initial assessment is widely acknowledged to be of central importance in relation to inclusion practices and this study found that this area of work was well managed in HE. Practice in the FE sector is more varied with excellent practice in some institutions and poor in others. It was found that there are no common accepted standards required of staff in relation to initial needs assessment in either sector. The survey highlights this area as one requiring urgent action to ensure a common standard of service across both the sectors.
- 4.13 Academic and support staff contributed views to the survey. Overall staff from both sectors recognised that their institution has a well managed centralised Learning Support Service. It was noted however that support staff in HE presented a very positive evaluation of services in their institutions. FE staff in general indicated a more varied and inconsistent evaluation of service in their institutions. In FE the quality of management of this service was considered by staff to have significant shortcomings in some institutions. In particular it appeared that there is a need to ensure that the role of Learning Support Co-ordinator in FE is appropriately placed in the organisation's structure and is adequately resourced.
- 4.14 SENDO requires institutions to ensure that students with a disability have appropriate access to the curriculum, assessment and student services. The survey indicates that there is still considerable work required to ensure that all disabled students receive the level of service to which they are entitled. Some 36.4% of academic staff in the FE sector expressed concerns regarding the adjustments made in the classroom to facilitate students with a disability. Responses were more positive in the HE sector with only 24.2% of all respondents sharing these concerns. The report demonstrates a clear need for both sectors to review and as appropriate enhance their services in relation to assessment and teaching and learning approaches.
- 4.15 The analysis of student views indicated that in general those studying in the HE institutions were more satisfied than those in the FE sector, with key aspects of learning support services in particular pre-entry guidance and initial assessment and induction. In a number of FE institutions key services such as initial assessment processes were considered by students to be poor or non-existent.
- 4.16 Student views also evidenced, across sectors, innovative adjustments and practices in place to support learners while on programmes of study. Student comments would suggest that good practice in this regard is in general more widespread and consistent in the HE sector than in the FE institutions.
- 4.17 In both sectors students were in general positive about the support they received and recognised the critical contribution to their success made by the Learning Support Staff in their Institution. It was notable that the frustrations they expressed were in general around issues which they believed could be addressed by some planning and increased levels of awareness across the organisation.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Scale of engagement

- The incidence of working age people in Northern Ireland who have a disability is estimated at 20% and 10.5% of people in Northern Ireland aged between 18 and 30 have a disability.
- Currently, FE institutions estimate that they recruit from under 1% to approximately 4% of their students from amongst those with a disability.
- Currently, conventional HE institutions estimate that they recruit approximately 2% of their students from amongst those with a disability. However, The Open University in Northern Ireland estimates that it recruits approximately 6.8% of its students from amongst those with a disability.
- Within the FE sector 60.1% of academic staff and 36.7% of administration/support staff claim to be in contact with students with a disability.
- Within the HE sector 52.2% of academic staff and 54.6% of administration/support staff claim to be in contact with students with a disability.

5.2 Discrete provision

- All FE institutions, but no HE institution, provide discrete provision in addition to mainstream provision for students with a disability.
- In some FE institutions there are no educational goals or progression routes associated with discrete provision.
- In other FE institutions students on discrete provision have clear goals and progression is built in with some students moving onto mainstream courses.
- The great majority of discrete provision is at level 0.

5.3 Funding

- Within FE, 55% of students with a disability are funded by ASF or DSA, 42% are funded by enhanced FTE funding and 3% from other sources.
- Within HE, 96% are funded via DSA and 4% from other sources.
- Both the FE and HE sectors have concerns about current funding levels.
- Disability support organisations believe the HE sector is better funded than the FE sector for students with a disability.
- Both FE and HE staff accept that securing funds for the support of students with a disability is a real priority. They also believe that their institution provides co-ordinated funding for students with a disability.

5.4 Policy and planning

- Some institutions may lack the necessary information base to engage in fully effective forward planning
- There is considerable variation in the extent to which disability issues are addressed in key policy, strategy, marketing and briefing materials across FE and HE institutions.
- Although there is reference made to disability in some documentation across both sectors, this is not widely accessed by students in either the FE or HE sectors.
- Further developments will be needed in some institutions to comply with forthcoming SENDO legislation.
- There is considerable variation in the use of disability experts to help inform the development of policy and planning documents.
- Most Boards of Governors believe their institution gives high priority to disability issues.
- Academic staff in both sectors believe they are aware of the policies and procedures of their own institution.
- Students within focus groups expressed a strong desire to provide advice to institutions as part of forward planning procedures.

