

A photograph of a person wearing a black wetsuit, a black beanie, and a bright orange life vest. They are lying on their back on a blue and black surfboard, riding a wave. The person is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows the ocean with white foam from the wave.

Natspec

The voice of
specialist further
education

What is inclusion and who gets to decide?

An exploration of inclusion from the perspective of specialist college learners and leaders

Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this important report. Inclusion is rightly at the centre of education policy, but too often the debate starts in the wrong place. It focuses on mainstream, assuming inclusion is about where a young person should be educated before asking what helps them feel safe, understood, ambitious and that they belong.

I'd like to thank the 67 learners and 32 leaders in specialist colleges who took part in the research. The report draws heavily on the voices of learners who have a clear message: inclusion is not achieved simply by placing everyone in the same setting. It is achieved when each young person has the right learning programme, the right support and the right environment for them.

For many disabled young people, specialist colleges provide exactly that. They are places where learners are heard, valued and supported to build the skills, confidence and independence they need for adult life. They are part of communities, not outside them, and they help learners navigate and participate in community life as adults.

With this research we hope to persuade policymakers, local authorities and wider partners that inclusion should not be reduced to a simple choice between mainstream and specialist provision; an inclusive system needs both. It must be flexible enough to respond well to each young person, rather than expecting young people to fit a single model.

I hope this research prompts thought and action, shifting the conversation away from assumptions about place and towards evidence and the experiences of young people themselves.



Clare Howard OBE
Natspec CEO



Learners have a clear message: inclusion is achieved when each young person has the right learning programme, the right support and the right environment for them.



Executive summary

Inclusion has become one of the core pillars of education policy in recent years, yet its definition is still hotly debated. With a greater emphasis on mainstream inclusion in government rhetoric, and preexisting research¹ that focuses predominantly on mainstream and schools, those who work and learn at specialist further education (FE) colleges have had little to no input into the inclusion conversation. As providers supporting learners with the most complex needs, specialist colleges offer vital perspectives on inclusion that have not yet been heard. This research sought to address this gap in the narrative, hearing from 67 learners and 32 senior leaders from 10 specialist colleges in England and Wales on what inclusion means to them and how it is practised. Learners and leaders were also asked their views on what practice could be transferred from specialist to mainstream colleges to make mainstream more inclusive.

The findings show that inclusion is not about location, but the quality of a young person's experience of education which is defined by belonging, agency and specialist support. Young people felt they belonged in specialist colleges in large part by having a collective identity among their peers of being disabled or having additional needs. Feeling respected, listened to and understood were also critical to young people being included.

The research found specialist colleges are uniquely placed to provide an included experience for young people with high levels of need. They can tailor provision and learning around the young person, offer concentrated spaces for cross-pollination of specialism and expertise, and make decisions at every level that places disabled learners and those with additional needs front and centre. Critically, their focus is on building the skills for young people to be included in their communities during and after college.

Some practices were seen to be transferable to mainstream. Cultural shifts, staff training and curriculum adaptations could be transferred with the right investment, but structural barriers mean that the holistic, interdisciplinary model of the specialist colleges cannot be fully replicated outside of the specialist sector.

The findings from the report have important implications for government in the development of education policy. They are also pertinent for local authorities as they make decisions about placements for young people.

¹ See annex 1 for summary of literature review

We therefore recommend that the Department for Education in England and the Welsh Government should:

- 1** Adopt a definition of 'inclusion' which is based on ensuring every child and young person receives the right learning programme and the right support in the right environment for the individual.
- 2** Prioritise the voices of young people, including those with the highest needs, in shaping their understanding of an inclusive education system.
- 3** Recognise a fully inclusive education system as including both mainstream and specialist providers, rather than an all inclusive mainstream sector.
- 4** Develop a strategic plan for specialist provision that complements its measures to improve mainstream inclusion, ensuring specialist colleges are adequately supported and funded so they can continue to deliver high quality provision and support the wider sector to develop inclusive practices.
- 5** Prioritise the development of a fairer and more straightforward mechanism for allocating specialist placements, including in specialist colleges, to all young people who want and need one.
- 6** Ensure that strategies for improving mainstream inclusion include a strand of work focused on developing disability awareness among non-disabled students so that they are empowered to create a welcoming environment for their disabled peers and those with additional needs.

Local authorities in England and Wales should:

- 7** Adopt an approach to inclusion that prioritises ensuring all young people in their local area have access to the right provision in the right place for them.
- 8** Recognise specialist colleges as vital contributors to an inclusive system and key agents in ensuring that all young people have access to the expertise they need to succeed in education and progress into an included future.
- 9** Involve both specialist and mainstream FE and skills providers in developing and delivering on local and regional strategic plans for post school provision for disabled learners and those with additional needs.
- 10** Give significant weight to learner preferences when making decisions about placements, respecting the learner's own assessment of what matters most to them and where they are most likely to thrive.

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**“At college I am
free to be me.”**

Learner

Introduction

Inclusion is one of the fundamental principles underpinning current government policy on education, yet paradoxically it is one of the least clearly defined concepts. Its prominence reflects a growing expectation that education settings should enable all learners, including those who are disabled or have additional needs, to participate, achieve and belong. Without setting out its own definition of inclusion or inviting debate to help reach a shared understanding of the term, government has so closely associated inclusion with mainstream education that inclusion is effectively being presented as the preserve of mainstream settings. So where does this leave specialist provision? Is it entirely at odds with the inclusion agenda, by virtue of the fact that learners are being educated separately from their non-disabled peers? Or is it an essential part of the inclusion agenda, enabling its learners to participate, achieve and belong in the broader education system and in wider society?

