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Learning Support Report

Part 1

Section 2(2) of the ALN Act (*Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act 2018*) defines 'additional learning needs' as a difficulty or disability that requires the provision of additional learning support. It states that an individual has a learning difficulty or disability if they face a greater challenge in learning, or have an impairment under the *Equality Act 2010* that has a significant impact on his or her ability to access education and training.

The Department for Education (2017) states that all further education teachers and learning practitioners should 'value and promote diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion.' This is reflected throughout all relevant policy and legislation, which will be examined, summarised and applied throughout this report.

Diversity, equality and inclusion are important topics to consider in discussions of further education. The protected characteristics for further and higher education institutions - age, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and pregnancy and maternity - are defined in section (4)1 of the *Equality Act 2010*. Discrimination on these grounds is strictly prohibited. Therefore, further and higher education institutions may not treat students unfairly or unjustly because of a protected characteristic - known as direct discrimination - nor can they make decisions that put students with one or multiple protected characteristics at a substantial disadvantage - known as indirect discrimination (*Equality Act 2010*).

Section 20(2) of the *Equality Act 2010* states that further and higher education institutions must challenge discrimination, make reasonable adjustments to ensure all students can benefit from the facilities, services and learning offered by the institution, and provide auxiliary aids where necessary in order to avoid substantial disadvantage. However, exceptions are allowed where there is a legal or legitimate aim to be achieved. As stated, these aims must be non-discriminatory and related to a reasonable need. An example of a legitimate aim could include maintaining academic or professional standards or ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of staff and students (*Equality Act 2010*).

The University of South Wales (2020) outlines a Strategic Equality Plan that aims to make its campuses and associated institutions fairer, safer and more equal for all. Six objectives are outlined in the plan: build a culture of inclusion and dignity by promoting fairness and economic equality; mainstream equality into decision-making, policies, practices and procurement; ensure equality is

integrated into the design and delivery of curriculum, courses and assessment methods; diversify staff and students; improve accessibility; and reduce pay gaps (University of South Wales, 2020).

In addition to celebrating diversity, equality and inclusion, further and higher education institutions have a responsibility to demonstrate commitment to the learner's safety and wellbeing. This is reflected in the professional standards which state that further education teachers and learning practitioners should work collaboratively to reduce and remove barriers to learning, and ensure that students are supported and taught in a safe environment (Department for Education, 2017). This is supported by *The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015*, which argues further and higher education institutions should invest in equality and diversity, as this has a positive impact on a number of other wellbeing goals.

Rix (2010, p. 285) argues that the learning environment has the potential to either enhance or diminish the mental health and wellbeing of students, and thus teachers and institutions have a responsibility to create and nurture an environment that promotes positive mental health, acts to prevent the development of problems in vulnerable groups such as those with protected characteristics, and supports those already experiencing difficulties or mental ill-health.

The College Merthyr Tydfil (2021) Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy details plans for capturing any wellbeing issues during the learner's transition to college, to ensure the college can proactively support the learner's transition into their studies. The College Merthyr Tydfil (2021) also aims to provide learner's with support through other key transition points during their studies by providing personalised guidance and support as they transition into higher education or employment. There is also an emphasis on intervention; encouraging early disclosure during the transition period, enrolment and induction process by providing the right environment to encourage and enable learners to seek guidance, information and support on all aspects of mental health and wellbeing (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2021).

In conclusion, further and higher education institutions have a duty to ensure that they comply with the law by refusing to discriminate against students in their provision of education and other services, providing access to all facilities and services to those who are entitled to them, and by not subjecting any student to any detriment.

Part 2

Megan

Megan has applied to study AS Theatre and Drama at The College Merthyr Tydfil in the next academic year. During the application process, she declared undiagnosed mental health support needs and at interview shared that she struggles with speaking up in class and mixing with new people due to anxiety. Additionally, she shared that during her school studies she struggled to concentrate in class and that her previous tutors suggested that she may have dyslexia.

First and foremost, as the student disclosed a mental health support and additional learning need prior to enrolment, college policy indicates that information is shared directly with the wellbeing team, the college transition officer, and the ALNCo who will invite the student to discuss her individual needs, to secure the relevant support ahead of her studies (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2021).

The additional learning needs team and transition officer will work with the student to provide additional support during her transition from school to college. This includes providing support for learners with physical disabilities, learning difficulties such as dyslexia and a range of other specific support needs such as mental health and wellbeing support (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2023a). Following enrolment, the student will be offered a referral to the counselling team at the college and the Inspire 2 Achieve programme which provides pastoral and wellbeing support to students aged between 16 and 25-years-old (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2021). If the student accepts this support, she will be provided with a lead worker who will work with her to create an action plan of support which may also include a personal development plan in accordance with the ALN Act (*Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act 2018*).

Reid (2016) argues that formulating an additional learning needs assessment should work to provide teachers or further education practitioners with the information they need to implement appropriate teaching approaches for students with dyslexia. In addition to considering appropriate teaching strategies, it is also important to consider the impact of assessment and feedback. Reid (2016) argues that students with dyslexia often spend a greater amount of time preparing for assignments, which can lead to discouragement when their grades do not reflect this preparation time. As such, it is important to spend time reviewing feedback with the student and working on developing her skills (Reid, 2016, p. 306). This could be implemented through one-to-one support such as pre-assignment discussions designed to allow students with dyslexia to outline any issues or concerns.