5.5 Management of service

- Although the FE sector has the greatest variety of types and levels of courses, it is the HE sector that has the clearest processes and procedures in place for students with a disability.
- The HE sector is more consistent than the FE sector in providing adequate full-time management of learning/disability support services.
- In the majority of FE institutions, Learning Support Co-ordinators operate on a part-time basis from as little as 0 allocated hours per week, up to 20.
- Learning Support Co-ordinators in the FE sector are highly valued by students with a disability. Students appreciated the range and level of support, Learning Support Co-ordinators provided on demand.
- In some FE institutions, services are managed by untrained staff.
- The HE sector is consistent in locating the management of the service within the academic community. The FE sector on the other hand varies considerably, with some institutions placing management within the administration community.
- HE institutions are more likely than FE institutions to have a member of their senior management team involved in the management of learning/disability support.
- Staff from both the FE and HE sectors believe that responsibility for students with a disability is delegated to appropriate staff and that their institution has a co-ordinated approach to dealing with students with a disability.
- Staff in most institutions believe that there is a well managed central support service for students with a disability.
- Both academic and administration/support staff believe that they are often left to decide how best to provide assistance to students with a disability.

5.6 Physical access issues

- Major advances have been made in recent years regarding physical access for students with many types of disabilities. However, for some disabilities, such as sight impairment, there remain considerable needs, suggesting further audits of provision may be helpful.
- There is a lack of consistency within the FE sector regarding reviewing access needs, and providing effective feedback channels for the reporting of needs.
- Staff in both sectors recognise that teaching premises provide suitable access to most students with a disability.

5.7 Resourcing

- Responses by the FE sector to the Disability Discrimination Act, the Tomlinson Report and the forthcoming SENDO legislation has been very varied. (For example, only a minority of institutions have developed staff awareness raising initiatives).
- In contrast the HE sector has responded both more consistently and more comprehensively.
- The availability of designated space and resources for those engaged in providing disability support varies across all types of institutions, although the HE sector appears to have a generally stronger resource base.
- A wide range of basic needs were identified by the FE sector. These included the need for dedicated, specialist staff (the most regularly cited need), dedicated rooms, assistive technology, staff training, assessment funding, and out-centre resources.
- A higher percentage of HE academic staff than is the case with FE academic staff believe that they have appropriate facilities and equipment for their work with students with a disability.
- HE sector needs were predominantly focused on qualitative improvement. They in the main revolved around staff development for academic staff, some types of physical resources and financial support for part-time and international students.

5.8 Recent improvements

- Over the last 2 years FE staff have noted the following as the 3 most significant improvements made within their institution and aimed at assisting students with a disability:
 - Provision of ramps, lifts and appropriate toilet facilities.
 - Appropriate car parking facilities.
 - Provision of appropriate signage to facilitate students with a visual impairment.
- Over the last 2 years HE staff have noted the following as the 3 most significant improvements made within their institution and aimed at assisting students with a disability:
 - Provision of ramps, lifts and appropriate toilet facilities.
 - Appropriate car parking facilities.
 - Provision of documentation in a variety of formats.

5.9 Staff development

- In the majority of institutions there is a coordinated effort to keep staff informed of developments in the area of disability.
- However, specialist staff development opportunities vary considerable amongst institutions, including in the areas of the use of specialist equipment, specialised computer software and enabling technology.
- Within the FE sector 43.3% of academic staff and 25.5% of administration/support staff claim to have received staff training during the last 2 years in relation to supporting students with disabilities.
- Within the HE sector 34.3% of academic staff and 40.9% of administration/support staff claim to have received staff training during the last 2 years in relation to supporting students with disabilities.
- Many staff in the FE sector claim to be either unaware of staff development opportunities or to believe that such staff development is not a high priority.
- A smaller but still significant number of HE staff have similar views.

5.10 Pre-course

- Across both the FE and HE sectors, the majority of responding students were not aware of support available at their institution before enrolling or applying to a course.
- According to students across both sectors, information about support available is often communicated after initial contact with the institution.
- In the HE sector, student questionnaire respondents felt that pre-entry guidance was very good, good or ok in 80% of cases, while students in focus groups gave a more mixed response.
- HE academic staff were significantly more positive than FE academic staff in relation to believing that they were always appropriately briefed in advance regarding students with a disability.
- Across both sectors, students request more information about courses and specific details relating to the Learning Support Co-ordinator or Disability Support Manager, including contact details.

