



independence

employability

progression

development



CELEBRATING ACHIEVEMENTS

“What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing”

Aristotle

Independent Specialist Colleges (ISCs) provide further education for over 3,800 learners with complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities who require a personalised learning programme and multi-disciplinary specialism and support in making their transition to adult life. ISCs support learners to be ambitious, to realise their aspirations and to develop the skills to make personal progress towards their identified goals. The team approach underpins all phases of the college experience, from the initial visit through to transition beyond college, as the following case studies demonstrate.

Adam has Cerebral Palsy, using a wheelchair for long distances, with severe learning & communication and behaviour difficulties. School reports indicated physical aggression such as kicking and biting, and severe anxiety in unfamiliar places, for example refusing to get in or out of vehicles, which required physical intervention from up to four people. He could be overly affectionate with strangers.

Adam’s inter-disciplinary learning support A behaviour specialist (BS) worked closely with Adam’s key-worker, parents and speech and language therapist. Before he started college, his key-worker visited him at home 4 times and he visited college 3 times; once at college, contact with his parents was carefully managed.

Adam’s initial assessment and Person Centred Planning meeting agreed that his main learning aim would be to accept change both in and out of college, in order to access the wider community. The BS compiled a Comprehensive Functional Assessment with information drawn from Student Support, interviews, documentation and observation, resulting in a set of supportive strategies:

- Adam to communicate his needs and wants using signing and single words
- All environments would meet his needs initially and thus reduce his anxiety, with variations to each environment introduced carefully
- Support staff to be limited to key members of the team, with other staff introduced for short periods
- Items which calmed Adam, such as his Elvis mask and guitar would be freely available, and at times of high stress he could seek them out. Staff would use them in sessions to support him to stay calm.
- An increased choice of activities within college and then in the community.

Adam’s transition

The College supported Adam to move successfully into his new home. He visited with key college staff and prospective support staff from his new home came to meet him at College. A full transition pack was put together and the behaviour specialist liaised with the new staff for 3 months after his move. Adam now lives with 2 other young men, attends a Creative Arts course at college with one to one support, and has joined a drama club. His separation anxiety has dissipated, and he copes well with non familiar people and places. He signs more and his speech is clearer, improving his quality of life, and he is happy and settled in his home.

Students are encouraged to be involved in all aspects of their learning programme and in particular, to understand the progress they are making towards their agreed goals. This requires individualised approaches, often making creative use of technology.

Hakim is deaf with communication difficulties and additional learning needs. One of Hakim’s goals was to be involved in his on-going assessment and to evaluate his progress and achievement. This was to be supported by the use of the interactive whiteboard and specialist staff using British Sign Language (BSL).



Hakim's progress and achievements Hakim is a visual learner with limited literacy skills, so specialist staff have devised an imaginative and creative strategy to allow him to visualise his personal targets and achievements. He can assess and evaluate himself against these targets and understand how well he is progressing. At the start of each session, Hakim's personal targets and expected outcomes are displayed on the interactive white board. He can understand the information and communicate any choices he needs to make; staff use BSL to reinforce this. He is videoed while working and the video is played back through the interactive white board at the end of the session. Hakim is able to review his work and evaluate what went well and what could be improved.

The interactive white board allows instant feedback and enables staff to recap previous work, link this to current work and help Hakim understand what he needs to do to progress even further. This has enabled him to develop high level skills of self evaluation, to indicate preferences and to visualise progress. As a result Hakim engages with his learning programme and knows how well he is doing.

Many learners want to improve their ability to live independently and get involved in the community. Specialist staff teams can enable students to make significant progress in these areas. As Ofsted noted about one outstanding ISC, learners valued 'being treated like adults and made to feel they can do the things they never thought possible'.

Kirsty is a young woman with Cerebral Palsy, cortical blindness, epilepsy, scoliosis, communication difficulties and mobility difficulties. She wanted to live in a small group home, enjoy leisure and further education and make and communicate choices and decisions about everyday life. Kirsty also wanted to feel secure receiving care from people other than her family, and make new friends.

