



# **Deaf Young People in Further Education**

## **Executive Summary**

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## **Introduction**

This research study was about deaf young people, aged 16 to 19 years old and Further Education in England. Further Education (FE) includes college and training courses that young people might take after they have left school. It does not include sixth form colleges or University.

The research project set out to discover:

- What is most helpful to deaf young people who are in Further Education from their point of view?
- Is Further Education good at meeting deaf young people's needs?
- How can the experience and success of deaf young people in Further Education be improved?

It was important to ask these questions because there is not a great deal of evidence about Further Education and deaf people. Most research worldwide has concentrated on deaf young people at school, or high achieving deaf young people who go on to University. Yet in England, Further Education is the most common place that deaf young people go to when they finish school.

- 60% of deaf young people will leave school and go to Further Education in comparison with just around one third of all young people aged 16.

## **Educational attainment in Further Education**

Looking at official government statistics from 2011 we found that:

- Although the vast majority of deaf young people complete their FE course, nearly one quarter do not achieve any qualification at any level
- The drop out rate for deaf students in Further Education is twice that of the general population of students in FE
- Around one third of deaf students in FE will follow a course at level 3. Of those who follow an AS level course fewer than 4% will actually achieve the qualification when they have completed the course.

We know already that deaf young people generally enter Further Education with fewer qualifications and lower levels of academic achievement in comparison with the general population of 16 year olds. But these results also show that:

- The majority of deaf young people in FE do not make up the qualifications gap they have on leaving school in comparison with other young people of their age.

## **Transition processes between school and FE**

'Transition' refers to the process that helps deaf young people prepare to leave school, consider their options after the end of compulsory education and provides

them with support. We found 8 factors which supported a good process of transition for a young person on leaving school

1. Starting the transition process early (ideally in Year 9 onwards).
2. Ensuring the individual deaf young person is at the centre of the process. Their preferences, strengths, needs and ideas should frame the discussion, not how much money is available or what usually happens.
3. Making sure the deaf young person understands fully what transition means and helping them to see they have choices and their opinion matters.
4. Prioritising the deaf young person's communication support needs in any discussions and meetings. What would help them fully to take part?
5. Working with the young person to build their skills and knowledge so they have everything they need to take part as fully as they can in any decisions. This might include, for example, building their confidence to 'speak up' in meetings, learning how to weigh up advantages and disadvantages in order to make a decision, or identifying what is most important to them and then working towards that goal.
6. Providing opportunities to learn through experience so all possible options (FE college, apprenticeships, sixth form etc.) feel real, not abstract. This is a better basis for a young person to start to consider options in practice, not just options in theory.
7. Paying due attention to the full range of options for deaf young people on leaving school rather than just seeing FE as the usual option and everything else an exception.
8. Remaining open minded to a range of course options for deaf young people. We came across examples of some professionals, and also some parents, ruling out some potential career choices 'because deaf people did not do that'. Equally we found that deaf young people were commonly directed towards some courses because these were seen as 'suitable' or the best chance of gaining a qualification. Both of these points of view potentially lead to a reduced range of possibilities for deaf young people.

### **The Further Education Environment**

FE environments vary considerably in their degree of experience and expertise in supporting deaf young people's learning needs. Some are specialist colleges, some are mainstream colleges with a strong track record in deaf learner support, some have very little experience of deaf young people's capabilities and needs.

The kind of FE environment was an important consideration for deaf young people. Some will work better than others for some deaf learners.

Decisions about which FE college suited the young person best was not just about their individual learning needs; other factors also played a part.

- We came across examples where some options were not considered suitable because of the financial implications for local authorities e.g. a place in a local

FE college was strongly supported as more preferable than one with more specialist deaf related expertise elsewhere, because it would cost the local authority more.

- Parents and young people were either routinely advised to look locally first or did not realise that there might be variety and options elsewhere that may be more suitable or might be considered.

Different FE colleges also varied in the kind of support available to deaf young people. This variation was not only because different deaf young people needed different things, it was also because of what individual colleges might prioritise, or the amount of money, time and expert support available.

### **The availability and quality of communication support**

An important issue was whether a young person's communication and language needs and preferences would be met. Although FE colleges have an obligation to make arrangements to support deaf learners, we found that the availability and quality of communication and language support varied considerably between different FE college environments. The differences we found between colleges suggest the following questions are important:

- Are there well qualified and skilled communication support workers and/or sign language interpreters available? Or is the standard of communication professionals not good enough to match deaf young people's learning needs?
- Are some staff forced to do more than one support task e.g. communication support workers are also notetakers, rather than the deaf learner who needs both having both?
- Is there flexibility for deaf young people to choose the courses and support they want, or do they have to fit in to those where communication support might be available?
- Are the most skilled communication support workers/interpreters used in the most complex learning situations?
- Are there qualified teachers/specialist tutors available and experienced in teaching English and literacy skills for deaf learners? [We found it was more common for general English tutors in college to do this but without necessarily knowing how to teach deaf learners, or for other staff such as communication support workers to double up and do this when it was not actually their role or skill set].
- Does the FE college recognise the central importance of communication support for deaf young people and prioritise spending on it?

