

Alison, thank you for arranging our conference and for your brilliant work throughout the year. Thank you in advance to everyone who will be contributing to this year's conference, we are very grateful for your support.

Welcome to you all from me – I hope you have an enjoyable, informative and invigorating time. In your daily leadership roles you constantly give out energy to others and so I hope these two days will 'top you back up' through generous sharing from fellow colleges, valuable inputs from other speakers and the good company of colleagues. This is your conference – enjoy it! Put yourselves first for a change.

With apologies for being a late stand in, I hope that by giving a personal overview of the past, current and future I will confirm what many of you already think and feel about the challenges and opportunities ahead, and reinforce that independent specialist colleges can and will do more than simply 'make it work' for 2010 and beyond.

Looking back there have been many times when everything seemed to be working against our students and their access to our colleges and yet the sector has survived and young people with complex disabilities and learning difficulties have continued to thrive through our life changing provision. In the early 90's despite high demand, many Local Authorities were no longer funding 'out of county' college placements. In my own college, the Governors were seriously considering whether the reducing numbers were viable.

Then in 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act established the Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFC) and this provided a more consistent route for our students to apply to specialist colleges, through a regional process. The FEFC even produced a booklet for parents to explain how to apply to specialist colleges. There were issues, especially in the latter days of FEFC and I will come to those later.

The FEFC had its own inspectorate with a 'learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities' team of highly respected individuals. Inspections of ISCs were curriculum and learner focused and pretty similar to a subject area inspection in FE Colleges. We had one overall grade and so it was possible to compare the provision across the sectors. Our colleges generally performed well and inspection had a positive impact on curriculum and learners.

In 1996 came the publication of 'Inclusive Learning', the seminal report of the FEFC's Learners with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities Committee. We all know it as the 'Tomlinson Report', after the Committee's Chairman, Professor John Tomlinson, an incredible man and our former President. Inclusive Learning was defined as that which provided the greatest degree of match or fit between the individual learner's requirements and the provision that is made for them. It transformed thinking to place the deficit in the system and not in the learner. It focused on getting the match right at three levels - the teacher, the provider and the sector.

Independent specialist colleges were valued and had a role within the spectrum of provision needed to meet the full range of learner requirements. This meant that our learners were also valued and recognised. David Kendall was a member of the Committee and Pat Hood was advisor to the committee and Co-Author of the Report.

For me 'Inclusive Learning' has always been a most inspiring, affirming and accessible piece of work. Yes, I own up that I was one of Pat Hood's crusaders going out into further education colleges as an inclusive learning facilitator armed with my box of materials and the determination to make a difference to learners!

By the late 90's and the end of the FEFC era, we were suffering from a fee freeze – sound familiar? There were also difficulties for young people over the age of 19 where joint funding from social services was required. Schedule 2j required progression to higher level programmes and prevented the continuation of some learners' programmes. It created an impenetrable barrier to further education for many young people with the most complex or profound disabilities and learning difficulties.

In 2000 the Learning and Skills Act abolished the FEFC and established the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Schedule 2j disappeared allowing more learners into the FE sector as a whole and under section 13 of the Act, the LSC *had a duty to secure a residential placement for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities where it was satisfied that it could not secure proper or reasonable provision to meet their needs without also securing boarding accommodation*. This effectively created a demand led budget and made joint funding very difficult for the LSC to achieve.

A new approach to student fees was introduced by LSC, based upon learners' assessed requirements across a matrix of support with a small amount funding relating to the types of learners. This new system only applied to new students and so effectively came in over three years. When I became Principal of National Star in 2000 I stuck my neck out and presented a deficit budget to Governors in order that they could understand that to provide adequate quality we needed to spend more on our learners than we were actually receiving in fees. Déjà vu!

Ofsted began inspecting and the first few years were punishing for many of our colleges. Inspection outcomes did nothing for the reputation of our sector. Analysis of grades revealed particular difficulties with leadership and management, and literacy and numeracy. The other curriculum grades were generally good and very much in line with previous FEFC inspections. Year on year ISC's and the most vulnerable learners were highlighted as the weakest part of the FE sector. Even though we were praised for enabling our students to achieve more independent lives, we weren't scoring well enough against the breadth of the new inspection framework.