The *Equality Act 2010* states that further education institutions must make reasonable adjustments to avoid substantial disadvantage where a teaching practice or strategy is detrimental to a student's learning. Therefore, in addition to institutional support, teachers are expected to review and adjust their teaching approaches, methodology, and techniques to meet the student's additional learning needs (Reid, 2016). As such, all teachers and further education practitioners should be reflecting on and critically assessing their knowledge and skills to improve learning, and adapt to individual students (Department for Education, 2017). This can be achieved by reviewing lesson and assessment plans, which will include direct feedback from the student about how her learning has been affected. This is important for 'promoting diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion' within the classroom (The Department for Education, 2017).

As the student has applied to study an exam subject, she is likely to be entitled to additional support in the way she is entitled to a variety of access arrangements and additional support in class. This would be observed by the teacher, who might take note of the student's normal way of working. For example, she may take longer to complete tasks or struggle with aspects of reading or writing. However, the proper provisions can only be made following an assessment by the ALNCo who can make recommendations to the exam board (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2023b).

Additional support for mental health and wellbeing needs is equally important. Implementing tools such as ice breakers could be beneficial for a student with anxiety disorder, as they allow students to feel more at ease and enable them to get to know their classmates in a fun environment that is relaxed enough for the students to engage with one another in an informal way (Chlup and Collins, 2010).

Dafydd

Dafydd has applied to study AS Theatre and Drama at The College Merthyr Tydfil in the next academic year. He is partially sighted and has cerebral palsy, which affects his motor skills. However, he uses crutches to help with walking. He is very independent and uses a computer for note-taking in class, though he sometimes struggles due to his typing speed and difficulties in using his left arm. Dafydd has asked for advice and information on the options available to him as a student.

As he has indicated that he has additional learning needs, he will be referred to the college's wellbeing team, transition officer and ALNCo to ensure that the necessary support is in place to enable him to complete his studies. This includes arranging for access to appropriate facilities and

support, as well as providing auxiliary aids such as note-taking facilities if required (*Equality Act 2010*).

All students should be provided with equal access to the facilities, support and accommodations necessary for them to achieve their academic goals, according to the *Equality Act 2010*. Therefore, adjustments must be made to the learning materials and strategies to accommodate these students. This includes ensuring all learning materials are prepared in advance so that they can be adapted to preferred formats e.g braille, audio-tape, or enlarged print (RNIB, 2020). In the instance that braille is the student's preferred format, learning materials should be provided ahead of taught sessions and extra time to be allocated in class as it can take up to three times longer to read than standard text (Perkins School for The Blind, no date).

The student has also noted difficulties with note-taking, however he is very independent and would like to remain as independent as possible during his studies. Therefore, he may not wish to have the assistance of an auxiliary aid. If this is the case, it is important to allow extra time for the student to carry out some tasks (RNIB, 2020). As the student has applied to study an exam subject, it is also important to consider the impact his visual impairment and writing abilities could have on his ability to sit his examinations. As such, he is entitled to additional exam support that can be arranged by the ALNCo in conjunction with a tutor or other appropriate support staff member (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2013b).

Research conducted by Hodge and Eccles (2014) has shown that students with visual and other physical impairments may feel isolated in the learning environment, which can have an impact on their learning and wellbeing. For this reason, it is important to demonstrate commitment to the student, his learning, safety and wellbeing by working with him to identify his needs and aims - working collaboratively with others such as the wellbeing team and ALNCo to reduce and remove barriers to learning, and ensuring the student is supported by promoting diversity and opportunity (The Department for Education, 2017).

Alys

Alys, a second-year student on the A-level Theatre and Drama course at The College Merthyr Tydfil, has discovered that she is pregnant after beginning the new academic year. She indicated that she wants to continue to study as much as possible and would like to know her options for support both during her pregnancy and after the birth.

The College Merthyr Tydfil has a policy in place that protects students from being prevented from accessing and succeeding in their studies (University of South Wales, 2018). This policy is flexible,

ensuring no student is disadvantaged due to pregnancy or maternity. It is based on the legal protection afforded to students under the *Equality Act 2010*, which protects them during pregnancy and maternity from unlawful discrimination.

If a student becomes pregnant, the course leader will need to carry out a risk assessment to identify any potential risks associated with the course and devise a plan for her protection (University of South Wales, 2018). A support system will be implemented consisting of personal and course tutors who can provide weekly tutorials to help manage the student's workload, in addition to providing pastoral support. It also includes assistance from the wellbeing team and other services such as the Inspire 2 Achieve programme (The College Merthyr, 2019). The student will receive weekly sessions with a nurse practitioner, as well as periodic home visits by the practitioner. The student may need to take time off for antenatal appointments. However, she will need to make arrangements to catch up on any missed work. Additionally, if pregnancy-related illness affects the student's ability to undertake aspects of the course, this will be treated the same way as other non-pregnancy related ill health (University of South Wales, 2018). The support that the student will receive also continues after her pregnancy and during the postnatal period via home visits and 'keeping in touch' appointments (The College Merthyr Tydfil, 2019).

Physical activity can be particularly challenging and, at times, harmful to pregnant women (University of South Wales, 2018). This is likely to be identified during the risk assessment, therefore adjustments should be made to ensure the student is able to complete the course without over-exerting herself. This could be achieved either by adapting the tasks to the student's abilities or by giving the student the option to study the design route offered by the course, instead of the more popular performance route.

If a student is pregnant, she should seek advice from her doctor or health visitor prior to the examinations period, as the college may need confirmation that she is fit to sit any examinations (University of South Wales, 2018). Once the student has received written confirmation from her doctor or health visitor, she should discuss this with the support services who can provide assistance to put any reasonable adjustments in place. The wellbeing team and ALNCo may also be able to help the student decide whether the reasonable adjustments in place are appropriate to support her (University of South Wales, 2018). In the event that the student's pregnancy prevents her from sitting her exams, special consideration of some kind may be given by the awarding body (WJEC, 2020).

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