5.11 Teaching and Learning

- Induction for students with a disability, normally takes place in all HE institutions during the summer period, when institutions are less busy.
- Induction for students with a disability, normally takes place in all FE institutions during the first week of the course when institutions are very busy.
- Students were able to provide examples of good practice in the classroom across both sectors. Such examples referred to teachers planning ahead, being flexible and making adjustments.
- Students were also able to provide examples of poor practice in the classroom in both sectors, with some teachers being unwilling or unable to meet additional needs.

- Although students recognise a wide range of learning support is available, they believe it is not consistent, and varies considerably among and within institutions.
- According to students in the HE sector, there is evidence of changes in teaching styles in some cases, but the situation is very patchy.
- According to students in the FE sector, although some staff gave additional support, such as providing handouts in advance, they did not adapt their teaching styles within the classroom.
- The vast majority of academic staff in both sectors do recognise that it is appropriate to change their regular way of working to meet the needs of students with a disability.
- Some teachers in both sectors do not see learning/disability support as their responsibility.
- FE staff are likely to believe that changes in teaching and learning are entirely left to individual teaching staff within their institution.
- HE staff are most likely to believe that their department has a co-ordinated approach to supporting the teaching and learning needs of students with a disability.

5.12 Barriers to learning

- According to students in the HE sector, the main barriers to learning relate to classroom issues such as attitudes of lecturers, the emphasis on reading, and notes not being available in advance. A small number of students were also dissatisfied by the long wait for equipment.
- For students in the FE sector, the main barriers to learning also included delays in assessment and the delay in allocation of support.
- For staff in the FE sector the 3 principle barriers to student engagement with Further Education were identified as:
 - Lack of awareness of general support available.
 - Lack of confidence.
 - Lack of awareness of curriculum support facilities available.
- For staff in the HE sector the 3 principle barriers to student engagement with Further Education were identified as:
 - Lack of awareness of general support available.
 - Lack of confidence.
 - Funding.

5.13 Referral

- The vast majority of institutions believe that current referral systems fail to identify all students in need of specialist support.
- The SENDO draft code of practice requires institutions to encourage disclosure, and to explain to all students the benefits of disclosure.
- Self-referral is the most dominant system at present. The FE sector more than the HE sector, also has engagement with referrals from other agencies.
- Enrolment procedures mean that the FE sector has much less time than the HE sector to use the time between enrolment and course start up to put support systems in place.

5.14 Initial needs assessment

- There are no common standards required of staff in relation to initial needs assessment, and as a consequence there is a wide variety of practice amongst institutions.
- Only around half of FE and HE academic staff believe that they are aware of initial needs assessment procedures.
- The HE sector seems to have clearer and more robust initial assessment procedures than is found across the FE sector.
- The FE sector works more regularly than the HE sector with a range of specialist support organisations.
- According to students, in some FE institutions the initial needs assessment process is ad hoc, casual, or non-existent.

- According to students, in some FE institutions the initial needs assessment process does not take place until after the course is started, which has implications for the provision of support.
- Some external organisations which support disabled people expressed concern regarding the initial needs assessment process in the FE sector.
- According to students, in the HE sector, the initial needs assessment process starts early, and support is normally in place at the beginning of the course.
- All institutions have a policy of creating an individual support plan following initial assessment.
- Institutions are committed to providing the necessary support required to enable disabled students to effectively engage in learning.
- Both FE and HE staff are likely to believe that there is a co-ordinated approach across their institution to the initial needs assessment of students.

5.15 Assessment

- All FE and HE institutions have special examination and assessment policies for students with a disability. These should lead to standardised practice within each institution.
- According to students, in both sectors staff tend to make adjustments to current forms of assessment rather making available alternative forms of assessment.
- According to students, a substantial numbers of students with a disability across both sectors were not offered an alternative form of assessment when they experienced difficulties. However, 86% of HE students and a majority of students in our sample have had special arrangements made for examinations and/or assignments.
- Staff believe that their institution has a centralised system for the co-ordination of special examination and assessment arrangements. However, FE staff are much more likely to believe that arrangements are dealt with in an ad hoc, on-request basis.

5.16 Other types of support

- Ancillary staff and support staff are highly valued by both FE and HE students with a disability. There are many examples of excellent practice by these staff across both sectors.
- Students with a disability in both sectors were very appreciative of the support they receive from their peers.
- Students appreciated the support provided by Education and Library Boards.
- There was concern among students about the time lapse between the beginning of the course and support being put in place.

