Project Report: Transitions Project

The experience of disabled students making the transition between institutions to begin or continue their Higher Education.

“The Forum strives to make its institutions accessible to all communities”.

Forum meeting, 28 February 2001

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Executive Summary:

This report is the outcome of a two-year research project looking at the experiences of disabled students making the transition to continued study at a different institution. Although many Further Education Colleges (FECs) provide Higher Education and students will often remain there for both Further and Higher Education, the purpose of this project was to look specifically at the issues involved in moving from one institution to another. The project was funded by the Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum (F&TWAF) and ran from August 2002 until August 2004. The Project Leader was advised by a working group comprising of members of staff from colleges and universities in the Fife and Tayside area and the Director of the Scottish Disability Team (SDT).

The implementation of legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and its amendment by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA) to include education, places responsibility on FECs and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to make their facilities and courses accessible to all students. There has been very little research into transition from FE to HE and this has been identified by other research as an area for further investigation.

This research focused on the experiences of disabled students as they move from one institution to another. The data for the report has come from interviews with disabled students and relevant staff in colleges and universities in the area. There were sixteen students involved throughout the research period although only ten actually made the transition to an HEI. The information gathered was used to inform this report and to enable short leaflets for students about the issues involved in transition to be written.

Application and Information:

Overall the information and guidance given to students regarding application to an HEI and other issues associated with this was dependent on the course they were studying in their FEC and the knowledge and interest of their course tutors. The main areas for concern raised were obtaining specific course and timetabling information, clarity of articulation information and information and support with financial applications, particularly DSA. They thought the timing of application particularly through UCAS was not appropriate for FEC students and found this affected their ability to make as informed a choice as they would have wished.

Preparation and Transition:

Preparation for moving on was something that the students in the project spent a significant amount of time on. Most were very aware of exactly what support they needed and that they needed this to be in place when they moved. Although some could not begin organising support until quite late in the summer because of waiting for HND results, eight of the students had made several visits to their chosen HEI specifically to get support organised. They recognised that this was essential to their successful transition and made the effort to have this in place. Most students also mentioned having a key contact person who knew their needs and whom they could trust as an important element to successful transition. Their

main priorities were gathering detailed course information, meeting the disability contact and arranging support early, orientation and obtaining information on funding.

The students raised issues regarding the organisation, availability, content and focus of organised preparation and saw pre – course and ongoing bridging support as necessary to transition. They had many concerns prior to moving on and particularly expressed fear of failure and the financial implications of not succeeding.

Support:

Although the majority of the students said that the support they received in both sectors was appropriate, they all faced difficulties at some level. Even those who saw their overall experience as positive identified several small difficulties that had the potential to have a significant impact. Comments on support in both sectors ranged from it being non-existent to never having been anywhere that gave so much support for learning. They saw the attitude of individual staff as very important in determining how they managed any difficulties with support. Most of the difficulties faced by the students were around time delays, requirements not being communicated effectively to tutors and lack of resources. The issues they faced in organising support at their HEIs resulted in a more difficult and stressful transition and in one case this had led to the student leaving the course altogether. The main difficulty for most was the delay in being assessed for support and in particular with accessing DSA funding.

Communication:

Another central theme that came from all the interviews related to communication within and between sectors as well as with the students. Students identified poor communication as the reason for many of the difficulties they faced and staff identified it as causing delays in the implementation of support. Where communication was good the benefits for students were very noticeable. They found the transition easier and their support was consistent. When it failed the student felt unsupported and their experience of transition was quite negative. The key for the students was to have a key contact person in each institution who was able to help with any queries they had and coordinate support.

Teaching and Learning:

This final section looks at teaching and learning issues and their impact on the students' transition experience. The issues raised by students and staff regarding teaching and learning issues may not be significant on their own but when combined with communication and support difficulties had the potential to prevent successful transition. Therefore teaching and learning issues need to be looked at when addressing other areas. The students raised issues in relation to staff attitudes and awareness of disability and transition, articulation, direct entry form HNC / D and the teaching, learning and assessment gap.

Recommendations:

1. Course descriptions should include detailed information about content, structure, assessments, placements, accessibility and where possible timetabling.
2. Information relevant to students' decision making should be clearly available in advance of UCAS deadlines.
3. Consideration should be given to changing the UCAS timescales to reflect the needs of students on FEC courses allowing them time to make more informed choices. At present the timescale is not in the interests of FEC students, particularly those undertaking a 1-year course.
4. Open Days should be structured to ensure they address the need of different groups of students. Students should be consulted in this process.
5. Accessibility to students of information on the full range of information on progression routes open to them should be reviewed and dissemination improved.
6. Active recruitment and retention of disabled student ambassadors would benefit prospective students by giving them the opportunity to learn about the extent to which the support offered by the institution operates effectively.
7. The timing and effectiveness of support given to disabled students transferring from HNC / D programmes to second and third year of degree programmes should be reviewed.
8. All students would benefit from access to accredited preparation for HE learning regardless of the FEC course they are studying.
9. Preparation for HE would be of greater benefit to students if it included formal learning opportunities within an HE setting and with HEI teaching staff.
10. Disabled students would benefit from having an identified key worker within institutions who would have an overview of that student's situation.
11. Support for disabled students should, whenever possible, be embedded within the institutions mainstream structures e.g. software to support dyslexic students being on the network and accessible on all computers.
12. There should be greater clarity about the eligibility criteria for accessing different types of support and this information should be available during the application process.
13. Disabled students should be made aware of the timescales involved in accessing support and funding so that they can begin this process at an appropriate time.
14. The operation of the role of the departmental disability officer should be reviewed to ensure consistency and appropriateness of training, caseloading and ongoing support.
15. Staff and students should be consulted about the content and focus of disability awareness training for staff.
16. The application process and assessment for DSA should be reviewed to minimise the delays experienced by disabled students accessing this support.
17. A more structured approach to the dissemination of information between support staff and departments and between and within departments would benefit disabled students.

18. There is scope for improved communication between support staff in FE and HE and teaching staff at departmental level, particularly at HNC / D direct entry level.
19. There is a need for increased opportunities in cross sector joint training on disability issues to enhance information flow and better awareness of respective roles.
20. The accessibility of information and how it is disseminated to students should be reviewed.
21. There is a need for a more rigorous and ongoing review of articulation links involving student and staff input with particular regard for disability issues.
22. The lack of awareness of a number of teaching staff on the impact of disability on students in the learning environment should be addressed.
23. Difficulties experienced by students in change of assessment methodologies in FE and HE should be addressed prior to transition.

Introduction:

"The rhetoric is great but the reality is grim"

"You are going to get more bums on seat staying on seats if the integration processes work"

"You always have this idea of what it is going to be like but that idea is never what it actually is"

"I feel as if I'm having to fit in with the way they do things rather than them trying to accommodate me"

This report is the outcome of a two-year research project looking at the experiences of disabled students making the transition to continued study at a different institution. Although many Further Education Colleges (FECs) provide Higher Education and students will often remain there for both Further and Higher Education, the purpose of this project was to look specifically at the issues involved in moving from one institution to another. Above are examples of some of the views expressed by the students involved in the project when looking at their transition experience.

The project was funded by the Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum (F&TWAF) and ran from August 2002 until August 2004. The Project Leader was advised by a working group comprising of members of staff from colleges and universities in the Fife and Tayside area and the Director of the Scottish Disability Team (SDT). This group helped with decision-making, the direction of the research and access to students, staff and resources.

Background to the research:

The Wider Access Fora have a role in promoting wider access to Further and Higher Education for all groups of people. It is important that disabled students are included in the widening access agenda as they have always been and continue to be under represented in Further and Higher education. *"This group continues to be under-represented, making up about 5% of home students, well below the proportion of disabled students in the population"* (Riddell, Tinklin & Wilson, 2004, p5). Findings from the interim report on Aspiration Raising & Transition of Disabled Students from FE to HE (2003) carried out by the National disability Team (NDT) and SKILL also indicate that disabled students are not consistently considered a target group in widening participation strategies or aspiration raising activities (HEFCE, 2004, p13).