Literature on inclusion is overwhelmingly focused on mainstream settings and schools in particular. This has meant the perspectives of those working or learning in specialist settings have been pushed to the sidelines. Specialist further education (FE) colleges and the learners they support are particularly absent from the debate and have had little to no opportunity to shape how inclusion is understood.

This research report seeks to broaden the evidence base on inclusion by capturing these missing perspectives. Specialist colleges hold a unique wealth of expertise in supporting disabled young people and those with additional needs², including those with the most complex needs. They can offer valuable insights into what inclusive education can look like in practice. Rather than positioning specialist provision as separate from the inclusion agenda, this report argues that specialist colleges have an important and often overlooked contribution to make.

² This report draws on perspectives from England and Wales, where different terminology is used - 'special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)' in England and 'additional learning needs (ALN)' in Wales. For consistency, the term 'disabled young people and those with additional needs' is used throughout.

Aims and objectives

The aims of this research were to:

- broaden understanding of the term 'inclusion' through examining how it is understood and applied in the specialist college context;
- identify inclusive practices from the specialist college sector which could be adopted by mainstream FE settings.

This involved exploring two key questions:

- 1. Do specialist FE colleges provide an included experience of education for their learners and, if so, how?**
- 2. Of the approaches taken by specialist colleges to ensure they provide an included experience, which could be meaningfully transferred to mainstream FE settings?**

The first question included two main areas of enquiry:

- What do learners and leaders in specialist colleges understand by the term 'inclusion'?
- What makes specialist colleges inclusive?

The second question involved identifying which practices could be easily transferred to mainstream settings, which would require systemic change to support their transfer, and which would be very difficult or impossible to replicate.



Methodology

This was a small scale piece of research drawing on the perspectives of senior leaders and learners in 10 specialist FE colleges, all members of Natspec.

Rapid review

A rapid review of the current literature on inclusion in specialist settings and in the FE sector was undertaken to identify what aspects of the topic had been researched previously and what gaps existed. 14 different articles were reviewed and a summary was produced³.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 32 senior leaders from a sample of 10 Natspec member colleges across England and Wales⁴. The sample reflected the diversity of Natspec's membership, in terms of college size, location, learner needs, age range, and programme types, and included both residential and non-residential settings.

Interviews were largely conducted in person, with the remainder conducted online, depending on participant preference and practical arrangements. Most colleges put forward two or more senior leaders for the interview; the resulting interaction between interviewees allowed for wide ranging discussions.



³ See annex 1 for summary of literature review

⁴ See annex 2 for senior leader interview schedule

Fig. 1: Adapted learner questions by specialist college staff



Focus groups with learners

Focus groups were held with each of the 10 participating colleges, involving a total of 67 learners. This format provided a supportive environment in which learners felt comfortable participating in discussion, with a broad range of perspectives emerging organically through conversation.

In order to maximise participation of learners with a wide range of different needs, a common set of questions was provided to colleges in advance⁵. Staff were encouraged to adapt these questions, if appropriate, to meet learners' communication and accessibility needs and to support their meaningful participation, e.g. through the use of widgets and visual cues (see fig. 1). Support staff occasionally prompted learners or offered interpretation of sounds to facilitate learner responses to questions.

Data analysis

Data from the interviews and focus groups was analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns, areas of consensus and points of divergence. The analysis explored the range of interpretations of inclusion expressed by participants and the variety of different practices used to support inclusion, and which were most frequently applied. It also examined the consistency and divergence of participant views on what could be meaningfully transferred from specialist to mainstream colleges.

Triangulation

To strengthen the validity of the findings, emerging themes were presented to approximately 50 delegates in a workshop at the Natspec national conference. Their feedback was used to test whether the themes resonated with wider sector experience and to refine findings where appropriate.

⁵ See annex 3 for learner focus group schedule

Findings

What does existing research tell us about inclusion in specialist colleges?

Existing literature offers different interpretations of inclusion, with no consistent understanding of what inclusive education means in practice. Most of the evidence concerns mainstream education and research into inclusion in specialist settings is predominantly focused on special schools. As a result, the perspectives of disabled young people and staff in specialist colleges are significantly underrepresented.⁶

Do specialist FE colleges provide an included experience of education for their learners and, if so, how?

Senior leaders and learners were invited to set out what they understood by the term 'inclusion', to state whether or not their college was inclusive by their own definition, and, if so, to explain how inclusion was being achieved in their setting.

⁶ See annex 1 for summary of literature review



What do learners and leaders in specialist colleges understand by the term 'inclusion'?

All senior leaders and learners across the 10 colleges described their college as inclusive. When asked to explain what contributed to this sense of inclusion, they identified a number of key factors.

Being understood

Learners consistently described inclusion as their needs being understood and responded to without having to explain or justify themselves. Senior leaders also emphasised the importance of enabling young people to find and exercise their voice and listening to what they had to say. Learners valued the patience of both staff and their peers, who gave them space to articulate their point of view, including where they needed additional time to do so, such as when they were using an augmentative assistive communication (AAC) device. Those who used an AAC device saw it as empowering them to express themselves. This mutual peer support and understanding was evident during the focus groups, where learners engaged attentively with each other's points of view.

Understanding also took the form of being recognised and treated as young adults and autonomous individuals, regardless of their care needs. For some, this contrasted with previous experiences in mainstream school, where they had been "patronised" or "ignored". Understanding here went beyond the learners' ability to communicate and involved a deeper recognition of their autonomy as young adults.