It still rankles with me that an individual literacy and numeracy grade was mandatory for our colleges despite the fact that we had not had anything like the support and development available to the GFE sector for LNC. We were eventually able to access the basic skills quality initiative but only because Sue Preece, as the then Vice Chair of Natspec, and Brenda Mullen pulled out the stops and organised it for us!

The other difficulty was the considerable difference between professionals with regard to what constituted effective provision and appropriate teaching, learning and attainment in relation to LNC for those with complex learning difficulties and disabilities. I still believe that the reputation of our colleges was unfairly tarnished by the inclusion of this compulsory grade and was very pleased to see this change after the first inspection round.

The other area where our colleges struggled was having an organisational leadership and management grade for the first time ever and far too many were judged to be inadequate in this aspect. Natspec acted as quickly as we could and thanks to Pat Hood, with support from LSC, inaugural Leadership & Management training for ISC Principals and senior managers took place.

From the low point of the first few years of Ofsted inspection our colleges have been much better included into development opportunities, mostly secured and led by Natspec, and inspection outcomes have improved. More recently we raised concerns over the high proportion of new providers receiving inadequate grades which was unreasonably affecting our reputation and this led to further strengthening of gate-keeping by LSC.

In 2004, with a backdrop of an escalating demand-led ISC budget and our colleges struggling on inspection, the LSC launched its review of planning and funding for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, independently chaired by Peter Little.

The review was concerned with the full breadth of provision for all self declared learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, 579,000 in 2003/2004. The committee's report 'Through Inclusion to Excellence' in 2005 had at its heart a new transformational vision, whereby the most effective use could be made of available resources by developing collaborative provision to meet individual needs to deliver a wider choice of high quality provision, wherever possible in local communities.

The Steering Group recommended remodelling provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, envisaging that: *"Learners' needs should be met through equitable and easily understood systems of planning, funding and placement, enabling all learners to achieve their goals and progress to the maximum possible level of independence and activity in their communities and in employment."*

The challenge to ISC's was clear: *"LSC should commit to a policy of 'investment for change' to achieve systemic transformation and increased supply of high quality, local provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities."*

Yet this also offered opportunities - ISC representatives were involved on the steering committee and its various working groups and whilst there was a clear message of change ahead there was also recognition for the continuing role of ISC's and their potential to support a progressive agenda: *"The increase in access to local provision, including the rebuilding of the FE sector is unlikely to replace the need for some learners with high level support requirements to access provision at specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities"*, and *"Specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities may wish to develop day provision. We would also anticipate that this would enable specialist colleges, in collaboration with other providers and agencies, to offer a more flexible mix of residential and day packages tailored to individual requirements."*

This was music to my ears and then *"We expect that the LSC national capital strategy will take account of the investment needs of those specialist colleges it expects to support in the short, medium and long term."* Perhaps I'd better stop there and say no more on capital!

One of the most exciting aspects of the report in my mind was to be the public recognition of Centres of Excellence for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Alongside the delivery of teaching and learning the centres were to help promote innovation, share and transfer effective practice, promote cross-sectoral working and the development of peer referencing methodologies. A very interesting prospect and a clear role for some of our colleges and other FE providers. The first centres were due to be established from December 2008 and I awaited this opportunity with anticipation – I'm still waiting!

In the latter years of LSC I do tend to feel that the push for local provision and controlling costs has overtaken quality, progression and outcomes and even vision and strategy. I found 'Through Inclusion to Excellence' challenging and yet inspiring as it looked at a vision for all learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities within which ISC's could play a significant part. However, I was disappointed by the LSC's implementation plan 'Learning for Living and Work', published in 2006. The agenda of localism had sharpened and I felt the potential of ISC's within the new agenda was lost. There are only a few references to ISC's in lists of the range of providers and the only real reference is that: *"specialist colleges must reconsider their traditional modes of delivery, and the duration of their programmes"*.