There was the perception by those interviewed for this research that there was growing demand for places in Further and Higher Education by disabled students and an expectation that they would be able to access this education. The implementation of legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and its amendment by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA) to include education, places responsibility on FECs and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to make their facilities and courses accessible to all students.

Over the last few years there has been an increase in research looking at disabled students and their experiences mainly in Higher Education. Hall & Tinklin (1998) looked at the experiences of disabled students in Scottish HEIs and found that they experienced difficulties in many areas including support, teaching, accommodation and social life. They identified points of transition as an area where support and guidance could be improved (Ch 11, p2). Transition was also highlighted by the report into credit transfer at the FE / HE interface by McLennan, Musselbrook & Dundas (2000). One of their recommendations was that additional research be carried out into the barriers facing students with special needs at the FE / HE interface.

There has been very little previous research done looking specifically at the transition between institutions for students in general or for disabled students. Sanderson (2001) looked at the experiences of disabled students moving from local colleges to Nottingham University. Her findings indicated that *"the transition process for disabled students moving from FE to HE is at best weak and, as a result, the individual additional needs of disabled students are not always being met"* (Sanderson, A, 2001, p227). She identifies a failure to communicate both between sectors and with disabled students as the key reason for the students' difficulties in transition. Other research into transition indicates that students are looking for more information and advice about support and Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (Collins, L, 2001). 80% of the students involved in Collins survey did not have their support in place when they started their course in their HEI (Collins, L, 2001, p1).

The research described above highlighted the need to further investigate the transition process focusing on specific issues faced by disabled students. This

report was funded by the Fife and Tayside Wider Access Forum and was based on interviews with students in that area.

Methodology:

This research focused on the experiences of disabled students as they move from one institution to another. Therefore the majority of the data has come from interviews with the students themselves. There were sixteen students involved throughout the research period although only ten actually made the transition to an HEI. In addition to the students' experiences, information was also gathered from interviews with relevant staff in colleges and universities in the area. The information gathered from both student and staff interviews was used to inform this report and to enable short leaflets for students about the issues involved in transition to be written.

The Students:

The students involved all attended an FEC in the Fife and Tayside area. The Project Leader wrote to all the colleges in the area and asked for their co-operation in approaching students who met the criteria for the study. The criteria for the study were that the students were currently studying in an FEC in the Fife & Tayside area, that they planned to move institution in the next academic year to continue their education and that they saw themselves as disabled. From this the institutions contacted students with more details about the background of the study and what was involved in taking part. The students identified themselves to the Project Leader or to institution staff as willing to take part in the study. Initial telephone contact with each student determined if they met the criteria for the study before the first interview took place Students were paid £10 per interview and travel expenses were also available. Most interviews took place in the institution the student was currently studying in although three took place in the students' homes.

The students were interviewed at three points during the transition process. The first in November / December 2002 as they were considering course choices and completing UCAS forms, the second in May / June 2003 as they completed their FEC course and the third in November / December 2004 as they were settling into their HEI. Six of the students did not continue to make the transition and were involved in the project until they decided not to continue. Therefore five were interviewed only once and one was interviewed twice. There were a variety of reasons for them not continuing including finding work instead or deciding to complete another year at their FEC before making the transition to an HEI. The data for these students has been looked at along side that of the ten students who did continue and has been used in the sections where their experiences were relevant.

The students involved attended five of the FECs in Fife and Tayside and they progressed to three HEIs in this area and two HEIs outwith the area. They were studying a range of Further and Higher Education courses including HNC, HND, Highers and Access courses. They all progressed to degree courses in either a University or a College of Further and Higher Education. Four went into first year,

one into second year and five into third year. Of the students who continued three described themselves as being dyslexic, one as having a physical disability, one as having a medical condition, two as having mental health difficulties (MHD) and three as having a learning disability (LD) and MHD. Of the students who began the project but did not progress three said they had mental health difficulties, one was dyslexic, one had a physical disability and one a medical condition. The students ranged in age from nineteen to forty seven years old.

The Staff:

In addition to the students, forty-five members of staff from all the colleges and universities in the Fife and Tayside area were interviewed. This was to gain a clearer picture of the structures and support available within these institutions, what information and advice is given to students and potential students, and what knowledge and experience both teaching and support staff had in the area of transition and providing support to disabled students.

The staff were identified by the Project Leader contacting the institutions with information about the research and the criterion for the staff to be interviewed which was that they had a role with transition and / or support of students. Staff were self-selecting and the results must be considered with this in mind.

Thirty-three college staff were interviewed between April – June 2003 and twelve university staff were interviewed in February – March 2004. As with the students a semi structured interview format was used with the interview schedules for each sector covering similar areas but within the context of that sector. The larger number of FEC staff interviewed was because of both the number of FECs in the area and the structure of FECs.

Analysis:

The interviews were all recorded using a digital recorder and transferred to computer for storage and transcribing. All interviews were transcribed fully and these transcripts were used for the analysis. The analysis was done using the "Framework" method (Ritchie, J. & Lewis, J., 2003). The analysis is almost purely qualitative as the numbers and nature of the research do not allow for statistical analysis and this was not the focus of the study. The transcripts were analysed using both the target areas of the research proposal and themes that were common through the student and staff responses. This allowed development of the five areas used to structure the following results and discussion section of the report. These areas are: Application & Transition, Preparation & Information, Support, Communication and Teaching & Learning Issues.

Results and Discussion

This section is divided into five areas each looking at an aspect of the transition experience. There is some overlap between these sections but they broadly divide the data gathered in the interviews. The students saw many of the issues they raised as relevant to all students moving on but disability issues added to the stress of transition.

Application & Information:

Overall the information and guidance given to students regarding application to an HEI and other issues associated with this was dependent on the course they were studying in their FEC and the knowledge and interest of their course tutors. The main areas for concern raised were obtaining specific course and timetabling information, clarity of articulation information and information and support with financial applications, particularly DSA.

Application:

Most students reported that they were happy with the level of support from college staff with completing application forms and writing personal statements. In the staff interviews it became clear that all of the FECs involved had support structures based around UCAS and that they ran several sessions on UCAS application in the first term. Responsibility for this was between student support services and course tutors.

Although students found support with completing their UCAS forms was of a high standard, they found guidance about the range of options was limited or confusing. They said this was compounded by the deadline for UCAS applications, which they felt was too early. This was especially true for students doing only one year at the FEC before moving on. Students felt that the deadline was too early to make informed choices and therefore there was too much pressure on making this choice. At the time of application they were not even sure they wanted to or could manage degree level study but were being advised that they had to choose subjects.

"I really wanted the guidance however we're being forced to apply now, which is a nightmare as no one can tell me if I can function in the subjects that interest me…I had to go on my instincts" (Student with MHD & LD)

It was not clear to the students that many HEI courses are flexible. Most HEI courses allow change of course during the first year so students do not have to continue studying the subject they initially applied for. The students did not appear to be aware of this and believed that the course choices they made on the UCAS form were fixed if they were accepted by the HEI. A couple wondered whether they had made the right choice and if their choice may have been different given more time and information.

"A lot of information was available after the UCAS closing date…there are times when I think, have I made the right decision, should I have gone for a different course?"
(Student with dyslexia).

This was also raised by both staff groups who said that UCAS timing was not in the interests of the students who come from FECs.

Pre – course information:

Over the summer before starting their HEI course all the students received information packs from their HEI but the majority felt these had too much information that was not relevant to them.

"In a sense you're given a lot of information…almost bombarded" (Student with MHD).

As a result several reported difficulty in extracting the information relevant to them and so found they had missed information that would have benefited them, particularly regarding induction and transition courses. The students who had particular difficulty with this were those with MHD or dyslexia.

"I got a pack [pre – course] but it was all too much…I didn't really know what applied to me" (Student with MHD).

However, from the HEI staff interviews it was clear that this was recognised and some sent information about transition courses, summer schools and student support services separately from other information to ensure it was not missed.

The content of the information received from HEIs was mentioned by most of the students. They found it did not contain the detail about course content, structure, assessment methods and timetabling that they wanted in order to make an informed choice. They particularly wanted concrete course information and found this was either not available or was given very close to the start of term. Therefore it was of no use in helping choose courses within the UCAS system or preparing for the transition.

"Needed them to tell you of the content of what you would be studying and what you should be reading up before you went" (Student with dyslexia).