**Always understanding,
always listening.**

Learner about specialist college staff

Having genuine choice

Learners and senior leaders said that inclusion meant young people having agency over the decisions that affect them. Learners' confidence in advocating for what they want was built through being given control over day-to-day decisions, such as where they would like to eat their lunch or whose house they would like to visit in the evening. They were also making more substantial decisions over courses, living arrangements and work experience, choices which were not limited by what was convenient for the college. For example, one college held a 'carousel' event where learners were able to sample different courses to determine which they wanted to take the next year. Whatever their support needs, the student could select a course based on their preference and the college would proactively adapt the environment to meet their needs.

One senior leader explained that true social inclusion requires the right to fail, including the freedom to make wrong decisions. Specialist colleges provide a controlled environment where young people are given the freedom to exercise their own judgement, witness the direct impact of their choices and learn from the experience.



I choose what I want.

Learner

Having high aspirations and equality of opportunity

Learners and leaders told us that an unwavering commitment to high aspirations is central to a truly included experience. Learners gave examples of achieving milestones they once thought impossible, such as starting their own business or presenting in front of 400 people at a conference because, in their specialist college, their disability was never viewed as a limiting factor.

Specialist college staff described creating an environment where 'nothing is off the table' in terms of enabling learners to have the same opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts. Learners emphasised that inclusion is about fair and equal access to education and future prospects, "not asking for more, but for equal". They wanted the same things as any young person to make lifelong friends, engage in adventurous activities, try out different career options. They saw college as helping them gain access to opportunities from which they would otherwise be shut out because of societal barriers. Senior leaders were keen to open up these opportunities as a vehicle for building camaraderie, broadening social networks and enabling exploration of interests that could become lifelong pursuits.

[We're] not asking for more, but for equal.

Learner



Belonging to a group where all young people are disabled and have additional needs

Learners shared a profound sense of belonging derived from being part of a peer group where everyone is disabled or has additional needs and shares an understanding of the challenges that come with that. Some described having a friendship group for the first time. This feeling was most pronounced from those who had transitioned from mainstream schools, where they frequently described their previous experiences as being marked by bullying, isolation or a constant awareness of being “different”. As one learner put it, “all you want is to fit in, but you are different and are treated as such – this can be so damaging”.

In the specialist college environment, learners were no longer defined by their disability, which allowed them to be seen as individuals and to form new identities. They could “reinvent” themselves, allowing other facets of their personality and interests to shine through. A student could become known not as “the disabled one” but, for example, for being particularly witty, an excellent footballer or a talented artist.

All you want is to fit in, but you are different and are treated as such – this can be so damaging.

Learner



Embraced and encouraged [to be] their authentic selves without fear of rejection.

Senior Leader

For some, connection with others who shared similar life experiences was transforming how they perceived and understood their disability. One senior leader shared the experience of a young man who, for the first time, could talk to a peer about the AAC device they both used. Having never previously met someone else using the same technology, this turned the piece of equipment from a marker of difference into a point of discussion.

College leaders helped to facilitate this celebration of diversity through “radical acceptance” so that learners are “embraced and encouraged [to be] their authentic selves without fear of rejection”. As one learner said simply, “at college I am free to be me”.

At college I am free to be me.

Learner

? Is there anything else you want to share?

Yes No

I like the other students in my class.

Learner has written in response to a question 'is there is anything else they want to share?':
"I like the other students in my class"

What makes specialist colleges inclusive?

While learners contributed significantly to defining inclusion, it was senior leaders who provided most of the evidence about the practices that specialist colleges use to achieve inclusiveness. They did not find it easy to draw a clear distinction between inclusion, effective practice and individualised approaches, instead viewing them as fundamentally intertwined. One leader summarised this position by explaining inclusion as being “bespoke for the young people who come here”.

**We are bespoke
for the young
people who
come here.**

Senior leader



Accessible by design

Leaders explained that all aspects of provision in specialist colleges are designed around the learner. This enables them to create an included experience from the outset, with no requirement for reasonable adjustments and no need for learners to “request additional support or alternative arrangements”. Senior leaders saw this as contrasting with mainstream settings, where learners are largely expected to fit in with existing systems and spaces not originally designed for them, and where inclusion means putting adjustments in place, often at the request of the young person or their family.

This was particularly evident in the physical setup of the buildings of some of the specialist colleges involved in the research. Leaders emphasised that inclusive environments are those where accessibility, both in terms of the physical space and in the proactive anticipation of young people’s needs, is built in from the outset. One senior leader explained that every part of their campus was accessible to their student cohort, all of whom were wheelchair users or needed mobility support. This meant that learners were never physically excluded or reliant on others to support their access, and their choice of course was never limited by accessibility concerns. The design of the physical space was also seen as critical for learners with high anxiety levels and sensory needs, who needed calmer environments for them to engage in their learning.





**“I feel like I’m a
valued individual.”**

Learner

Individualised and tailored learning

Inclusion was being achieved through deep personalisation of learning, with staff adapting teaching, support, communication and environments to each learner's needs. The curriculum was largely shaped around the learner, with individualised programmes within broad pathways designed to match the learner's starting point, needs, interests and aspirations. Even when working towards formal qualifications, delivery was often highly personalised. Timetables were regularly organised around what worked best for the learner, rather than expecting the learner to follow a strict schedule. Specialist colleges can embed this flexibility as a core principle of their practice because of the high levels of staff expertise across multiple disciplines, small class sizes and high staff ratios.

There's
something for
everyone [here].

Learner



Preparing learners for a more included future

Providing education within a specialist setting was described by many senior leaders as effective in preparing young people for a more included future. Colleges use their controlled environments to help learners identify and break through barriers that might otherwise prevent them from participating meaningfully in society. While learners may be educated separately from other non-disabled learners, the focus remains firmly on preparing them to take up their place in society and often involves frequent learning opportunities within the wider community setting.