5.17 Quality assurance

- There are a variety of standards in use for quality assurance purposes, with most institutions adopting at least one.
- All HE institutions and most FE institutions have some process of capturing student feedback to feed into considerations regarding learning/disability support services.
- The use of the results of student feedback are put to a variety of purpose, but there does not appear to be a consistent use of feedback across the FE sector in particular.

5.18 Communication and Networking

- There is considerable variation in external networking ranging from some institutions with good relationships with external agencies and regular attendance at conferences and events, to others with little if any networking activity.
- Some external organisations indicated a desire to provide assistance and expertise to the FE sector to help strengthen provision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Prior to listing recommendations, it is important to make some general observations that establish a clear context for their consideration.

The context

The mechanisms and processes through which students with a disability become engaged in learning, often involves the complex interaction of a range of factors. Effective inclusion will therefore require a whole institution and strategic approach. The diversity of issues to be managed include ensuring that the institution values all learners and staff, puts the learner at the centre of procedures, fosters reflective teaching strategies, is professional, transparent and equitable in its standards of service to students with a disability, and values diversity. All of this implies a fiduciary relationship between the institution and its students, and this has profound implications for the culture of educational institutions.

We have therefore aimed at constructing recommendations that will contribute to establishing the type of culture required by the forthcoming SENDO legislation. We would also echo the view of Tomlinson, that developing good practice in relation to students with a disability, will enhance services for all students.

In addition to a concern for the creation of effective institutional cultures, there are three areas of practical concern that also provide a context for our recommendations.

First, it is important to recognise that some recommendations have implications for government and DEL, and others for institutional policy and practice. It will therefore be important to ensure the following recommendations are discussed at a senior level both within government and also within the FE and HE sectors.

Second, it is important to understand that there is considerable variation in institutional readiness for the forthcoming SENDO legislation. In particular, practice varies considerably within the further education sector. Therefore, these recommendations must be considered in the particular context of each institution. They should not be implemented in a formulaic way that assumes all institutions are the same.

Third, the facilitators on the next phase of this project, which will involve constructive engagement with the institutions to ensure they are fully prepared for the forthcoming legislation, must ensure the following.

- a. That they draw up a programme of support in concert with each institution which reflects each institution's specific needs. This may be assisted by reviewing each institution's set of summary tables for the staff survey. Such materials will be made available by the researchers.
- b. The programme of support should incorporate in an appropriate manner each of the following recommendations.
- c. The facilitators must ensure they can deploy the appropriate range of consultancy, facilitation and training skills that will be needed to support the implementation of the recommendations.

Recommendations

With the above comments kept in mind, our recommendations are as follows.

1. **Funding.** While both FE and HE institutions expressed concerns regarding the level of funding, it is noted that the system HE have for the assessment of need and allocation of funding (DSA) is more structured, equitable and ultimately track-able than that within FE (ASF). At present therefore the HE system represents best practice. Given this we would recommend that a review be carried out to explore the following, bearing in mind students' rights under SENDO:-
 - i. Harmonisation of systems for assessment of need between FE and HE providers to ensure equity for all students.
 - ii. Levels of funding reflecting assessed student need in relation to the course of study regardless if this is in FE or HE.
2. **Disclosure.** Given the need under the draft SENDO Code of Practice to explain the benefits of disclosure and to encourage disclosure, and also given the belief of staff that many students under current arrangements are not disclosing disabilities, we recommend the following.
 - i. Each institution should have a clear internal referral system prepared and published to ensure staff are able to mobilise appropriate internal support following disclosure.
 - ii. Awareness raising amongst staff should be undertaken to ensure all staff are aware of the importance of encouraging disclosure.
 - iii. Each institution should ensure that induction briefing materials regarding the benefits of disclosure are available to all students.
 - iv. Each institution should ensure there is dedicated and private space available in appropriate places to facilitate confidential disclosure.
3. **Internal review.** There is considerable variation in the extent to which disability issues are addressed in institutional documentation. There is also varying degrees of commitment in terms of management and the resourcing of internal expertise to support students with disabilities. Furthermore, the challenges of SENDO are so far reaching that institutions must have an integrated whole institution approach. We therefore recommend the following.
 - i. Internal reviews of current strategy, policy, marketing and operational documents should be undertaken to ensure that an effective service is provided to disabled students.
 - ii. Internal reviews of current management arrangements should be undertaken to ensure that clear responsibilities are established from senior levels of institutional management, down to front line teaching and support staff.
 - iii. Specific attention should be given to the management of learning support in institutions. In particular, staff in these roles must be given the appropriate time for their important function, and must have the appropriate authority and expertise to ensure that their involvement is effective.
4. **Continuous review.** It is important to move beyond the ad hoc and haphazard approach of some institutions towards the development and deployment of procedures and resources. This is the responsibility of senior management.