Staff also saw the need for more detailed information about course choices, as many students only consider the routes where there are articulation agreements from their course into a specific HEI. They do not look wider than those courses or institutions. Some staff also felt that departments limited the choices they told students about, which was not always in the students' best interests. They thought that awareness of all options available needed to be raised with students when applying to HEIs.

Two HEI staff highlighted the need to be honest with students about course content and that they need to know exactly what a course involves before they sign up. HEI staff said that information and publicity was sent to all FECs but some felt that the communication of this information to students was patchy. There was a feeling from both sectors that the student's decision about when to

transfer from an HNC / D to a degree varied according to the individual need and circumstance and there was a perception that the advice given to students may be influenced by institutional priorities.

"There is tension because of the funding system…competition & overlap" (FEC staff).

The students' perception was that this affected the accuracy, detail and content of information given in prospectuses and on Open Days, particularly information about available support.

Most of the students also raised issues about the advice and information given about Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). Several reported being given conflicting advice about SAAS and DSA forms. Support for completing these forms was varied in both FECs and HEIs. Some students, particularly those with MHD had no knowledge of DSA or the eligibility criteria. This was particularly relevant for one student who had learning difficulties (but was not diagnosed as dyslexic) and a long term MHD for which she was on medication. She was unable to access DSA through her learning difficulties and did not know that her MHD would qualify. DSA advice was given to some students by staff at their FEC but they felt it was not always thorough enough or early enough. However some students did receive good DSA support from the FEC and went to their HEI with the form complete as far as was possible. These tended to be students who had already been receiving DSA.

Articulation:

Students also had difficulty with the articulation information provided by FECs. They reported that information they were given by course staff did not always match what they were then told by the HEI. Often articulation agreements were not acknowledged by both sides or access was to a lower year than the student had believed. Both FEC and HEI staff raised this issue and thought there needed to be more collaboration between the institutions with an ongoing review of existing articulation arrangements.

"We need to be sure of what's on offer so we can give students realistic goals" (FEC staff).

On a similar theme, three of the students reported difficulty with the clarity of information about the procedure for accepting places when coming from an HNC / D. They were unsure of how to inform the HEI that they had passed the HND or if they needed to do this. As a result they almost lost their place and the time they had for preparation was limited.

Open Days / visits:

All but one of the students attended an Open Day prior to starting their course and the general impression was that these were good for orientation but not for getting the detailed information they were looking for. One student said it helped clarify her thinking and gave her confidence that going to university was achievable for

her. However it was still too vague on the information she was looking for particularly in relation to course content and available support. This was the impression most of the students had. In one case the student said that the vagueness of the Open Day gave a very negative impression of the institution (Note: this institution was outwith the Forum area). Eight of the ten students arranged personal visits over the summer before starting at the HEI and found these much more useful in getting the information they needed.

"Felt we got more time actually phoning up and making an appointment" (Student with a physical disability).

This vagueness was also commented on by some FEC staff who said the Open Days needed to be more focused to give the students the information they need. This was felt to be particularly important for students coming from FECs as most were mature students and were more focused on the course than university life itself. Mature students have different motivations and requirements than the school leaver group. For the students interviewed the main factors in institution choice were location (not having to move home), course and exam structure, support, disability statements (written statement of the institution's commitment to supporting disabled students) and reputation.

Recommendations:

- **Course descriptions should include detailed information about content, structure, assessments, placements, accessibility and where possible timetabling.**

- **Information relevant to students' decision making should be clearly available in advance of UCAS deadlines.**

- **Consideration should be given to changing the UCAS timescales to reflect the needs of students on FEC courses allowing them time to make more informed choices. At present the timescale is not in the interests of FEC students, particularly those undertaking a 1-year course.**

- **Open Days should be structured to ensure they address the need of different groups of students. Students should be consulted in this process.**

- **Accessibility to students of information on the full range of information on progression routes open to them should be reviewed and dissemination improved.**

Preparation & Transition:

Preparation for moving on was something that the students in the project spent a significant amount of time on. Most were very aware of exactly what support they needed and that they needed this to be in place when they moved. Eight of the students were mature students returning to education for a variety of reasons. All

had had a negative experience of education at school and attending an FEC was a step into an area they had little confidence in. The other two students had gone to the FEC from school specifically as a bridge to an HEI.

Student planning for transition:

All but two of the students did extensive pre course planning for transition with seven visiting the HEI two or more times pre course. Their main priorities were gathering detailed course information, meeting the disability contact and arranging support early, orientation and finding out about finance and funding. Eight mentioned disability support as a priority. For one student this was her second attempt to progress, the first having failed because she underestimated the impact of her epilepsy, which became more severe during the course. Originally she had not done any pre – course planning in relation to support and did not even realise she could access learning support.

"I just wouldn't have bothered because learning support you don't think would be for medical conditions" (Student with epilepsy).

This time she made several visits to arrange support in both her course and residences. Another student left the organisation of support until she attended the induction week. She noted that if she realised the timescales involved she would have begun this process much earlier.

Although some could not begin organising support until quite late in the summer because of waiting for HND results, eight of the students had made several visits to their chosen HEI specifically to get support organised. They recognised that this was essential to their successful transition and made the effort to have this in place. Most students also mentioned having a key contact person who knew their needs and whom they could trust as an important element to successful transition.

FEC preparation for HE learning:

All the students said they found their FEC experience good for returning to education, developing necessary skills and increasing their confidence. Five of the ten said that their experience had increased their expectations without which they would not have been going to the HEI.

"[Study at college] Gave me the confidence to go and do something" (Student with dyslexia & MHD).

They had returned to education with the FEC as their final destination but their success within the FEC environment and the encouragement of staff made them realise they could go further. The other five students had returned with the intention of progressing to a degree course. However they also felt their FEC experience was a good stepping stone, so for all the students, time at an FEC was seen as preparation for moving on in itself.

Organised preparation for HE was dependent on the course they were studying.

"The Access course got the best of things like that" (Student with MHD).

Those students on a specific Access course had a preparation for HE unit as part of the course that they received credit for. This meant they had protected time to look at study skills, university learning, HEI visits, etc. The students who did this reported that they found it useful if a bit tedious at the time. They said it gave a clearer idea of what would be expected and helped clarify some misconceptions they had about HEI environments. Once they were on their degree course they said it was of benefit and they were glad they had access to this unit. At least one student who did not have access to this kind of preparation said it should be open to every student thinking of moving to an HEI regardless of the FEC course they were studying. There was a general feeling that there was no clear agreement between FECs and HEIs regarding responsibility for preparation and transition.

The other students in the study did not have access to this level of preparation. They mentioned some study skills seminars being advertised. However, as these were not compulsory or credited-bearing most students found it difficult to attend given the pressures of their coursework. One student was receiving study support because of her dyslexia at her FEC and was able to use this to look at HEI study techniques.

Some students said that individual tutors would mention how assignments should be written at degree level and most reported that their courses did become more difficult and they were expected to be more autonomous in their learning as the year progressed. This was mentioned by some FEC staff as something they tried to incorporate into their teaching, however they found it difficult to marry this with the FEC supportive ethos. The students felt that this was dependent on the interest and experience of the tutor. They all found that there was a huge leap in learning when they got to their new institution.

"It's such a major change…we had no sense of that" (Student with dyslexia &

MHD).

Students, including those who did Access courses, felt that although the study skills preparation they got was useful, it was not in enough depth.

"HE preparation was good but I think it could have been a wee bit more in depth"
(Student with dyslexia).

They felt that what they really needed was experience of the HEI environment or experience of the same teaching styles.

"On the HND they could have made it a bit more like the university" (Student with dyslexia & MHD).

"A lecture in a lecture hall would have been good" (Student with dyslexia).

One FEC staff interviewee mentioned a specific link one of their courses has with a local HEI in which the students do 7 labs and an exam there. This was arranged because they realised their HND students were missing a particular curricular area. The staff member felt this was very useful as it gave the students direct experience of HEI learning and assessment as well as giving the students contact with the class they would join if they progressed to that degree.