Young people were regularly engaging with volunteering or accessing community facilities. One college, for instance, held a tournament with the local football club where disabled and non-disabled young people played alongside one another. Senior leaders were keen to stress that, far from being denied the opportunity to be around other non-disabled people, their learners were able to use the college as a secure base from which they could actively participate in their wider community. This enabled them to develop the skills to engage with their communities with greater confidence and autonomy in the future.

[The college] was the right environment to grow...like a plant.

Learner



Colleges were often focused on small but critical details that could make all the difference to the individual in terms of inclusion in society. For example, one college spent weeks working with a young person who was too anxious to use public toilets. The goal was to build their confidence enough so that they could join their family on outings and engage in community life just like any other young person.

Many of the young people identified that what they were learning was demonstrably useful, providing them with the skills to be more included in the future. For example, some learners spoke excitedly about their newfound ability to apply skills they had learned in mobility training to travelling independently on public transport, giving them greater access to their local community and beyond.

For some learners, employment is a critical part of an included future. Specialist colleges have built up networks of employers, often providing them with disability awareness training to ensure that the work experience and paid employment opportunities they offer are inclusive. One college was offering a learner run service, auditing workplaces for their accessibility and disability friendliness.

The specialist college curriculum also includes skills for the workplace that non-disabled jobseekers would not need to consider, such as using public transport to get to work, advocating for their reasonable adjustments, or identifying supported accommodation near an employer. As one young person put it, "being employable is so much more than having your qualifications."

Leaders concluded that genuine inclusion in their communities, through employment or other pathways, cannot be left to chance for disabled learners or those with additional needs. It requires the college to take a deliberate, person centred approach where learners are given the foundations and confidence to engage with the wider community.

Being employable is so much more than having your qualifications.

Learner

Relational approaches

Both senior leaders and learners identified trusting relationships as critical to creating an inclusive environment. They saw inclusion as being underpinned by a whole setting approach to relational practice, often trauma informed, with skilled staff and high staff to student ratios. This gave them the time and capability to build strong connections with learners, even if they did not work with them directly.

Easy to talk to.

Learner about specialist college staff

From the learners' perspectives, the quality of these relationships was a primary differentiator from mainstream settings. They described specialist college staff as caring, approachable, and willing to adapt, providing both emotional and practical support. One young man shared that at his previous mainstream school he often "got into fights" because the staff and students didn't understand him. He contrasted that with his experience at a specialist college where staff were "easy to talk to" and he now felt safe enough to resolve frustrations through conversation rather than conflict.

In specialist colleges, behaviour is viewed primarily as a form of communication, rather than a disciplinary issue. Leaders and learners talked about staff being highly skilled in de-escalation and supporting learners with self- and coregulation. Leaders noted that being able to draw on different expertise across the college, e.g. from speech and language therapists or behaviour specialists, was critical in building positive behaviour support. They were able to create a sense of safety and belonging which was particularly important for learners who had previously had negative or traumatic experiences of education. Environments characterised by acceptance, flexibility and non-punitive responses to behaviour helped learners reengage, often leading to significant improvements in attendance, confidence and wellbeing. Because these positive behaviour management strategies are consistent and embedded throughout the college, they provide a stable framework that makes even the most disengaged learners feel safe enough to participate and progress.

Interdisciplinary support

The interdisciplinary approach of specialist colleges was seen by senior leaders as key to being inclusive. With a “tight knit” team of education, social care and healthcare professionals all located within a single setting, support can be coordinated seamlessly across the learner’s day. This joined up working ensures that support is highly responsive, rather than being fragmented across different agencies.

Leaders described how a combination of a highly skilled team on site and flexibility in the curriculum meant learners with complex medical needs rarely missed out on education. As a result, scheduled medication administration, therapy sessions, or emergency responses for conditions like epilepsy did not have to be barriers to learning. At the same time, timetables could be adjusted to ensure hospital appointments did not result in lost learning.

The collaborative environment also facilitates an exchange of expertise, where professionals from different disciplines learn from one another and innovate together. Leaders saw this as naturally upskilling staff, as they have access to the wealth of experience held by tutors, therapists and health and social care professionals. The professional development occurs in real time, enabling staff to trial and refine different strategies to ensure learners have the most included experience possible.



Attitude to risk

Risk assessment processes were seen as a positive tool for facilitating participation, rather than as a means for identifying barriers and justifying exclusion. They were being used to identify the specific adaptations that should be put in place to ensure that learners could participate in a chosen activity. For example, one college was supporting young people who were wheelchair users to participate in surfing. Their approach was, "If a student wants to do X, how do we make that possible?"

A leader in this same college described the protected specialist college environment as one in which learners can be permitted to take risks relatively safely. She gave the example of learners being able to move freely around the site, without being accompanied by support staff. "After all what's the worst that could happen here, when every member of staff knows every learner?" she asked. This attitude to risk was giving students with highly complex needs the same freedom to move around college as a non-disabled young person would have in a mainstream setting – along with a sense of ownership of and belonging to the college.

**If a student wants to do [an activity],
how do we make that possible?**

Senior leader



Supporting the family

Some leaders also saw support for the family being key to a young person being truly included. Regular communication and visit opportunities enabled families to observe the progress of their young person and feel confident that the college was developing their independence safely and appropriately.

An understandable desire on the part of a parent to protect their child can act as an unintended barrier to an included future. Close working relationships between specialist college and families gave parents the confidence to trust in their young person's growing autonomy. As a result, they felt able to allow their child to practise skills learned at college at home. One senior leader said she received a teary phone call from a parent because her son had made her a cup of tea for the first time ever. One young person said that her college had not only been "life changing" for her, but also for her family, who could now clearly envision a future where she lives more independently.

Life changing.