Kirsty's progress Kirsty has many physical challenges and was often distressed when she started college. She could not communicate her needs and had difficulty controlling her emotions, so was unable to benefit from college life. She needed to feel able to trust those supporting her. A multi-disciplinary team, including an occupational therapist, speech and language therapists, lecturer, named nurse, physiotherapist, relaxation therapist, key support staff, an aromatherapist and a music therapist, undertook a robust assessment and developed individual strategies for Kirsty. Alternative positioning and consistency in staff and approach, allowed her to work in privacy and gradually integrate into her peer group. A communication strategy was devised and a rapport established with her parents. Everyone worked towards agreed targets and there was regular monitoring and feedback to allow for changes and note progression.

Kirsty's achievements

Over time Kirsty began to interact more effectively and developed the confidence and maturity to communicate her needs so that staff could respond.

It became evident that Kirsty was performing beyond expectations. Increasingly challenging targets were set and she continued to achieve and overcome the barriers to learning she had previously encountered.

Kirsty embarked on a final year transition programme which highlighted the progress in her communication, literacy, numeracy and self advocacy skills. She directed her own care needs effectively, knew her own mind and how to convey this and left college a very happy and inspirational young woman.

Some learners will always need support, and have to develop specific assertive skills in directing and managing their own care, a challenge for both learners and staff.

Andrew was 19 when he enrolled at College. He has Cerebral Palsy and associated learning difficulties and disabilities; he uses an electric wheelchair for mobility and communicates verbally, but also uses a communication aid if required. He has limited motor skills in both hands. Andrew's long term ambition was to live independently in his local community.



Andrew's learning programme He worked with 4 other learners with similar aspirations. His personal tutor and care tutor were in regular contact with his family, who reinforced the skills being developed at college. Specialist support included speech therapy to assist his communication, and physiotherapy and occupational therapy to meet his postural and future living needs. This joined up, multi-disciplinary approach to his personalised programme enabled Andrew to achieve his goals through practical application, reinforcement and accreditation. Andrew progressed from living on site to living with friends in a communal apartment. This is testament to his personal development; he acquired the skills during his time at college to work with others and resolve conflicts, make his own choices, conduct his life and direct others to meet his needs effectively.

Andrew's achievements Andrew achieved all his personal targets around assertiveness and directive and decision making skills, along with his academic aims of achieving OCR - all at First Grade - which enabled him to practise and demonstrate his independence skills. He was a role model to other learners and was awarded the Student of the Year at the annual awards ceremony. Andrew now lives in his own apartment and manages and directs three care support staff who work with him throughout the day to meet his needs. This enables him to use the community and study at two local colleges, and he has the confidence and ability to choose how he spends his leisure time.

Voluntary work is as fulfilling and rewarding for people with learning difficulties and disabilities as it is for the millions of other volunteers across the UK. It is a great way to get involved in the community, make new friends and expand your interests, as well as developing skills for work.

Kim is 22 and has learning difficulties with speech and communication support needs. In her 3rd year, Kim worked on a voluntary conservation project, where her learning goals were to increase her confidence by taking leading roles in the group, and develop skills in using new tools and equipment. The project was based at a local National Trust property, where she worked alongside NT staff and members of the public.

Kim's voluntary work Kim and her fellow students worked towards the John Muir Award, an environmental award that encourages people to enjoy and care for wild places. Working in this way builds self confidence and esteem, develops useful work and life skills and integrates learners into the local and wider community – all useful, transferable skills.

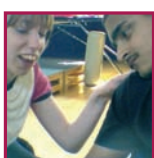
Kim's group worked on cleaning out a Ha-ha and building a footpath. They planted specimen trees, put tree guards around them to protect them from deer and cleared surrounding vegetation to ensure maximum growth. They cleared unwanted natural regeneration such as self seeded trees and made them into pea sticks and sun flowers stakes. The students worked alongside other volunteers. They researched and produced an information board for the general public and made a presentation to local dignitaries and senior National Trust staff about the work they had done.