Both staff groups felt that transition work was needed for students but highlighted difficulties with this. FEC staff saw the need for preparing students for the different environment at HEIs but spoke of lack of time and funding for this. Timetables are very tight and there is not funding built in to courses for preparation other than in the Access courses.

"If we had sufficient staff we could alter the delivery to give preparation" (FEC staff).

Some staff also said that HEIs prefer to do this preparation themselves to ensure consistency. HEI staff also spoke of the need for students to be better prepared for the differences in learning environments.

Bridging / transition information and support:

All the students mentioned that their HEI ran short sessions on study skills in the induction week and that these were ongoing through the first term. Most attended some of these sessions and found them useful particularly for essay structure and referencing, as this was very different from on their FEC courses. A few of the students were aware of pre – term transition courses and that some of these were specifically for students coming from FECs. One student was told attendance at the transition course was compulsory although she later found this was not the case. However she stated that the course was very good and thought all students moving from FECs to HEIs should attend. She also said that had she not been told it was compulsory she would not have gone. Other students also felt that a bridging or transition course was essential for successful transition but acknowledged that that they had not recognised this as a priority amongst the other things that needed to be arranged.

"Bridging courses are crucial" (Student with MHD).

"*The bridging sessions have been really useful"* (Student with dyslexia)

Two HEIs invite all FE students to attend specific FE – HE bridging courses. They felt that most FEC students at present were not well prepared and that their concept of learning in an HEI didn't match reality.

The students said that Open Days gave them orientation but not experience of HEI learning. They suggested access to lectures, shadowing a student or having visiting lecturers into the FEC course would be useful. However they acknowledged that in the present system this was not possible as the course timetables are very tight and staff in both sectors do not have the time or resources to pursue this.

Some students also felt that the FEC had little interest in preparation because the student was not returning to them so there was little incentive to make time in the course.

"Once they've [the college] had you for your time that's it really… that's the impression I got" (Student with LD & MHD).

"Get the feeling at NC and HNC they will do anything for you because they are relying on you to come back…impression that if you're not coming back next year there's no interest in you" (Student with a physical disability).

While studying for his HNC this student (quoted above) found teaching staff were good at giving guidance about progression routes within the FEC. However, once he was on the HND and there were no further courses within that FEC he was not able to get guidance time regarding progression out with the institution.

The students also noted that it would have been useful to speak to a disabled student who was currently studying a similar course at their preferred HEI. They thought this would have raised their awareness of the difficulties they might encounter and issues such as timescales for accessing funding and support. They found on Open Days that the questions they had were not answered fully and what they were told about support services was for all students and therefore too general for them. Several suggested being able to speak to someone who had similar difficulties accessing their course would be of benefit.

"I would have liked to have a meeting with other people with my kind of learning problems" (Student with LD & MHD).

"I would really have liked to talk to a student with a disability about how they managed to get through" (Student with dyslexia).

<u>Student concerns:</u>

The students had several concerns prior to moving on both disability related and general. Disability related concerns included coping with the change in teaching environment, that their disability would not be recognised, how they would be assessed and getting a key person they could trust to help. Having a key or named contact was mentioned by students as important as they would have an overview of the students' situation.

"It takes me a good couple of hours to explain [the implications of my disabilities] it's good to have someone who can tell the key areas…I've spent so much time explaining…" (Student with dyslexia & MHD).

Other concerns were about coping with the level of work or that staff would not be as in touch with the students as they were at the FEC, preconceived ideas about who goes to and teaches at universities and debt.

Most of their concerns would be echoed by all students making the transition, however they were clearly concerned about the added impact of their disability on these issues. They saw it as an additional stress to be dealt with that impacted on everything else.

> *"It's different being disabled and thinking about £13,000 of debt"* (Student with dyslexia & MHD).

Many of them expressed fear of failure, of not coping or fitting in and the financial implications of not succeeding. Their previous negative educational experiences increased these fears.

Recommendations:

- **Active recruitment and retention of disabled student ambassadors would benefit prospective students by giving them the opportunity to learn about the extent to which the support offered by the institution operates effectively.**

- **The timing and effectiveness of support given to disabled students transferring from HNC / D programmes to second and third year of degree programmes should be reviewed.**

- **All students would benefit from access to accredited preparation for HE learning regardless of the FEC course they are studying.**

- **Preparation for HE would be of greater benefit to students if it included formal learning opportunities within an HE setting and with HEI teaching staff.**

- **Disabled students would benefit from having an identified key worker within institutions who would have an overview of that student's situation.**

Support:

Although the majority of the students said that the support they received in both sectors was appropriate, they all faced difficulties at some level. Even those who saw their overall experience as positive identified several small difficulties that had the potential to have a significant impact. Comments on support in both sectors ranged from it being non-existent to never having been anywhere that gave so much support for learning. They saw the attitude of individual staff as very important in determining how they managed any difficulties with support. If the student felt staff were understanding and working with them to overcome these or suggest alternatives they would rate the support as positive. Those faced with negative reactions or who perceived they were being hindered found these same difficulties much more difficult and stressful.

Most of the difficulties faced by the students were around time delays, requirements not being communicated effectively to tutors and lack of resources. The issues they faced in organising support at their HEIs resulted in a more difficult and stressful transition and in one case this had led to the student leaving the course altogether. The main difficulty for most was the delay in being assessed for support and in particular with accessing DSA funding.

Accessing / organising support:

When talking about access to support at both FECs and HEIs students said they had realised that they had to label themselves as disabled in order to access funding and support. Many of the students in this study said they would not see themselves as disabled but were aware that this was the means to accessing services. This was particularly true in HEIs where the size of the organisation meant that support arrangements tended to be more formally organised. It was perceived that there was less scope for flexibility in HE that was available in FE to support students who had difficulty accessing courses but no official diagnosis.

Most students expected at least the same if not a better level of support at the HEI compared to their FEC. They thought there would be more experience of supporting disabled students, better funding and that it would be more organised. However, they realised they had made assumptions and the different organisation did not necessarily lead to better support. They found the support was more structured in many ways but there was no one person with responsibility or an overview of their support. It felt fragmented and in many cases poor communication led to the student having to restate their requirements and the reason for these many times. FEC staff thought that support at HEIs was not so apparent for a variety of reasons and thought that the support services in HEIs needed to be very visual and well promoted to be accessible to students.

Students found they were expected to be proactive and organise quite complex processes to get the support they required e.g. finding and retaining non medical support staff such as note takers and scribes. There was no recognition that the very things they needed support with to learn made the independent organisation of this support difficult.

"The emphasis is very much on yourself to do it" (Student with dyslexia).

Several HEI staff made reference to the need for students to have the ability to seek out and organise support but this needs to be balanced with the implications of each student's disability.

One of the biggest difficulties with transition and support faced by the students in the study was not the actual disability and its implications but the time and energy needed to organise and fight for support. They reported losing valuable orientation and teaching time to chase appropriate people and follow up issues to do with support and funding.

"The first week I never even got into the library or computer suite because every

spare minute was spent chasing people" (Student with a physical disability).

These students need support because they are already at a disadvantage in terms of learning. However the time they have to spend in organising that support puts them at an even greater disadvantage by leaving them even further behind in work and study. One student considered deferring for a year to ensure support would be in place for the start of the course, however he was concerned he would lose momentum and not return. Another student had already left the course when I returned to interview for the third time specifically because support had not been organised and his perception of a lack of interest being shown by the HEI of the impact this was having. There were also timetabling difficulties but these would have been manageable if the assessed support had been provided.

"I feel as if financially and with the lack of help that I've been forced out" (Student with a physical disability).

Again several students identified having a key contact person they trusted to communicate relevant information and coordinate support as essential to organisation of their support and therefore a successful transition. Some staff said that students left arranging HEI support to the last minute. However in this study most of the students spent a lot of time pre-course organising support and informed the HEI early of their requirements.

DSA:

Four students had DSA funding at college so their support was very similar at the HEI as it had been in the FEC. For the other students either they were not eligible for DSA or they were applying for the first time. They were all surprised by the length of time it took to apply, to be assessed and to organise support. Most were in the process of being assessed or were waiting for equipment to arrive or other support to begin when interviewed for the third time in November 2003. They were effectively managing the first semester / term without the necessary support and were therefore at a disadvantage.