The development and quality of service requires that it is subject to on-going review and best practice shows that this should be informed by a dialogue with disabled students and external support organisations. To assist with this task we recommend the following.

- i. Each institution should establish an advisory review group consisting of the Learning Support Coordinator, representatives of students with a disability, and representatives from specialist external agencies.
 - ii. The advisory review group should be asked to prepare an independent report each year prior to the preparation of the annual Institute Development Plan. The report should recommend areas for priority development with the aim of enhancing support for students with disabilities.
5. **Staff awareness.** It is clear that a significant number of teaching staff are not fully aware of their responsibilities regarding working with students with a disability. This was sometimes caused by lack of confidence or a lack of skill in terms of meeting the needs of students with very complex needs, in other instances teaching staff simply did not see the support of disabled students as part of their role as a teacher. Many staff themselves also recognise they are not fully aware of all relevant procedures and policies. We therefore recommend the following.
- i. Each institution should establish an awareness raising programme aimed at all teaching, management and support staff, in relation to forthcoming SENDO legislation, and the institution's own policies and procedures and the changing needs of our learners.
 - ii. Awareness raising should be occupationally focused (for example, ensuring teaching staff and support staff are aware of their requirement to deliver the cultural changes necessary for SENDO).
6. **Staff development.** When staff have received appropriate training there is clear evidence that this leads to good practice, however, many staff have not received appropriate training to enable them to discharge their responsibilities towards students with a disability. We therefore recommend the following.
- i. Priority should be given to ensuring that appropriate development opportunities are made available to staff, aimed at enhancing their expertise in dealing with the learning needs of students with a disability and the individual needs of all students.
 - ii. Teaching staff should, for example, have the opportunity to develop their skills in relation to:
 1. Deploying an appropriate range of teaching styles.
 2. Using assistive technologies.
 3. Designing appropriate assessment methods.
 - iii. Learning support staff should, for example, have the opportunity to develop their skills in relation to:
 1. Initial assessment
 2. Guidance and counselling
 3. Policy and procedure development
 - iv. Support/administrative staff should, for example, have the opportunity to develop their skills in relation to:
 1. Communication skills
 2. Practical support skills related to their role
7. **Marketing and pre-entry materials.** Given the views of staff and students that there is a lack of effective information at pre-entry stage, and that this creates an initial barrier to learning, we make the following recommendations.
- i. All marketing materials should be reviewed to ensure positive statements are present regarding the support available to students with disabilities.
 - ii. Institutions should ensure all guidance agencies in Northern Ireland are appropriately briefed on support services for disabled students.
 - iii. Institutions should be encouraged to agree on appropriate standards for website design, to facilitate ease of access and use. Such standards should take account of disability issues.

8. **Quality assurance.** Within the FE sector there are a variety of standards, including none, being used by learning support staff to benchmark the quality of their work with students with a disability. We therefore recommend that,
 - i. The sector should aim at agreeing a common and robust standard for learning support work that fully meets the needs of SENDO.
 - ii. The Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) should review IQRS documentation to ensure that the curricular quality process drives best practice in relation to students with a disability

9. **Networking.** Networking is recognised as one method of ensuring effective benchmarking. Currently there is a considerable variation in the extent to which institutions effectively network both within their own sector and also with external agencies. We recommend the following.
 - i. All FE institutions should ensure their Learning Support Coordinator is enabled to attend the Learning Support Coordinators' Forum.
 - ii. The forum should include within its business the sharing of good practice, and reviewing of emerging issues.
 - iii. The Learning Support Forum should have an advisory role in relation to policy and best practice.
 - iv. The forum should consider inviting attendance from HE sector managers of disability services, and particularly when the agenda addresses emerging issues and the sharing of good practice.
 - v. All institutions should review, with the prospect of developing, their contacts with external agencies, including those within the voluntary sector. This should be undertaken with the aim of developing an effective network of external expertise that can contribute to the development of institutional expertise. There are currently in existence a number of forums and networks within the FE sector which could be proactively used in order to co-ordinate and facilitate any further programme of staff development which might be acquired to meet the needs of SENDO as detailed in this report.