Kim's achievements

Working for the John Muir Conserver Award gave Kim a sense of accomplishment and increased confidence, and improved her social skills and team building skills. She is now working towards the NPTC Skills for Working Life Conservation E2.

Many learners find large FE colleges intimidating and need the chance to develop their self confidence in a safe, more structured setting before moving on.

Nick has Cerebral Palsy and uses a powered wheelchair; he needs a scribe and support with literacy. He lacked the confidence and assertiveness to attend a mainstream college. Nick wanted to be able to manage own personal assistance, live in his own flat and follow a mainstream college performing arts course.



Nick's learning programme Song writing enables young people to find their voice, and when Nick came to college, he began to write his own songs. Performing them in public built his self-esteem; he discovered a comedic flair and began to make audiences laugh. Initially, Nick performed in the safe context of the college theatre, to friends and family, but by the time he had left had performed at the Royal Albert Hall, the Royal Opera House, the National Student Drama Festival and in many community settings.

The college partnership with Graeae Theatre Company, a disabled-led professional performing arts organisation, gave Nick a realistic idea of the prospects for disabled actors. Using improvisation and forum theatre, Nick developed excellent communication skills, particularly in dealing with unfamiliar situations and developing empathy. Nick also learnt employability skills such as self-discipline, time-keeping, team-work, health & safety awareness and customer service skills. He was one of the first disabled young people nationally to gain a Trinity Guildhall Arts Award Level 1. Nick built up his CV and practiced interview techniques; the combination of his Arts Award qualification and his newly gained experience led to a place on a Level 3 performing arts course, where he is already achieving distinctions in some units.

Nick's achievements Nick has achieved his goals – he is living independently in his own flat, managing his own personal assistance and attending mainstream college. He keeps in regular touch with the college, offering a role model to current students of the benefits of independent living.

Finding work can be a real challenge for many people with learning difficulties and disabilities; the government strategy Valuing Employment Now notes that less than 10% of people with learning difficulties are in paid work. A staged approach to developing employability skills is beneficial, as are work experience opportunities in real vocational settings.

Matt has moderate learning difficulties and communicates using Makaton and indistinct speech. He has severe dyspraxia and a short attention span; he is also hard working, sociable and keen to please. Matt wanted to move into supported living with friends, get part-time paid employment and participate in local sporting activities. On arrival at college his behaviour was challenging, but a behaviour plan, personal development objectives and regular support from a personal tutor have enabled Matt to manage his behaviour and ask to take time out from stressful situations.

Matt's work skills At the end of his first year Matt moved from the main campus to a satellite house. He had to get up on time, wash and dress, do his laundry, cook meals and make a packed lunch. He found this hard initially, but with support from his personal tutor he made significant progress.

Matt demonstrated good practical skills in horticulture, maintenance and catering which he sampled during his first year. He preferred cooking and chose to work preparing snack lunches for students and staff. He began to demonstrate good hygiene and sensible behaviour in the kitchen and his food preparation skills improved. When the college opened a café in the next village, Matt began working in the kitchen and waiting table. He learned to make meals to a high standard with minimal support, his confidence grew and he got on well with customers.

Matt started half a day work experience in a local Asda café, with staff support to offer reassurance and assist with communication. The café is very busy and he sometimes found it difficult to cope with the pace, but Asda was pleased with his work and offered him a full day. Staff shadowed Matt and risk assessed his ability to undertake this independently, and after a period of reduced support, he worked under the sole guidance of the café manager. He progressed from clearing tables to unpacking and storing deliveries, and preparing and serving hot food, and his placement increased to two days. Matt hopes to be offered a longer work placement or a part-time paid job at Asda in his home town.

Matt's achievements Matt has learned transferable work and independent living skills which will enable him to achieve his long term goal. He has a huge sense of achievement and pride in his skills.



Gaining accreditation within a Foundation Learning programme can be very motivating, whether in relation to gaining credits around broad employability skills or specific vocational qualifications. Having a qualification is not the only route into work, but it is a good way of demonstrating ability to employers.