Fair enough in some respects, although I found it very narrow and uninspiring. Where was the vision and joined up strategy in this statement? However, the ambition of England becoming an international exemplar for provision for the most complex learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities remained, and so we forged on.

In recent years we have had to strongly challenge some terribly unfair things that have been said about our colleges and our learners, such as our learners being 'forced' to go away from home. There is a distinctive difference between saying that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities need to be able to choose high quality local provision if they wish to stay locally, to saying that young people are being forced to go away from home.

Anecdotally, we have had questions about why a learner should have a place at a specialist college when their long term future is in residential care and queries about whether particular learners are 'ineducable', plus GFE's being coerced to take learners for whom they simply do not have the expertise. The placement process at its worst can drive a wedge between GFE's and ISC's, even to the point of unpicking learning for living and work partnerships. We have moved far away from the medical model of disability and yet ISC's find themselves in a deficit model as the place of last resort which is far from the truth for our learners and their families. Where is the quality and equity in all of this?

Despite everything, independent specialist colleges continue to provide the most tremendous, life changing outcomes for our students. The sector has continued to extend its expertise, opening up provision for learners with increasingly complex and profound disabilities and enabling them to achieve things they and their families would never have thought possible.

Following on from the 'Value of Specialism' brochure Natspec is very pleased to be launching 'Celebrating Achievements' today, filled with case studies demonstrating the value of our sector and the achievements of the wonderful young people that we work with. Thank you to all of the colleges who provided case studies and to Alison for such an excellent publication. Life changing stories, repeated over and over again across our colleges.

Our colleges have embraced the vision for change and there are many superb examples of collaboration, new flexible provision and specialism being shared. Bridge College's co-location with the Manchester College is a very exciting development. Bridge students will have much closer relationships with community groups and individuals who live, work and play on or near the campus thus developing their own social and community skills and access, and also widening the understanding of others, bringing to life through real activities shared aims in equality and diversity, closing achievement gaps and consolidating community cohesion.

Queen Alexandra College's Sight Village exhibition of technology and services for blind and partially sighted people marks its seventeenth year in 2010. Having grown from using one room at the College, it now fills a large exhibition centre with exhibitors from the USA, China and across Europe. The past three years have seen the introduction of QAC Sight Village events in London, Edinburgh, Glasgow and the Republic of Ireland. The event has enabled the College to work closely with commercial organisations worldwide and all of the charities of and for blind people in the UK.

My own College, National Star has established a number of new ventures including short term residential placements for students from GFE colleges; LIFT training for the local authority which is estimated to be saving £250K in taxi costs per annum; a national project with Whizz Kids to deliver independence training to young people. We have even secured a small FE responsiveness allocation this year to offer local provision alongside GFE's.

Treloars has recently launched 'Flexi options' which offers an array of innovative, specialist opportunities including "outreach" and "inreach" work, 'Treloar's direct' a mobile assistive

technology unit and seconded therapy using other college's premises. Orchard Hill's progressive approach to taking their provision out to GFE's and other locations near to people's homes is highlighted in Professor Jim Mansell's recent DoH publication 'Raising our Sights: services for adults with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities'. Their work includes a partnership with Carshalton College to run a purpose built vocational progression centre.

The LSIS/Natspec working in partnership for quality improvement project revealed much to celebrate. We need to recognise however that ISC's are not spread evenly across the country and their particular location affords different opportunities and challenges. A one size fits all approach will not work, each college will have different solutions and contributions to make.

So where are we now, what's ahead?

We have another change with the ASCL Act, the establishment of the YPLA and the SFA and local authorities identifying need and commissioning education and training for learners up to 19 and up to 25 for those subject to a learning difficulties assessment. We are told changes in duties and powers will not reduce access to ISC's and we will need to monitor this closely. Clearly the new Government could lead to further changes ahead.