"I could know how to use the equipment and actually put everything into practice…could just concentrate on the work" (Student with dyslexia).

"It will probably be the middle of December (before my equipment arrives), which means I've lost a whole semester…seems to take forever" (Student with epilepsy).

Many had been given loan equipment but were concerned about actually getting their own equipment. Those who had DSA on their FEC course were not waiting for equipment but still had delays in receiving ongoing funding.

Having a diagnosis that "fitted" one of the categories for the DSA was a major issue for some of the students in the study, particularly those with learning

difficulties that did not meet the criteria for dyslexia. If they did not "fit a box" for DSA they felt that the HEI did not have the structures in place to support them.

"If I get a diagnosis everything is released and without it you get nothing…if you don't fit the box you get nothing" (Student with dyslexia & LD).

Although it was acknowledged that these students had significant difficulties, there seemed to be no alternative routes to accessing support. The structures in FECs seemed to give staff greater scope to respond to students not eligible for DSA.

One student commented that SAAS were letting the institutions down with the time it took to access funding. Staff from both sectors were aware of the time it could take to access funding through DSA. They also felt that it was more difficult for students with learning difficulties as they had to have much more evidence than those students with other disabilities. One HEI staff interviewee believed that institutions should be funded directly rather than extending DSA as this would mean more holistic support for all students who needed it rather than each having to prove their eligibility.

"We should be prepared to support students more holistically…don't think DSA expansion is the best use of public funds…should fund institutions properly to support students needs" (HEI staff).

Although this solution was not mentioned specifically by other staff or students, several referred to the difference in proof required by students with learning difficulties or MHD compared to those with a medical condition or physical disability. They perceived the system as unfair and that funding individuals in this way caused many of the delays with student support.

"All students have learning needs and every student should have access to support – having to attach a label does not make sense to me" (HEI Staff).

"There's no support (at the HEI) because I'm not supposed to be disabled – no DSA" (Student with LD & undisclosed MHD).

"I don't know what I'm entitled to because I need an interview with the Access centre and I can't get that until I have a psychologists assessment under 2 years old" (Student with MHD & Dyslexia).

"Different disabilities seem to have different levels of evidence needed" (HEI Staff).

If support for disabled students was funded in a way that allowed institutions to embed support systems this could lead to more holistic support.

Some students had little knowledge of DSA and were unaware of the criteria for eligibility; specifically two students who had significant MHD did not know this could entitle them to DSA funding and support. One was accessing some support from counselling services but staff there either did not know about DSA funding or were not communicating this to the student therefore she saw no benefit in disclosing her MHD to those assessing her for learning support.

Delays in support provision led to students being disadvantaged further and this increased stress levels. Given that most of the students in this study were mature returners and incurring significant debt to return to education, they were often concerned that they were not going to be able to complete the course. Only one student had received his DSA before being interviewed in November 2003 and the others were all still waiting. This impacted on all areas of their study and all spoke of having to spend valuable learning time organising support.

Staffing:

As mentioned earlier most of the students had had negative early experiences of education and most had left school early with low expectations and assuming they were not able to cope academically. This was often due to undiagnosed learning difficulties. For five of the students their disability was diagnosed either just before or during the FEC course. They all experienced difficulties coming to terms with the implications of this. Students who already had a diagnosis had had the chance to develop and become familiar with alternative learning strategies.

They identified staff attitudes as key to successful support provision. Staff who did not acknowledge the disability or the extent of the impact this could have on learning caused the most difficulties. This was shown clearly by two students with MHD who found staff accepted they had difficulties but underestimated the impact of this equating it to a normal fear of public speaking or waking up feeling a bit down. However most students in the study had high praise for individual staff in support services and teaching departments even if they had difficulties with the actual support received. They felt this was more to do with lack of resources and funding than an unwillingness to help.

The students felt that awareness training for staff was not in depth enough and that it needed to be more specific as many staff who had supposedly had training did not demonstrate this in their dealings with students.

"[There is the] philosophy that they have this marvellous awareness training but I don't see anyone putting it into practice" (Student with dyslexia).

This was raised by staff as well who said the training they had was very general and they would benefit from more specific training on how to support students with different disabilities in a teaching situation.

Students highlighted that the majority of staff in both sectors were open to supporting students and had a positive attitude but were so overstretched that

they did not have the time to give the necessary support. Again this was echoed by staff who said that they are not given additional time to support students or prepare materials in alternative formats. One HEI disability officer said that the time they had for support and pastoral care in general was being heavily cut and it was not possible to give all students support in the available time. This means that it is very dependent on the staff member to take time from other areas to devote to this. Staff felt that the need for better support for disabled students was recognised but that more infrastructure work is needed to enable this. They felt that the DDA (1995) had raised student awareness and expectations of support as well as releasing more funds and raising the importance of disability support with management and external agencies such as the SQA. However they felt this was a long way from being embedded in institutional systems – a view echoed by some of the students.

"It's not the individual lecturer's fault; it's the institution as a whole" (Student with a physical disability).

Although most staff were seen as very willing, one support services staff member in particular appeared to be resistant to looking at any alternatives with one student who the staff member did not diagnose as dyslexic despite acknowledging that others would diagnose dyslexia. This meant the student was unable to access DSA funding and was having difficulty getting her needs recognised by anyone running her course. She was very clear about her requirements and with assistance was achieving high grades, near the top of the class.

"If I have to do it without any allowances you can forget it…I won't be able to produce anything worthwhile" (Student with MHD & LD).

She stated clearly that she would not manage without a permanent replacement for the laptop that she currently had on loan. The stress this was causing was impacting on her ability to study and on her home life.

Students identified that there was considerable variation in the level of support (and occasionally commitment) given by different departmental disability officers in HEIs. Many of these disability officers were part time and had been allocated the role rather than choosing it. There were issues as to the time available for them to carry out the role in addition to their teaching and research duties and the ease with which they could be contacted.

"At university you do all the running…it's a lot of running and there's very little reward to be found" (Student with LD & MHD).

The service received by students was dependent on the attitude and commitment of the member of staff. This view was backed up by the staff interviews with departmental disability officers where they reported being given no protected time to support students adequately. Other staff reported relying heavily on specialist staff for information and said they would usually refer all disability queries to those staff.

The students felt that this lack of dedicated time made it difficult for institutions to fulfil their commitment to disability issues. As such some students perceived that disability issues were of low priority.

Students who were dissatisfied with the support and / or staff attitudes found it difficult to complain and two reported feeling intimidated by the complaints procedure, as this would involve dealing with the staff they were complaining about. They reported feeling they were not listened to and feeling they were going in circles.

Other support issues:

Students had different experiences related to the impact that their disability had on other areas of life related to studying and whether this was acknowledged. One found that staff recognised that his memory and organisational difficulties would also affect his ability to organise support, complete forms and attend bridging courses. They responded by giving him reminders and support to organise himself.

> *"Once she [student advisor – HEI] realised I had problems she just took over"* (Student with MHD).

However most students found that the impact of their disability was recognised in relation to teaching and learning but not in other areas.

Another issue for support in HEIs raised by the students was the separation between the schools/faculties. Students studying courses in more than one school/faculty experienced huge variation in support, communication and attitude. Some were very responsive and had robust support structures where others did not. This was not so much of an issue in FECs and most students found these to be more responsive and that support services were more coordinated and student centred. They had similar difficulties with teaching staff in both sectors but found the arrangement of support services in FECs made this easier to deal with.

Representation and reality:

Several of the students spoke about the difference between what they were told would happen once they were in the HEI and what actually happened when they began their course. This was in relation to assessment and provision of support, timetabling, course content and communication. They reported that they were promised good support by the HEI when they were making their choices. However, in reality when they got there these promises were not always fulfilled. Although not as relevant to this transition, this was an issue in FECs as well and staff there acknowledged this.

> *"There's a gap between the representation of what goes on and reality"* (FEC staff).

Four of the students felt there was a marked difference between representation and reality at HEIs regarding support. They believed staff were well meaning but the structures were not in place to implement promises made and that communication between departments was inconsistent. These students felt strongly that the institutions made considerable effort to recruit them by indicating that a significant level of support would be available but once recruited this level of commitment was not always maintained.