Peter has Down's Syndrome with severe learning difficulties, visual and hearing impairments and hypothyroidism. He has communication difficulties and presents challenging behaviours, in particular, very poor impulse control. Peter wanted to live in the community and work in supported employment, and gain vocational qualifications to support this. He started with a highly structured timetable, working in small groups and where necessary on a 1:2 basis. Staff used makaton signing and he had regular support from speech and language therapists, which reduced as Peter's need declined. He attended behaviour therapy sessions and regularly met with his counsellor to help him manage his behaviour and aid his learning.

Peter's employability programme After his initial assessment term, Peter chose to work in the Hospitality department. His assessment profile showed him working at Entry Level 1 in literacy and numeracy but at a higher level in vocational tasks. Peter often demonstrated immature and challenging behaviours and there were a number of initial difficulties, including aggression towards his peers and lack of motivation. These difficulties were resolved through careful collaboration between staff in the department and across college, as well as with Peter and his parents.

Peter began working in the college meeting rooms, with close supervision and regular routines. He developed skills in cleaning tasks and health and safety, and positive behaviour through teamwork and independent activities. He asked to concentrate on food and drink service, and moved to the college restaurant, working towards Level 1 NVQ units. A year later, Peter began work experience at a local bar and restaurant, where he developed food handling skills and gained greater confidence and maturity when working with others. He successfully completed a Foundation Certificate of Health and Safety in the Workplace, Welcome Host Award and Certificate in Basic Food Safety.

Peter's achievements Peter left college with industry recognised qualifications, including an NVQ in Food and Drink Service at Level 1, and a CV that demonstrated sound skills and knowledge, backed up with real work experience. He is now happily working part-time in a hotel in his home area, undertaking evening shifts in the kitchen.

The barriers to work are not always related to the tasks themselves, but to other aspects of employment, such as getting to work or having the right technology in place.

Ruby has a visual impairment with additional learning difficulties and a disability. Her main goal was to find work or work based training suited to her skills and abilities. In addition to an individual programme to develop her vocational skills, Ruby had physiotherapy and occupational therapy, together with input for behavioural support.

Ruby's employment support Ruby chose to work in catering and had internal and external work placements. The Mobility team implemented an individual programme to support her to develop the skills required for orientation and travel to and from work. She passed several Travel Proficiency Tests designed to meet her individual needs that gave her the confidence to travel independently. Ruby also required access to a range of technology to support her learning and enable her to achieve her goals. She was given opportunities to experiment with a wide variety of technologies to support her development in the work environment. This included using an MP3 player to record sets of instructions and an I pod touch/I phone with I-prompt software to break down visual and audio step by step instructions. When working in the kitchen she has used a Daisy player with recorded C.D. recipes to enable her to prepare simple dishes for the café. She has achieved her main goal and is now working in a café and undergoing further work based training.



An approach to gaining employment that is advocated in Valuing Employment Now is supported employment, where jobs are matched to individuals and tasks are broken down into small achievable steps.

John is an adult with an autism spectrum condition, who experiences impairments of social interaction, social communication, imagination and social understanding. He also has dyslexia, learning difficulties, diabetes and epilepsy, which can be barriers to learning. John created an electronic person centred learning plan to identify his aspirations, which allowed him to imagine his future and communicate his long term goals through a visual rather than a verbal approach. He wanted to gain confidence handling money, be able to make himself snacks, learn how to travel using public transport and improve his reading, writing and IT skills. He also wanted to develop skills and a qualification in retail to gain open employment. He received support from a multidisciplinary team including his parents, key tutors, learning support assistants, connexions, employers and a speech and language therapist. A personalised programme was devised, with tailored support and clear targets linked to John's goals and aspirations.

John's employment John worked in a city centre shop owned by the college, a sheltered employment environment where he gained vocational knowledge and retail skills such as greeting and serving customers, handling money, maintaining stock levels and dressing the shop window. He then moved into supported employment at a local supermarket one day a week, with job coaching from his tutor to transfer his skills into this new environment; this support was gradually reduced as he gained confidence.