Learner talking about the impact of college for her and her family



Which approaches taken by specialist colleges could be meaningfully transferred to mainstream FE settings?

Participants were asked to reflect on the inclusive practices that they had identified within their own college and categorise these into: easily transferable to mainstream FE; transferable given systemic changes such as an increase in funding or changes to performance measures; very difficult or impossible for mainstream FE to replicate. Responses mainly came from senior leaders.

There was no clear consensus on what could be transferred or how easily. This might be in part due to the varying levels of familiarity of respondents with mainstream further education, or how recent their experience of mainstream was. Some of the senior leaders stressed that the fundamental difference in approach to inclusion between the two different types of college made this a complex question, with specialist colleges including learners by building provision around them and mainstream settings adapting or adjusting existing provision to make it accessible.

Several leaders pointed out that the inclusiveness of a college is highly dependent upon where senior leaders choose to allocate resources. While specialist colleges have the advantage – or “privilege”, as one described it – of being able to prioritise disabled learners in all decision making, mainstream college leaders must balance competing priorities. For example, in improving the college estate, they must decide whether to put a new roof on the automotive vehicle building or create a new independent living flat. They questioned whether the imperative to split their focus across a range of competing interests made it possible for mainstream college to replicate the extent of inclusiveness that can be achieved when an entire cohort is disabled or has additional needs.

Some leaders also pointed out that the contexts in which general FE colleges operate are highly varied, with some having specialist hubs on site or being involved in close partnerships with specialist colleges. This means that practice could be more easily transferred to some mainstream settings than others.

A number of key elements, however, were repeatedly raised in discussion.



Culture and ethos

Leaders all agreed that culture and ethos underpin a setting's ability to be inclusive. Opinions differed, however, on how easy it would be for mainstream settings to create a culture and ethos that centred the inclusion of disabled young people or those with additional needs, as specialist colleges do. While some argued that changing attitudes toward disability is not necessarily resource heavy, others noted that cultural change takes sustained effort, time, and "the right people" in leadership to embed inclusive practice across the whole setting.

One participant in the conference workshop described how it had taken 10 years to embed an ethos of inclusion in a general FE college with which she was familiar. Achieving an inclusive culture would mean moving beyond surface level markers of inclusion such as "having a disabled toilet or ramp", towards a deeper understanding of disability and additional needs. Attitude to behaviour was seen as the most important shift, where more flexible behaviour policies and a commitment to understanding individual needs, typically seen in specialist colleges, would need to be adopted across the mainstream setting.

The right people.

Senior leader view on what is needed to improve inclusive practice

[inclusion is more than] having a disabled toilet or ramp.

Senior leader

Upskilling staff

There was agreement that upskilling mainstream staff in a number of inclusive practices and improving their understanding of additional needs and disability would be relatively straightforward. It was acknowledged, however, that the depth of expertise in the specialist sector may still be difficult to replicate. Learners thought that a better understanding of their needs would result in those needs being more fully met. They suggested that visiting specialist colleges to observe inclusive practices first hand would benefit mainstream staff.

Participants were able to identify a number of core principles and strategies used in specialist colleges that could be replicated in mainstream colleges, of which relational approaches was the most commonly cited. They thought that understanding behaviour as communication, de-escalation techniques and teaching learners how to self- and co regulate could all be adopted by mainstream settings.

Leaders were clear, however, that the amount of training required, particularly to support learners with greater complexity of need, would require a significant increase in time and investment in continuous professional development (CPD). Specialist colleges typically require their staff to engage in frequent and extensive CPD relating to disability and additional needs in order to develop and maintain the expertise needed to support their learners.

In addition, 'organic' upskilling happens in a specialist environment through daily, immersive experiences with learners and expertise is built over time. Leaders thought that the level of expertise required to meet low incidence needs would be difficult to achieve in a mainstream setting where there is naturally a lower frequency of learners with that need and less concentration of specialism.

Leaders also pointed out that, while they would be willing to deliver training to staff in mainstream settings, they are not currently adequately resourced to do so. They would need government support and investment to enable them to fulfil this secondary function if they were to do so without compromising the quality of provision in their own specialist settings.

Tailoring provision around the learner

Leaders suggested that tailoring provision around the learner could be transferred to some extent to mainstream colleges. Greater personalisation would require increased resourcing to account for more time spent on adaptation of curriculum materials and higher staff to student ratios. Leaders said that mainstream settings could integrate broader life skills alongside formal qualifications, thus strengthening 'preparing for adulthood' and increasing the likelihood of a more included future.

However, they emphasised that the truly interdisciplinary nature of the most highly bespoke specialist provision which supports the inclusion of learners with the highest level of needs remains difficult to replicate. Even where mainstream colleges have health professionals on site, the coordination required to plan and deliver each learner's programme, to monitor progress and assess achievement is not feasible with higher learner numbers.



Physical environment

The physical environment was a central theme in discussions on what is transferable. It was seen as relatively straightforward to transfer some key features where only minor adjustments to the existing environment would be needed. At relatively modest cost, for example, mainstream colleges could undertake sensory audits or make use of visual and pictorial cues. They could create quieter, sensory breakout spaces, or adjust lighting to better suit neurodivergent learners. However, other features, such as installing hoists in all areas of the building, would require expensive structural changes.

Leaders thought that most mainstream colleges simply do not have the underlying infrastructure to support learners with higher levels of need. Transforming these settings would either require major investment in adaptations to improve accessibility or the building of a separate, dedicated space.

One leader described this approach as bolting a specialist college onto the side of a general FE, raising the question: why develop a new separate space from scratch when a fully equipped specialist college already exists nearby?