> *" The rhetoric is great but the reality is grim"* (Students with LD & MHD).

They felt they were seen as a low priority by the institution as a whole. Several students had used the reputation for support and promises of reassessment and provision of support to choose one institution over another. They felt very angry, disappointed and disillusioned at the perceived lack of interest in providing that support once they were there.

Recommendations:

- **Support for disabled students should, whenever possible, be embedded within the institutions mainstream structures e.g. software to support dyslexic students being on the network and accessible on all computers.**

- **There should be greater clarity about the eligibility criteria for accessing different types of support and this information should be available during the application process.**

- **Disabled students should be made aware of the timescales involved in accessing support and funding so that they can begin this process at an appropriate time.**

- **The operation of the role of the departmental disability officer should be reviewed to ensure consistency and appropriateness of training, caseloading and ongoing support.**

- **Staff and students should be consulted about the content and focus of disability awareness training for staff.**

- **The application process and assessment for DSA should be reviewed to minimise the delays experienced by disabled students accessing this support.**

Communication:

Another central theme that came from all the interviews related to communication within and between sectors as well as with the students. Students identified poor communication as the reason for many of the difficulties they faced and staff identified it as causing delays in the implementation of support. Where communication was good the benefits for students were very noticeable. They found the transition easier and their support was consistent. When it failed the

student felt unsupported and their experience of transition was quite negative. The key for the students was to have a key contact person in each institution who was able to help with any queries they had and coordinate support.

Communication within institutions:

Students identified effective communication between support services and teaching staff as essential. They felt that if this was not happening or was delayed much of their time was taken up with explaining over and over what their difficulties were and what support they needed. When there was effective communication between these departments students found that staff were already aware of their needs and they just had to identify themselves when they started the course. They felt that it was important to make sure information was only shared with those who needed to know but that effective communication was essential to successful implementation of support. Transition was most successful for those students whose support requirements had been communicated on time to the relevant teaching staff. When communication was delayed or did not happen, the students felt disadvantaged.

These difficulties with internal communication were recognised and mentioned by most of the staff interviewed although some thought it was adequate. In HEIs staff felt that the modular systems and staff turnover made communication regarding support difficult. They also found that the quality of communication varied dependent on the department. Support staff in both sectors expressed concern that information was passed to course leaders but that it was not passed further. They saw failure of communication as the prime cause of failure of support.

> *"There are instances where students are not getting the support and I know it's because of a lack of communication"* (HEI staff).

Staff from all of the HEIs said that electronic memo and database systems were being implemented to try and combat this difficulty. In all FECs some form of personal learning support plan was used to identify and communicate students support requirements. However staff said it was the students' responsibility to register with support services in order to give permission for information to be passed on. Some students do not want information to be passed further than support services and staff said the students must then acknowledge that this will limit the effectiveness of support.

Most of the students felt that support staff were sending details of support to teaching departments but they often found that it was not being passed further than the team leader. This resulted in the tutors actually involved with them not being aware of their requirements.

Communication between sectors:

Links between the sectors were seen as being quite varied. Students identified communication between sectors as an area for improvement. Prior to their transition several had expressed the expectation that there would be good communication between sectors and were surprised that this was not the case. In

particular they thought that there needed to be better communication between support services in each sector. Some students had appointments with HEI support staff organised for them by FEC staff. They found this of benefit and said it helped them to trust the HEI staff member because of this introduction. They felt that this was dependent on the individual staff member having a link rather than this being an institution wide link.

Most staff reported either having no communication with staff in the other sector or if they did it was on a very informal basis and usually in relation to individual students. The links appeared to be at the management level and other staff were unaware of ongoing communication and development of links. They identified local articulation links and direct entry as areas that would most benefit from better communication between the sectors. Staff from both groups talked of articulation links that had been running for years with no review and were aware that both the FEC and HEI courses involved had changed over that time. They were clear that articulation needed ongoing communication at provision level to make ensure courses matched and that students using these routes were coping with the transition.

Students in the study who had direct entry into second or third year of an HEI course did have difficulties with differences between the courses. They did not think there were links between the sectors and also thought communication needed to be improved to link courses better. Links between staff from different institutions tended to be within the same sector. Lack of communication between sectors was seen as a key area for improvement of support and transition for disabled students.

"If we were more proactive in our discussions and links between institutions disability would be encompassed in everything we did" (FEC staff).

Some of the students also thought there was a gap in responsibility caused by a lack of organised communication between the sectors. This led to the students and some staff being unsure of whose responsibility it was to support the students with issues they had regarding transition.

<u>Communication with students:</u>

The students' experience of communication by each sector with them was very varied. As with other issues students found it was often dependent on the department and individual staff attitudes. Some found that good communication was spoken about at Open Days and induction but did not happen when they needed to contact staff.

"There's a lot of rhetoric about we are here to help you. If you actually try to contact them you don't even get a response" (Student with LD & MHD).

As mentioned in the information section students were sent a variety of information by HEIs prior to starting their courses. Some HEI staff visited FEC

courses to give talks and promote courses at their institution. However HEI staff felt that they needed to communicate better with prospective students and that this communication must be meaningful and at an appropriate time. FEC staff felt that they were not always up to date with course and support developments in the HEIs and saw direct communication by HEIs with students as important.

The student comments on communication with them by both sectors would support the staff view. They felt information about some things was communicated very well e.g. UCAS information, Open Day information. However they often felt that detailed information about courses and support services in both sectors was variable. Some students found support services very easy to access and get information about where others were unsure where to go and were not given accurate information by course staff. Institutions appeared to be aware of the variability of information given to students and most were trying to make procedures and information about support more transparent.

Communication with the student also affected the provision of support. Effective communication with students at the assessment stage is vital to providing appropriate support. Most of the students had a positive experience of the assessment process however some felt they weren't listened to.

"The only way they [staff] are going to find out [about requirements] is when they ask
the student" (Student with dyslexia).

Two students in particular experienced difficulty getting their support needs understood. They perceived this as arising from a lack of effective communication between themselves and support services as well as poor interdepartmental communication. One of the students experienced this in both institutions and the other in the HEI only.

Recommendations:

- **A more structured approach to the dissemination of information between support staff and departments and between and within departments would benefit disabled students.**

- **There is scope for improved communication between support staff in FE and HE and teaching staff at departmental level, Particularly at HNC / D direct entry level.**

- **There is a need for increased opportunities in cross sector joint training on disability issues to enhance information flow and better awareness of respective roles.**

- **The accessibility of information and how it is disseminated to students should be reviewed.**

Teaching & Learning Issues:

This final section looks at issues to do with teaching and learning issues and their impact on the students' transition experience. The issues raised by students and staff regarding teaching and learning issues may not be significant on their own but when combined with communication and support difficulties had the potential to prevent successful transition. Therefore teaching and learning issues need to be looked at when addressing other areas.

Staff attitudes and awareness of disability and related transition issues:

Students found most teaching staff were approachable but that disability issues were often given low priority by these staff and seen as the remit of specialist staff. Students felt the awareness training received by teaching staff was not in depth enough and their understanding of different disabilities was often limited. As a result appropriate support and concessions were not always made available. They reported that the organisation of FEC support appeared to make these difficulties with teaching staff easier to cope with than in HEIs.

Students encountered very different attitudes from staff in both sectors. Some were very aware of the possible impact of disabilities on students access to learning and were willing to make changes such as preparing material in advance, giving direction about essential reading, putting material on the intranet, making themselves available for additional input, etc. However students experienced some staff who did not accept the impact of their disability and did not make allowances.

The students also found that in HEIs the teaching and learning environment varied greatly from one department to another. Students who were studying subjects in different schools found there was very good communication, understanding and support in some but that this was lacking in another. Staff also noted this separation between schools in HEIs and the difficulties it could lead to.

Teaching staff from both sectors thought they would be able to help students make the transition more easily if they understood and had more experience of the other sector and how students were taught there as well as how support was organised. However several also stated that there were no time allowances for this type of staff development, therefore it was unlikely to be possible.

Most FEC staff felt that they were able to be more responsive to students and that the level of personal contact they had with them was invaluable. They saw themselves as a bridge for adult returners and those needing an extra step between school and HEIs. They saw the emphasis in HEIs being on academic support while in FECs there was a greater level of pastoral support. Some staff in FECs felt that on occasion they may be too accessible and that a phased reduction in support as students moved to the end of their HN courses might help to promote the greater level of independent learning expected in HEIs.