Variations in available communication and language support may not be a problem if a deaf learner's needs are met in the FE environment in which they are placed. However we were concerned that scale of the differences in different FE placements to meet deaf learner's need meant that:

- there was not an equality of opportunity for deaf young people across the different FE provisions

- uptake of learning support by deaf young people can be affected by its availability rather than by best fit to the learner's needs
- there were no minimum standards or best practice guidelines against which FE environments could benchmark their provision and their offer to the variety of deaf learners they might encounter

### **Meeting deaf young people's social and emotional needs**

Many young deaf people enter FE with deficits in social skills, skills for independence/ independence skills , personal confidence and emotional maturity. The number is usually much higher than amongst hearing students starting FE. Also some deaf learners may have more serious mental health needs. It is well recognised internationally that FE plays an important function in developing the whole young person, and helping deaf young people in particular to overcome delays in maturity and acquire important life skills. We found that there was considerable variation in how FE colleges responded to this need and whether it was prioritised.

- Some colleges had a tailor-made curriculum for deaf young people that was specially designed to develop personal and social skills, and to foster well-being.
- Some had clearly thought through approaches to providing deaf young people with experiences and support that meant that they worked on their maturity and independence.
- Others regarded personal/social maturity as something that just happened alongside the other experiences of FE college and so did not require deliberate attention.
- Colleges varied in their experience of dealing with specific mental health issues and how these might be affected by being deaf with some having clearly defined support services and plans to meet deaf learner needs. Others had far less experience, tended not to anticipate service needs and had a more ad hoc response if and when a need arose.

This variation means that it is important to consider whether any given FE placement is able to meet the particular emotional and social needs of an individual deaf young person. Not all will have the range and experience to do so for all deaf young people.

### **Deaf young people are highly motivated and many are ambitious to succeed**

The deaf learners we spoke to displayed a dazzling array of ambitions, hopes and aspirations. Few thought that their deafness would hold them back. They tended to think that the difficulties they would have would be to do with language (e.g. would their English be good enough?) or lack of communication support to help them succeed in the future.

But it was also clear that many of the deaf young people we met lacked the knowledge, experience and information to help them make decisions about their

future. It was hard for them to know what was feasible and what might be over-ambitious or unrealistic.

In supporting deaf young people to form realistic goals and fulfil ambitions and aspirations the following were identified as important:

- providing good quality information about professions and their implications (e.g. what does the job involve? What qualifications do you need?)
- challenging young people's assumptions about personal ambitions that are either too high or too low
- first hand work experience and work placements so they learn through 'doing'
- motivation and 'can-do' support from staff, parents and peers
- a well-resourced and knowledgeable careers guidance structure that is effective during post-16 education and supports young people's pathways on leaving college

### **Conclusions**

While Further Education is the most common destination for deaf young people leaving school, there is evidence that it does not serve many of them well. Deaf young people's achievements are not comparable with those of other young people with additional needs or other learners in FE educational environments. This cannot be explained simply by deaf young people entering FE with considerably lower qualifications than other learners.

We were particularly concerned that decisions are made for and with deaf young people to go to FE without a detailed consideration of what kind of FE environment might best suit them. Some provide considerably more opportunities to meet diverse learning needs than others.

In some cases local authorities are steering young people and their parents to the least expensive and most local provision without due consideration to whether it is the most suitable or effective for the individual deaf young person.

We were also concerned that many deaf young people were not accessing enough information or offered enough experiences to gain the understanding they need to make knowledgeable choices about what they want to do in FE and afterwards. In some cases the range of choices available to them within FE were very limited, whether because of limited communication support, low expectations of others, or limited vision of what deaf young people 'usually do.'

Currently there is no national process for tracking deaf young people's progress through Further education, and therefore identifying what works best in which circumstances. Opportunities for effective intervention to improve outcomes are therefore lost.

That said, we found some excellent examples of FE environments that provided high quality language and communication support, offered structured support for deaf young people to develop personal social and emotional maturity and actively worked to expand deaf young people's horizons. Their ability to respond to the diversity of deaf young people's hopes, strengths and needs was very impressive.

There is an urgent need to establish best practice standards in Further Education for deaf young people, a means of colleges benchmarking themselves against minimum standards and a means of demonstrating when provision is excellent and effective given the diversity of deaf learners.

Keeping deaf young people's views and experiences at the forefront of any future developments to enhance and share good practice in FE would be most helpful.

### **How was the research study carried out?**

The study was conducted by the University of Manchester, UK in the SORD (Social Research with Deaf people) group and the educational psychology department by Deaf and hearing researchers (Alys Young, Rosemary Oram, Hilary Sutherland and Garry Squires). It was funded by the National Deaf Children's Society.

We (i) reviewed previous published research; (ii) analysed official government statistics on deaf young people and FE students from 2011; (iii) interviewed 12 college staff and 18 key informants across 6 local authorities and 6 further education colleges; (iv) asked 27 deaf young people aged 16 to 21 who were in Further Education for their views and experiences.

The full report is available from NDCS on their web site.

### **A BSL version of this summary is available on:**

<http://www.nursing.manchester.ac.uk/research/researchgroups/socialcareandpopulationhealth/sord/services/?ID=3089&Control=TagList1>