What is certain is the pressure on public funds that will continue for many years. We all expect another storm ahead which will need to be weathered. It is likely to be more severe than ever.

I believe we will need to be able to demonstrate best value for money outcomes for our students, that we will need to do more for less, perhaps by achieving outcomes for greater numbers of students from the same or less resource, and also that we need to establish additional revenue bearing activities, which many of you have already, to support and sustain our core work through uncertain times.

There is no doubt that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have a high priority. The YPLA vision includes to: "*work with partners to secure seamless learning pathways from pre-16 through to post-19 and in particular to improve progression for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities up to the age of 25*", YPLA is committed to being learner-centred and provider neutral and it is also charged with improving value for money.

So what would I like to see?

Independent specialist colleges, general FE colleges and other providers offering an integrated network of provision that enables learners to progress through learning and beyond into productive lives. Health and social care providers, employers and agencies and so forth actively engaged with this network in order that positive outcomes and planned progression is prime.

Specialist colleges as a valued and integral part of the national, regional and local strategy for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

This would require genuinely personalised and collaborative planning for individuals to chart their way through the system to achieve outcomes that optimise their life chances and offer opportunities to contribute to the economy and society and have a better life. I believe that this is what the vision in 'Through Inclusion to Excellence' was about.

It would require shifts in policy and funding to enable specialist colleges play a fuller part in flexible and collaborative provision, currently our funding system constrains us far too much. It also seems to have outrun its time with fees frozen for the third year for residential and fourth for day, plus inequalities in the rates for exceptional funding. It doesn't seem sustainable and I believe it is a noose around our necks.

Many of the initiatives we have seen in recent years have depended upon short term investment for change funding – we need long term approaches in policy and funding to fully realise the vision for change. I would like to see funding more in line with an allocation that enables innovative approaches, allowing full time, longer term placements and part time, short term specialist placements, including residential, that integrate with general FE and other providers.

I have always believed that integrating specialist and general FE at the margins could widen participation, raise quality, extend choice and improve value for money. I would also like to see approaches that allow collaboration and even blending of our provision with health and social services to support transition and progression and address the issues over care and health costs. ISCs should be central to the solution for complex learners but we need to be able to break out of the chains that bind us in terms of funding silos, the perception of what we can offer and prejudice against specialisation and residential.

I would also like to see us being recognised officially as ‘colleges’ again rather than providers - colleges are communities of learning, we are not simply purveyors or suppliers. We are part of the college sector.

So, I want to see ISC’s being central to a positive strategy for complex learners and not a place of last resort, with policy and funding that creates partnerships between us and other providers and enables flexibility and personalisation.

We need to see the learning difficulties assessments working effectively and impartially and Foundation Learning enabling access, achievement and progression – let’s hope it doesn’t become another Schedule 2j!

We need to be valued members of Children’s Trusts and 14 – 19 strategic partnerships where we can champion vulnerable young people. We need to be involved in sub regional planning groups. I want to see specialist Colleges recognised as leaders within the field of further education for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in their local area, region and nationally – based upon quality, student outcomes and value for money. And who knows maybe we will even see Centres of Excellence for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities!

The inspiration, determination and achievements of the young people and staff that we work with has kept me busily and happily engaged within this sector for almost thirty years. As I step down from the demands and joys of being a full time Principal and Chair of Natspec, I remain totally committed to the value of specialism and the profound impact of a residential college experience. Natspec has grown greatly in stature and influence over the years and so I urge you to support, value and contribute to it – don’t comment from the sidelines, get involved! Together the sector is stronger.

I respect and value the creativity, innovation and uniqueness of each of your colleges and will continue to champion the requirements of our young people to have the best learning possible that enriches their lives, enables them to make a positive contribution and to have happy, productive futures.

I believe the independent specialist college sector is a triumph of responsiveness and learner focus, we have always had to find our own way and I wish you all well for the fight ahead – grasp each and every opportunity, it’s down to you to forge the future for our learners.

Good luck to you all – keep on believing, stick to your guns and above all keep our learners in your sights!

Thank you.