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A world of possibilities

*The journey through specialist college can open up exciting opportunities for many who might struggle in a mainstream setting, says **Alison Boulton***

Choosing a specialist further education college is a really important step for you if you are a young person with a learning difficulty or a disability setting out to become more independent. Many specialist colleges offer residential provision, and with it the opportunity to be away from home, living and learning together with your peer group.

The first few days at college can be a little daunting: there are new friends to make, new staff to get to know, a new place to find your way around and a new learning programme to understand. Things take a bit of getting used to and there might even be a spot of homesickness to get over, but a few weeks into term and all that newness will be behind you.

The journey starts, though, a long time before that first day, when you are thinking about leaving school and deciding what comes next. Going to a further education college is a great stepping stone to becoming an adult, looking after yourself and perhaps moving into the world of work. There should be lots of help available, including someone to talk to about the options and visits to colleges locally and elsewhere, so that you can think about what you want to learn and the support you will need. The process of getting into a specialist college can be time consuming, and needs to start as soon as you are sure this is the right thing for you. Your careers adviser will support you to make

the application and fill in the forms required, including a learning difficulty assessment (LDA) – sometimes called an S139a. It might be a while before the funding is confirmed.

Specialist colleges are, as the name suggests, colleges with specialist skills in providing learning programmes and support for young people with learning difficulties or disabilities. They often have particular skills linked to specific disabilities, but they can also provide support for any additional disabilities and care or medical needs you may have.

You will be encouraged to take risks, though not without discussion and planning

A specialist college will assess you before offering a place, to ensure they can meet all your needs. During your induction at college, you will spend time with expert staff from the interdisciplinary team, discussing your hopes and ambitions and deciding on the best way to achieve them. Don't worry if you still feel vague about the future, your time at college will give you plenty of opportunities to try things out and see what works for you, so that you can make informed decisions about your future.

Specialist support

As well as teachers and care staff, you might see the speech and language therapist, physiotherapist, learning support assistants, technologists and others. The staff team will help you to put together your individual learning programme and, if necessary,



a care and medical plan, and identify the support you will need. It will be done in a way that makes it easy to understand and suits your personal preferences, so it might be an electronic plan, a written plan or one with pictures or symbols. Your tutor or key worker will help you to keep track of your progress and ensure the plan is still the right one for you and that you are getting the right support. The important thing is that your programme is challenging and gives you plenty of opportunities to build on existing skills, learn new ones, and help you towards achieving your goals. Increasing your communication skills and enabling you to be as independent as possible will often be the most important aspects of your programme, although you may also be undertaking vocational or academic qualifications.

While there will be plenty of support available, don't expect things to be done for you! At college, you will be getting support for independence. We know from talking to students that they hate what we call "the velcro model", so there won't always be someone at your side telling you how to do things, or even worse, doing them for you. Wherever possible, other solutions will be found, for example through the use of technology to make you more independent. You will also be encouraged to take risks, though not without discussion and planning.

Although your specialist college will have a wide range of facilities with suitable adaptations, you won't spend all your time on the college site. As well as making use of a wide range of community facilities, such as local shops, sports centres and cafes, you may do some studying at the local FE college and some work experience. This might be linked to your vocational studies, but even

A social communication programme helped Claire build up her confidence and self-esteem

if you are not sure about getting employment, it will give you many useful skills and really boost your confidence. Some colleges run their own enterprises, including shops, internet cafes and print services, where you can learn some of the employability skills you can use in the future. You might also get the chance to undertake some voluntary work in areas such as conservation.

Time to relax

Be assured that not all your time at college will be spent learning in formal sessions. There will be plenty of social time, both structured and unstructured, when you can spend time with friends. This could include taking part in sports, going to the cinema or bowling, and pursuing existing or new hobbies. Along the way, you will develop and practise a wide range of social and communication skills, learn to travel more independently and manage your budget effectively.

In residential colleges, you will probably start out living in accommodation that will provide high levels of support, until you have settled in and demonstrated how much you can do for yourself. You will then be able to move into accommodation that allows you to develop your independence skills to the highest level, possibly even moving off the college site to live in housing in the community. You will

Independent living: Claire's story

Claire's story outlines how an individual programme can come together.

Claire has learning difficulties, congenital cataracts and is diabetic. She wanted to live independently with friends, to achieve some qualifications and find a job. Claire's assessment showed that she required intensive mobility training, support to manage her diabetes and diet, some adaptation of materials, and strategies for using distance vision.

Over a three year independent living programme, Claire learnt skills which enabled her to transfer from a study bedroom to a flat and then, in her third year, a small independent house on campus. A social communication programme helped to build up her confidence and self-esteem.

Claire undertook work experience at a local construction company. As well as helping her gain office skills, the placement gave her an insight into the world of work and encouraged her to develop her administration skills. She developed confidence in using the phone and talking to other staff, and she achieved a number of CLAIT modules at the local college.

Her confidence in crossing roads and using public transport increased significantly and she became an independent traveller, able to make her own way to her work placements and successfully learning to use binoculars to identify bus numbers.

Claire competed in the Special Olympics for athletics and swimming, gaining several medals in both disciplines.

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Personal development: Andrew's story

Andrew has cerebral palsy and associated learning difficulties and disabilities, and uses an electric wheelchair for mobility. He communicates verbally, but 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 and he worked with four 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, inter-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. During his time at college, he learnt to work with others and resolve conflicts, to make his own choices, and direct others to meet his needs effectively. He achieved all his academic aims, getting top grades in OCR qualifications. He was a role model for 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.

Andrew now lives in his own apartment and manages and directs three care support staff

be able to practise all the skills you need to live independently in realistic settings, including getting up in the morning and getting yourself to your sessions on time. This will all be carefully monitored, to ensure your safety but provide a challenge at the same time.

Looking to the future

It is important that evidence of all your college achievements is noted down in a way that will be useful to you, to further education or training providers, to people



who will support you in the future and to potential employers. Some aspects of your programme might be accredited, so you will get a qualification. Other skills will not be accredited but are equally important; these could be recorded on DVD, through photos, on an e-portfolio or in other ways that suit your needs.

Your course is likely to last two or perhaps three years, but it will almost certainly fly by and it won't seem long before you are thinking about the next stage. You will have regular reviews along the way, but about a year before leaving, you will begin to plan for the future – how will you spend your days and where will you live? College staff, your parents or carers and other agencies, such as social services and careers, will support you in making these crucial decisions. You may be planning on moving back to your home area so will need to find time in college holidays to look at the options available there. You might want to focus initially on just one aspect, such as finding somewhere to live, before considering what you will do; sorting it all out at once can be rather daunting, but in time it will fall into place.

A specialist college will support you to achieve your goals and prepare you for adult life. It will improve your self-confidence and give you a wide range of personal skills. Above all, it will be mix of challenge and fun and something to really enjoy. **SEN**

Further information

Alison Boulton is Chief Executive of Natspec, The Association of National Specialist Colleges, a membership association for independent specialist colleges offering further education and training to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities:

www.natspec.org.uk