The inherent nature of mainstream colleges – often large, loud and busy – means they are unsuitable for certain need profiles. For learners with high levels of anxiety or hypersensitive sensory needs, the sheer scale of a mainstream college is a barrier. Participants noted that some of these young people would struggle to even get past the college gates, which no amount of adaptation to the environment could counter.

We would need to bolt [the college] onto the side of a GFE.

Senior leader

Fostering belonging for disabled young people

Leaders and learners believed that mainstream colleges could adopt some of the approaches used by specialist colleges to create a sense of belonging for disabled young people. This would include taking a celebratory approach to disability, setting clear expectations on how to communicate with disabled people, and taking proactive steps to ensure disabled young people are fully integrated in college life. Learners themselves advocated for better disability awareness, not just for staff in mainstream settings, but for their non-disabled peers. Many shared experiences where staff and students in their mainstream schools had made assumptions about their abilities, leading to them being underestimated or bullied. They saw it as a highly transferable goal for mainstream staff and students to communicate respectfully, challenge stereotypes and recognise the diverse strengths of disabled learners.

However, staff and learners thought the fundamental level of belonging in their specialist environment which the young people valued so highly would be very difficult to replicate. The means of creating a sense of shared identity derived from being part of a disabled community, for example in deaf culture or for those who are visually impaired, cannot be easily transferred to a place where learners are predominantly non-disabled. As one learner put it, it's "difficult to integrate sighted and non-sighted education worlds." Shared, lived experience creates a specific type of community that is unique to the specialist setting.

**Difficult to
integrate sighted
and non-sighted
education worlds.**

Learner



Conclusion

When young people with higher levels of need – and those who support them in a specialist setting – are involved in defining inclusion, its meaning shifts away from where the learning takes place to the quality of the young person's experience. Inclusion becomes associated with belonging, agency, specialised support and an experience of education that is meaningful and aspirational for the individual. This is a fundamentally different take from the one that is underpinning the government's focus on improving mainstream inclusion, where the location of learning is being given primacy.

Young people felt they belonged in large part by having a collective identity among their peers of being disabled or having additional needs. They were no longer seen as different and were valued for other key facets of their personalities. They were encouraged to feel confident in themselves regardless of their disability or additional needs, and even to celebrate their disability as a strength.

Leaders saw specialist colleges as uniquely placed to provide an included experience for young people with high levels of need through offering provision that is tailored around the learner. The colleges provide concentrated spaces for cross-pollination of specialism and expertise, where decisions at every level place disabled learners and those with additional needs front and centre. Their primary focus is on building the skills to enable their learners to be included in their communities during and after college. Their college experience gives young people the opportunity to develop and rehearse the skills they need to thrive in the wider community in a safe, supportive place.



Some, but by no means all, of these practices can be transferred from specialist to mainstream. The majority of participants thought it would be possible, with the right levels of investment, to achieve cultural shifts, upskill staff and make adaptations to the curriculum. Specialist colleges

are willing to support that transfer of practice through collaborative working with their mainstream counterparts, provided they are resourced to do so. However, practices that rely on the holistic, interdisciplinary model of the specialist sector or depend on the collective experience of being educated alongside others with a shared experience of disability would be very difficult to replicate in mainstream. For those learners whose ability to engage in education, participate meaningfully and achieve to their potential is dependent on these factors, access to a specialist college setting is critical.



The research highlights the importance of involving specialist colleges, their learners and staff, in conversations about inclusion. It suggests that the debate about achieving inclusion should not be framed as specialist versus mainstream, but instead it should focus on **working together to provide the right learning programme, the right support and the right environment for each individual young person.** The aim should be to create an inclusive education system where this is achievable for all.

Recommendations

These findings have strong implications for the Department for Education and the Welsh Government as they develop Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) policy. They are also important for local authorities as they make decisions about placements for young people.

The interpretation of inclusion that is currently dominating government thinking in both England and Wales does not take into account young people's views and experiences of inclusion, particularly where they have a higher level of need. Working with this narrow definition of inclusion is likely to result in some young people being denied the specialist provision they need in order to fulfil their potential.

Senior leaders and learners in specialist colleges make a strong case for the inclusiveness of specialist colleges, presenting a challenge to the philosophical standpoint that education in mainstream is inherently more inclusive and therefore more desirable.

Specialist colleges have a wealth of experience and expertise in including learners with a higher level of need, much of which is relevant to the mainstream FE sector. However, if government policies and support are targeted solely at increasing inclusion in mainstream, there is a risk that specialist colleges will be unable to maintain high quality provision or fulfil their role in supporting the wider system.

We therefore recommend that the Department for Education in England and the Welsh Government should:

- 1** Adopt a definition of 'inclusion' which is based on ensuring every child and young person receives the right learning programme and the right support in the right environment for the individual.
- 2** Prioritise the voices of young people, including those with the highest needs, in shaping their understanding of an inclusive education system.
- 3** Recognise a fully inclusive education system as including both mainstream and specialist providers, rather than an all inclusive mainstream sector.
- 4** Develop a strategic plan for specialist provision that complements its measures to improve mainstream inclusion, ensuring specialist colleges are adequately supported and funded so they can continue to deliver high quality provision and support the wider sector to develop inclusive practices.
- 5** Prioritise the development of a fairer and more straightforward mechanism for allocating specialist placements, including in specialist colleges, to all young people who want and need one.
- 6** Ensure that strategies for improving mainstream inclusion include a strand of work focused on developing disability awareness among non-disabled students so that they are empowered to create a welcoming environment for their disabled peers and those with additional needs.