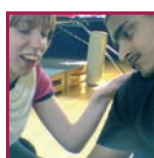
During tutorials, John received careers information, advice and guidance to develop employability skills such as timekeeping and attendance, dressing appropriately, working as part of a team, applying for jobs and interview techniques. He is currently learning how to use public transport to travel to the supermarket independently and safely.

John's achievements

Two years ago John was a young man did not have the confidence to go to the local shop to buy a pint of milk. Now his independence, social interaction and communication skills have greatly improved, he has the confidence to try independent travelling, and hopes to get paid work in the future. He has achieved a BTEC Entry Level 2 Certificate in Retail and has now progressed onto Entry Level 3.

Learners know better than anyone some of the challenges they face, and providing opportunities to meet and share experiences is of great value.

Each year the West Midlands region holds a leavers' conference at Hereward College, attended by students and staff from ISCs across the region. The whole event is led by learners, including some leavers who come back to share their experiences. Inclusive workshops and activities enable students to meet together, exchange ideas, learn new skills and air some of the key issues they are going to face when they leave college. This years conference on the theme 'Our lives, our future, our voice' includes an exhibition of learners' achievements, ranging from art work, photographs and artefacts to a portfolio of achievement, in a variety of media including web-based, video or audio tape and 3D work. Learners find it a stimulating and enjoyable day; one comment after last year was, 'There were quite a few things I've enjoyed, but I think the workshop on finding a job was really helpful', whilst another thought it was good 'to talk to each other'. One student especially enjoyed having 'a practical activity to complete'. Staff also offered positive feedback; 'the overall comment from my students on the conference was that they enjoyed it very much'.



Transition presents a number of challenges, so has to be well managed. Providing the right support to learners and making effective links with services can smooth the process and ensure that learners move on with a real sense of achievement.

Tiffany has Autism and wanted to develop her vocational and independent living skills, and improve her confidence, self esteem and friendship skills.

Tiffany's transition Tiffany worked with a transition coordinator to formulate a person centred exit plan. She was part of a seminar group of six leavers, providing them all with a forum for peer support at a time of change. Her third year programme was informed by her exit plan and included support to enable her to have a successful transition. Tiffany wanted to do an art course, but previous experience made it hard to attend a mainstream college - she could not look at other people's work because she felt hers did not live up to theirs. She attended the local college for a year doing Art with a support worker. It took nearly the whole year of tears, hiding and reflection before she felt comfortable, but this experience empowered her to move on to another mainstream college when she left. Tiffany also did work experience in a shop and café and gained an NVQ in Customer Services to give her the necessary qualifications and experience to get a part time job.

Tiffany hoped to live as independently as possible and her 3rd year was spent with minimal support, developing her living skills. She and her boyfriend wanted to share a flat when they left, so they stayed in the training flat to see what this would be like. Moving in with her boyfriend meant Tiffany had to move from Cambridge to Surrey. The multi-disciplinary Annual Review meeting was a pivotal point in managing transition. The transition coordinator maintained regular support with Tiffany's external team and linked the two Social Services, providing them with the necessary information to transfer authorities and obtain support for a successful transition. She supported Tiffany to apply to her new college and took her to her interview to ensure that her needs would be met on the course.

Tiffany's achievements Tiffany is now doing exceptionally well on a BTEC in Art and Business Studies at a mainstream college. She is living with her boyfriend in their own flat with support. In her leaving speech, Tiffany said she had achieved what she wanted, 'a normal independent life' and felt that specialist college was central to this achievement, which she would never have been able to make on her own: "the journey out of a bad past into a new life filled with mysteries and wonder".

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About Natspec

Natspec is a membership association for over 70 independent specialist colleges providing inclusive further education for learners with complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Natspec promotes the benefits of specialism to policy makers and represents the interests of ISCs nationally and regionally: www.natspec.org.uk

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