"I think our students are less and less capable…we are teaching them to be helpless" (FEC staff).

One suggested that this could be more of a difficulty for students the longer they remained in an FEC before moving on. HEI staff raised this as a concern as well and thought FEC students came expecting the same level of support, which was not usually available in HEIs.

Students comments would support the view that support in FECs is more flexible. Their experience was that the issues they faced with teaching staff were similar in both sectors but the support available in the FECs reduced the impact of these issues. However, they also felt that the level of support at the FECs needed to reduce as they got closer to moving on. Several of the concerns they expressed at moving on were around their perception that HEI staff would not be accessible or approachable, that the support they needed would not be recognised and that they wouldn't cope with exams. For most students these fears were not realised and they were coping well with the teaching at their HEI. However they all found they had less contact with both teaching and support staff and that this was arranged more formally than in the FECs. Most communication they had with HEI staff was by email.

Again staff in both sectors said that time was an issue for them in developing more understanding of the other sector and of disability issues and support. Some expressed an interest in learning more about each other's methods, teaching, support and structures but did not have the time to do this. They felt they were being asked to do more and more with the same time and several expressed concern that the burden of the DDA should not be put on lecturers with no additional support.

<u>Direct entry / articulation issues:</u>

Another area of concern was the curriculum match between HN frameworks and degrees. Students found the information and units taught on HNC / D courses was often very different from what was taught in first and second year of the degree course they would be joining.

"For people who had been at the HEI, moving onto the degree didn't seem to be such a
shock because their standards and work practices were so much higher than ours"
(Student with epilepsy moving to a College of Further & Higher Education).

This difficulty for transition was also spoken about by the staff groups who felt that the HNC / D route was being pushed as the way into degrees but the structures to underpin this were not there. FEC staff felt that the reality of HND into third year of a degree was not accepted by HEIs and until this was accepted more widely there would always be difficulties with articulation and direct entry. In addition to this the limited communication between FEC and HEI staff at a curricular level mentioned in the previous section meant courses were not linking up as well as they could.

Both students and staff thought there was a further difficulty for direct entry students in that lecturers did not always realise some second or third year

students were in their first year at that institution so made assumptions about their knowledge.

"I think tutors see a third year class and think we will know about the university…doesn't click that they have some direct entry" (Student with dyslexia).

Several students mentioned that the transition would have been easier if they could have had access to detailed information on course content and reading lists with essential reading marked. They felt this would have given them the chance to read up and prepare for the course over the summer preceding the course. There was a feeling that this was time wasted that could have been used more constructively. Students whose disability meant they needed to spend significantly more time reading course material and becoming familiar with issues thought this would have been of great help. However most found they did not get this information until the induction week.

<u>Teaching, learning and assessment gap:</u>

One of the main differences noted by students was in the level of work. They all thought their course at the FEC was much easier than that at the HEI. Those who weren't aware came to realise that they had been heavily supported in their FEC and although aware that HEI learning was more independent, this was a bigger difference than anticipated.

"You always have the idea of what it is going to be like but that idea is never what it actually is" (Student with dyslexia).

They found the difference in assessment methods particularly difficult. As stated in the transition & preparation section the students thought that more experience of similar teaching and assessment would make the transition easier. They felt that FEC assessments were too relaxed to be effective in preparing them for the HEI environment. However, they also thought that HEIs needed to be more flexible in making changes to assessment and teaching methods to accommodate all students.

"The HND was more relaxed and easier to cope with…the degree is much more regimented" (Student with epilepsy).

Although most of the students saw FECs as being more flexible one student found difficulties with this in her FEC course as well as in the HEI.

"I feel as if I'm having to fit in with the way they do things rather than them trying to accommodate me…square peg trying to fit into a round hole" (Student with MHD & dyslexia).

Some staff mentioned that teaching departments need to identify the essential elements of their course as this would help both with flexibility of assessments and in giving students the relevant information when making course choices.

Staff from both sectors recognised that assessment styles were very different in FE and HE. In FE it was perceived that there were cycles of feedback in the learning and assessment process that is not present in HE. They found that some students expressed surprise at not having these feedback opportunities in HEI assessments. This was seen to be more of a difficulty for direct entry students as when coming to the HEI at that level, their first assessments count toward their final degree. They have less time to settle in and adjust to the differences than they would if entering first year and this could have a greater impact on their successful transition than for those entering earlier years.

Both students and staff saw the differences in the teaching and learning styles and environment as having a significant impact on the transition from FE to HE. Staff felt there was a need to recognise the leap between environments and that direct entry students would require transitions support to bridge this gap. As mentioned earlier, the students saw bridging support and courses as essential to successful transition. Some students felt they had very good support to bridge the gap but others felt this was limited. Some staff acknowledged that given the changing student group coming into HEIs now that they cannot expect students to be independent learners from day one. Therefore they need to recognise this in teaching and support.

Recommendations:

- **There is a need for a more rigorous and ongoing review of articulation links involving student and staff input with particular regard for disability issues.**

- **The lack of awareness of a number of teaching staff on the impact of disability on students in the learning environment should be addressed.**

- **Difficulties experienced by students in change of assessment methodologies in FE and HE should be addressed prior to transition.**

Conclusion:

"Transition for disabled students by it's very nature is a time of uncertainty and that uncertainty is deepened if support and the nature of that support is unknown" (Sanderson, A, 2001, p239).

Students and staff involved in this project were asked specifically what did help or would have helped the transition process. From this and the discussion they identified several key elements to successful transition. These were:

1. Having a key contact in each institution.

2. Clearer information on practical and financial support and how to access this.
3. More regular communication with staff in institutions particularly regarding transition processes and support.
4. For preparation for HE courses to be accredited and available to all students considering transition.
5. For preparation to be more focused and include practical experience of HE learning in an HEI setting.
6. Access to bridging / transitions courses.
7. The opportunity to speak to disabled students currently in the HEI.
8. More specific course information available pre – application.
9. Reading lists and specific course content information available during the summer prior to starting the course.

One of the main issues to arise from this research is that despite spending a lot of time finding out about and organising their support before beginning their course in an HEI, for most of the students support was not in place when they started. This resulted in them having to expend a lot of time and energy on getting their support implemented. They reported that most of the delays with their support were caused by delays with DSA and assessments of need. All the institutions had loan equipment and many had or were in the process of putting software on institution IT systems. This went some way to alleviating the impact of delays. However, the students still felt under pressure as long as they were using loan equipment.

All the students had praise for individual staff members in all the institutions. There were a few difficulties with individual staff but on the whole the students found staff to be understanding and supportive. They perceived most of the difficulties they had to be with external organisations such as SAAS and the UCAS system. They also placed responsibility on institutions giving disability issues a low priority and the structures needed for effective support being absent or underdeveloped.

Recommendations:

From the experiences of the students involved in this study and the comments of the staff groups the following recommendations present themselves:

1. Course descriptions should include detailed information about content, structure, assessments, placements, accessibility and where possible timetabling.
2. Information relevant to students' decision making should be clearly available in advance of UCAS deadlines.
3. Consideration should be given to changing the UCAS timescales to reflect the needs of students on FEC courses allowing them time to make more informed choices. At present the timescale is not in the interests of FEC students, particularly those undertaking a 1-year course.
4. Open Days should be structured to ensure they address the need of different groups of students. Students should be consulted in this process.