Local authorities in England and Wales should:

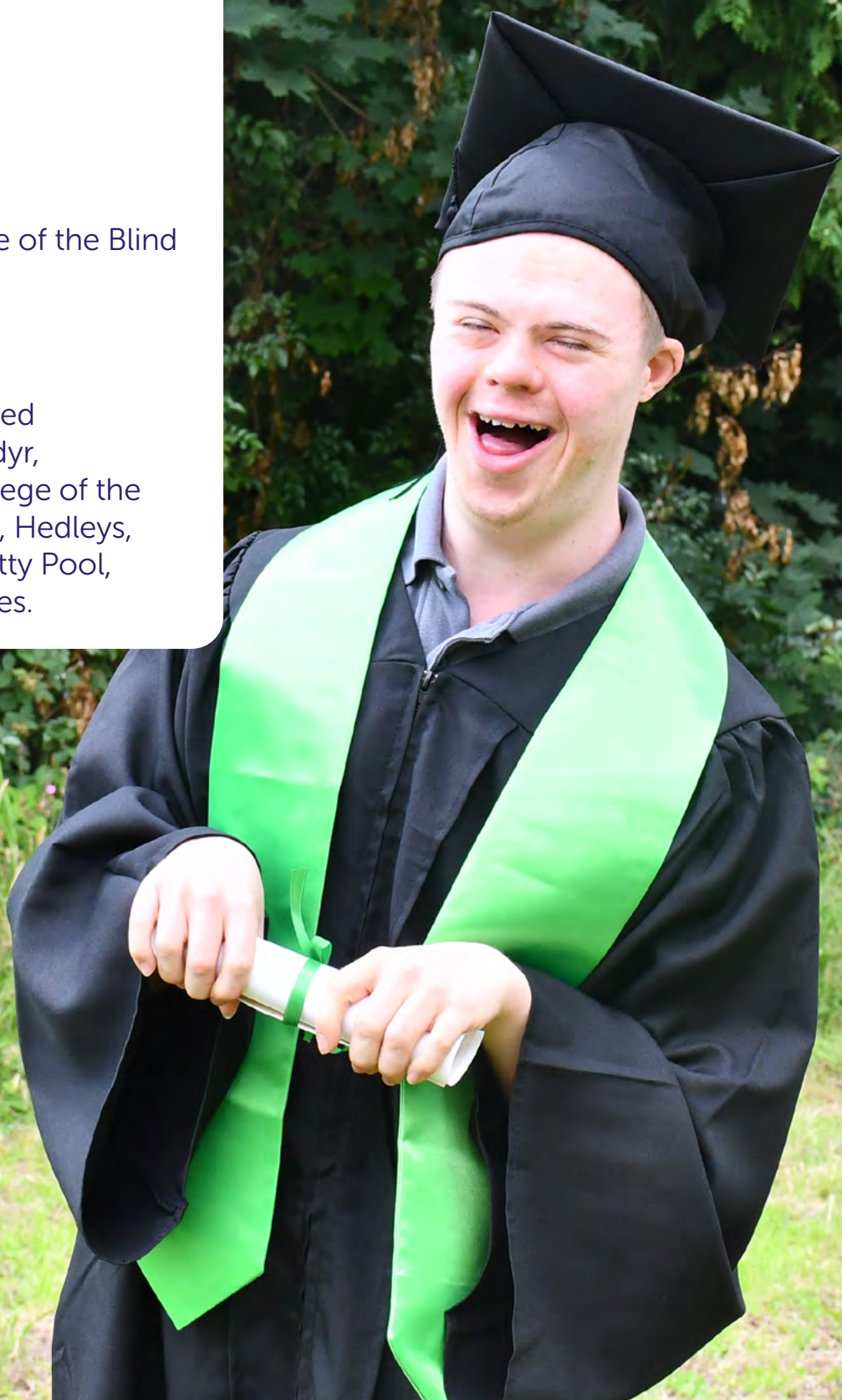
- 7** Adopt an approach to inclusion that prioritises ensuring all young people in their local area have access to the right provision in the right place for them.
- 8** Recognise specialist colleges as vital contributors to an inclusive system and key agents in ensuring that all young people have access to the expertise they need to succeed in education and progress into an included future.
- 9** Involve both specialist and mainstream FE and skills providers in developing and delivering on local and regional strategic plans for post school provision for disabled learners and those with additional needs.
- 10** Give significant weight to learner preferences when making decisions about placements, respecting the learner's own assessment of what matters most to them and where they are most likely to thrive.

Participating colleges

With thanks to the following colleges that participated in the research:

- Birtenshaw College
- Coleg Plas Dwbl
- Hedleys College
- Pengwern College
- Pinc College
- Portland College
- Royal National College of the Blind
- St Piers College
- The Hive College
- Treloar College

and to those that supplied photographs: Coleg Elidyr, The Royal National College of the Blind, Aurora Boveridge, Hedleys, Homefield, Mercury, Petty Pool, Pinc and Treloar Colleges.



Annexes

Annex 1: Summary of the literature review and list of research

Inclusion is widely endorsed as a policy goal, but its meaning varies across research, policy and public debate. In the UK, debates often frame inclusion more narrowly as a question of mainstream versus specialist. Some argue that specialist provision risks reinforcing segregation, in line with [Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), while other research and sector commentary highlight that mainstream placement does not automatically equate to inclusion where schools lack capacity, expertise or resources. These tensions are increasingly visible as policy signals frame mainstream as the default and specialist provision as primarily for learners “with the most complex needs”. At the same time, concern has been raised that a system that focuses on the hierarchy of learners and a dual system of mainstream and specialist education could undermine the inclusive education agenda.

Other scholarship and [international frameworks](#) emphasise participation, removal of barriers and system responsibility to adapt, rather than placement alone, while tools such as the [Index for Inclusion](#) conceptualise inclusion through cultures, policies and practices that enable belonging, agency and achievement across settings.

A further challenge is that inclusion is difficult to measure. Much research relies on attainment or placement type, while wider outcomes such as wellbeing, confidence and belonging are inconsistently captured. Evidence reviews report mixed findings, partly because inclusion is defined differently across studies and because learners with higher support needs are more likely to be concentrated in specialist settings. Inclusion is also experienced differently by stakeholders: young people often prioritise feeling safe and understood; parents might focus on stability and being included in communities; staff emphasise removing barriers and flexibility. These perspectives are rarely integrated into formal evaluations.

While inclusion has been extensively debated in school contexts, comparatively limited research focuses on further education, despite post-16 being a critical transition point, particularly for disabled young people who face a significantly higher risk of disengagement and not being in education, employment or training. FE operates across education, preparation for adulthood, employability and health and care, yet national inclusion debates remain predominantly school-focused,

with specialist colleges referenced less frequently. This gap is significant: without understanding how inclusion is experienced and enacted in specialist post-16 settings, policy risks overlooking a critical part of the education system. This reinforces the need for research that captures learner, family and staff perspectives to better understand how inclusive practice in specialist FE shapes participation, wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

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Annex 2: Senior leader questions

Understanding inclusion in specialist colleges

1. Would you describe your college as 'inclusive'? What makes you say that?

Prompts:

- a. What aspects of the college are in scope when you think about inclusion, e.g. physical environment, culture, learner experience, curriculum,
- b. What indicators or measures are you using to assess the inclusiveness of your provision?
- c. To what extent are you focused on ensuring your learners have an included post college life?
- d. How would you counter the point of view that educating disabled learners separately from their non-disabled peers is automatically exclusory?
- e. Based on what you've said so far, how would you sum up what you mean by 'inclusion of young people with SEND'?

2. What specific practices or approaches are you adopting that give your learners an included experience?

Prompts:

- a. For example, in relation to the physical environment, culture, learner experience and opportunities, curriculum, teaching and learning...
- b. Are there any approaches that particularly relate to ensuring your learners will enjoy an included life after college?
- c. Where would you say the college's strengths are in terms of inclusion?
- d. What if any areas have you identified as needing further development in relation to inclusion? What are the challenges in creating an included experience?
- e. From what you know of mainstream provision (including what your learners with experience of mainstream tell you), how do you think your approach to including learners with SEND compares to that of a mainstream setting?

Transferability to mainstream FE

3. Which of the practices or approaches you've shared do you believe could be meaningfully adopted in mainstream FE settings?

Prompts:

- a. Which, if any, could any be easily transferred? What makes them easily transferable?
 - b. Which practices might be transferable, subject to certain conditions or changes (e.g. better resourcing for mainstream, different performance measures, senior leader commitment...)?
 - c. What do you think would be the best way to share effective practice?
4. Which aspects of your approach to inclusion do you think would be very difficult or impossible for mainstream FE providers to adopt?

Prompts:

- a. What would make it difficult for mainstream settings to take these approaches?
- b. Are there aspects of your approach completely dependent on the college being a specialist setting (geared solely around learners with SEND)? What makes you say that?
- c. Where you think your practice would not be transferable, is this particularly significant to the inclusion of any specific learner groups or types of need?

Further reflections

5. Is there anything you would like to add to help us understand the role of specialist colleges in ensuring learners with SEND are included in FE?

Annex 3: Learner questions

Understanding inclusion in specialist colleges

1. What does 'inclusion' and 'being included' in your education mean to you?

Prompts:

- a. What does 'inclusion' or 'being included' feel like to you?
- b. Consider what inclusion means in relation to
 - i. Being able to join in with activities, lessons, or social things
 - ii. Having choices and control over what you do
 - iii. Your goals and aspirations
 - iv. Being part of a community
 - v. Being understood and / or having your needs met
 - vi. Having opportunities
 - vii. Learning relevant things
- c. What does it look like when young people are included in education?
- d. What does it look like when young people aren't included?

2. How important is it to you to feel included?

Prompts:

- a. Why does it matter / not matter to you?
- b. What difference does it make when you are included?
- c. What impact does it have if you aren't included?
- d. Do you think there are long-term effects of being included or not?

3. Do you feel included at this college?

If yes / mostly – What is it about college that makes you feel included?

If no / not really – What is it about college that makes you feel not included?

Prompts:

- a. Why does it matter / not matter to you?
- b. What difference does it make when you are included?
- c. What impact does it have if you aren't included?
- d. Do you think there are long-term effects of being included or not?

Transferability to mainstream FE

4. Do you feel more or less included at this college than you did at your previous school(s) or college? Can you tell us how this experience is different from your previous experience?

Prompts:

- a. If you were at a mainstream school or college before you came to this college, what are the main differences in how well you were included?
- b. What was done better in terms of making you feel included and what was done worse? Think about
 - i. How staff supported you
 - ii. How much the lessons suited you – how easy or not it was to understand what you needed to do
 - iii. How easy or not it was to learn – to make progress and to achieve things
 - iv. How well you got along with the other students
 - v. How involved you were in clubs and other activities
 - vi. How easy or not it was to get around the building
 - vii. How valued or important you felt
 - viii. Whether you felt understood or not
- c. If you went to a mainstream school or college setting, what could they have done differently to be more inclusive?
- d. What could specialist colleges teach mainstream schools or colleges about being inclusive?
- e. What could mainstream schools and colleges teach specialist colleges about being inclusive?

Further reflections

5. Is there anything else you want to share with us about inclusion in your education?



Natspec is the membership association for organisations that offer specialist further education and training for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 16 to 25.

For more information about Natspec, visit <https://natspec.org.uk/policy/>



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