5. Accessibility to students of information on the full range of information on progression routes open to them should be reviewed and dissemination improved.
6. Active recruitment and retention of disabled student ambassadors would benefit prospective students by giving them the opportunity to learn about the extent to which the support offered by the institution operates effectively.
7. The timing and effectiveness of support given to disabled students transferring from HNC / D programmes to second and third year of degree programmes should be reviewed.
8. All students would benefit from access to accredited preparation for HE learning regardless of the FEC course they are studying.
9. Preparation for HE would be of greater benefit to students if it included formal learning opportunities within an HE setting and with HEI teaching staff.
10. Disabled students would benefit from having an identified key worker within institutions who would have an overview of that student's situation.
11. Support for disabled students should, whenever possible, be embedded within the institutions mainstream structures e.g. software to support dyslexic students being on the network and accessible on all computers.
12. There should be greater clarity about the eligibility criteria for accessing different types of support and this information should be available during the application process.
13. Disabled students should be made aware of the timescales involved in accessing support and funding so that they can begin this process at an appropriate time.
14. The operation of the role of the departmental disability officer should be reviewed to ensure consistency and appropriateness of training, caseloading and ongoing support.
15. Staff and students should be consulted about the content and focus of disability awareness training for staff.
16. The application process and assessment for DSA should be reviewed to minimise the delays experienced by disabled students accessing this support.
17. A more structured approach to the dissemination of information between support staff and departments and between and within departments would benefit disabled students.
18. There is scope for improved communication between support staff in FE and HE and teaching staff at departmental level, Particularly at HNC / D direct entry level.
19. There is a need for increased opportunities in cross sector joint training on disability issues to enhance information flow and better awareness of respective roles.
20. The accessibility of information and how it is disseminated to students should be reviewed.
21. There is a need for a more rigorous and ongoing review of articulation links involving student and staff input with particular regard for disability issues.
22. The lack of awareness of a number of teaching staff on the impact of disability on students in the learning environment should be addressed.

23. Difficulties experienced by students in change of assessment methodologies in Fe and HE should be addressed prior to transition.

The Project Leader would like to thank the students who gave their time and spoke honestly about their positive and negative experiences within Further and Higher Education and during the transition process. Without their continued cooperation this research would not have been possible.

Thanks are also due to all the staff who took part as this placed the students perspectives within the institutional context and was essential to the project leader's understanding of Further and Higher Education.

The Project Leader made contact with eight of the students involved in August 2004. Six had successfully completed their first year at the HEI and either had their degree or were returning to continue their education at that institution. One student, as mentioned in the report had already left his course when interviewed in November 2003. The final student also left the course in March 2004 due to stress and a lack of understanding and support from institution and placement staff. This student now has their own business but feels let down by education and states they would not return to formal education again.

Contact with the other two students was attempted but not successful.

Rebecca Oosterhoorn MA (Hons), MSW, August 2004.

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Appendix 1: Project Proposal

FIFE & TAYSIDE WIDER ACCESS FORUM

PROJECT PROPOSAL

It is important that the widening access in agenda includes support for those with disabilities. There is a growing demand for places Further Education from students with disabilities who have been supported through the school system and there is justified expectation on their part that they will have the opportunity to progress to HE. The implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act will place responsibilities on FE to HE to respond effectively to this demand.

The purpose of this proposal is to examine the experience of students with identified disabilities in the transition from FE to HE.

The project is based on a proposal to SHEFC from Lothian Colleges and Universities in Lothian which did not go forward owing to staffing changes. No other Forum is currently undertaking a project on disability.

It is expected that the project will run from August 2002 to August 2004. This will allow a Project Co-ordinator to be in place and to have initial research carried out to identify students who will be making choices and filling in UCAS forms around November/December 2002.

This will give a period of time to follow first year students in HE from September 2003 to February/March 2004.

Writing up of the project will take place from Easter Break 2004 to end of project August 2004.

Dissemination will take place at the last planned conference of the Forum in 2004.

Aims

This Project will:

- examine the experience of students with special needs and disabilities progressing from FE to HE with particular regard to the variety of support mechanisms available
- identify current practice with regard to collaboration between Institutions concerning students with disabilities
- consider implications of SDA Act on transitional support for students
- identify perceptions of support from a staff and student perspective
- investigate retention levels in both FE and HE
- research the differential in funding and support in FE and HE
- make recommendations in relation to good practice and disseminate findings throughout the Forum region. Further dissemination will follow to other Forums

Specific Objectives

The Project will, in relation to students with special needs and disabilities, seek to:

- investigate how and why students in FE choose a particular programme of study and/or Institution at HE level

- identify information necessary to help students make these choices

- investigate access to Open days, 'taster' sessions, personal visits and other pre-sessional activities

- identify the nature of information about individuals that is passed between Institutions and the means of doing so

- evaluate and compare individual student experiences of transition and how these relate to particular routes of progression – e.g., Access courses, Highers, HNC/HND – and particular choices of programme of study

- evaluate staff perception of support in place for students or prospective students and compare with the students' perception

- evaluate the impact of particular provisions of support in learning, I.T., English language difficulties, in addition to personal support

- evaluate the impact of extrinsic factors such as paid employment, dependants, finance

- take note of factors in relation to curriculum design, programme delivery and

- assessment strategies which affect the student's ability to succeed in managing the transition from FE to HE

- monitor student progress within the 1st year at university, identifying where possible coping strategies and factors affecting (possible) withdrawal

Methodology

This study will include the following particular groups of students:

- all students with identified special needs and disabilities leaving a specific named college in Fife and a specific named college in Tayside (to be discussed) entering a University course at any of the Forum partner universities in 2002-2003. Survey of students and staff can be held with student and staff at other colleges within the Forum region

It is envisaged that this study will incorporate:

- desk research to identify appropriate students

- questionnaires, postal surveys, personal interviews and focus groups with students at different stages within the parameters of the Project

- interviews with academic and support staff in the participating institutions

- analysis of evidence of academic progress

- review of relevant literature and material from other projects

It is acknowledged that the success of this study will in some part be dependent upon the willingness of students to participate. For this reason particular attention will be paid to issues relating to confidentiality of information and student consent.

Deliverables and Dissemination

This Project will produce:

- a report with practical recommendations for practitioners which will be widely circulated amongst the Forum colleges and universities
- guidelines for Institutions in managing the transition process
- a booklet for students with special needs and disabilities offering guidance on managing the transition from FE to HE
- an event for both FE and HE sectors at which findings from this Project will be disseminated
- a workshop to be offered at other relevant events

Findings from this Project will also be available on relevant websites.

Management

A Project Steering Group will be formed consisting of representatives from the named partner institutions, including a representative with a remit for Widening Access; the National Co-ordinator for Students with Disabilities; The Project Co-ordinator and the Forum Project Manager. In attendance will also be the Forum Project Officer who will takes notes of the meeting. The Project Steering Group will be expected to meet on approximately eight occasions during the course of the Project.

The Project will be serviced by a Project Co-ordinator (part-time, 0.6 FTE) The Project Co-ordinator will ideally have a working knowledge of disability issues in the field of education and some research experience.

Other aspects of the post e.g. administrative support will be supplied by Forum Staff already in place.

During the course of the project it became clear that all the aims included in the proposal could not be carried out in the hours available to the Project Leader. Therefore the aims and outcomes were adjusted appropriately.

Appendix 2: Student Profiles

Student	Age	Gender	Disability	FEC Course	No Years at FEC	HEI Entry Year
1	37	M	Dyslexia	HND	3	3
2	37	F	MHD	Highers	1	Not continued
3	47	F	MHD	Highers	1	2
4	35	M	Dyslexia / MHD	Access	2	1
5	45	F	Dyslexia	Access	1	1
6	41	F	LD / MHD	Access	2	1
7	37	M	Physical Disability	HND	3	3
8	34	F	MHD	HNC	1	Not continued
9	32	M	LD / MHD	HNC	3	3
10	36	M	Medical Condition	HNC	2	Not continued
11	39	M	MHD	HNC	1	Not continued
12	44	F	Physical Disability	HND	4	Not continued
13	40	M	MHD	HND	2	3
14	19	M	Dyslexia	HNC	1	Not continued
15	20	F	Epilepsy	HND	2	3
16	19	F	Dyslexia	HNC	1	1

Appendix 3: Abbreviations used in the report

DSA: Disabled Students Allowance

DDA (1995): Disability Discrimination Act 1995

SAAS: Student Awards Agency Scotland

UCAS:

HNC: Higher National Certificate

HND: Higher National Diploma

MHD: Mental Health Difficulties

LD: Learning Difficulties

HE: Higher Education

FE: Further Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

FEC: Further Education Institution

NDT: National Disability Team

SKILL: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities

SENDA: Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001

HEFCE: Higher Education Funding Council for England

SDT: Scottish Disability Team