

Patient and Client Council

Further Education

What people with a learning disability said about attending college in Northern Ireland.

August 2011

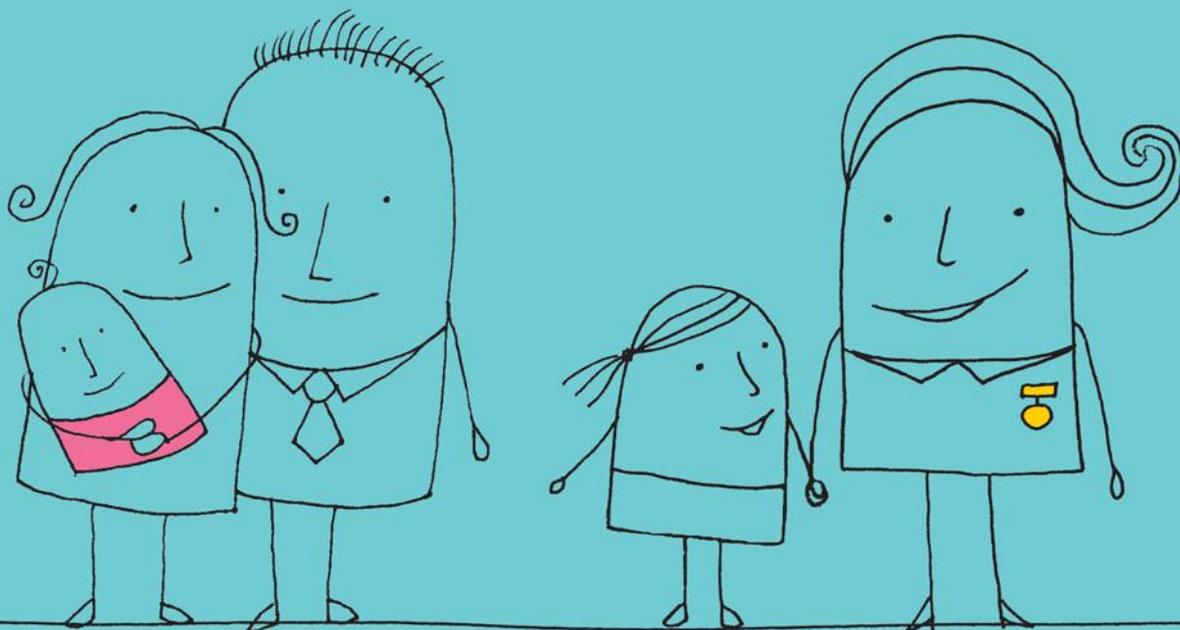


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Foreword

Everyone should get the chance to go to college so that they can learn new skills, meet new people and mix with other people from their local community.

For people with a learning disability going to college means having opportunities to develop as an individual, to become more confident, gain the skills you want in life and the qualifications you need to get a job. My local college provides good support to people with a learning disability, where each person is known as an individual and gets the support they need. By going to college people with a learning disability can be part of their local community, have a routine in their life, become more independent, get the chance to have a social life and meet their friends.

This is a report about what people with a learning disability who go to college think about college life, courses and learning. It is important that colleges listen to people with a learning disability and their families about the type of courses and support that are needed. Everyone with a learning disability should get the chance to enjoy college life and to progress when they are at college.

Thank you to all of the people with a learning disability who shared their views as part of this report.

Joanne McDonald
Bamford Monitoring Group Member

Summary

The purpose of this report is to give people with a learning disability the opportunity to voice their opinion on Further Education. A total of **88** people with a learning disability took part in this project at **5** further educational colleges throughout Northern Ireland. Through these discussions some themes have emerged.

Most people enjoy being a student and feel that they have gained a lot from being at college. Most have positive things to say about the student experience. People like learning new things, developing a greater sense of independence, working towards a goal and the feeling of achievement that comes from gaining qualifications.

However, many people said that they would like more choice at college. Some feel that the range of college courses available to people with a learning disability is very limited. They would like more options, especially as some people are repeating courses due to limited choice. Others said that they have little say in what course they attend, as this decision is made for them by a family member or advisor from school.

Going to college is clearly a valuable experience for many people with a learning disability and a significant step towards greater independence. However, it is important that college courses are good preparation for the future, aimed at progression into the workplace.

1.0 Background and Purpose

1.1 The Patient and Client Council

The Patient and Client Council provides a powerful, independent voice for people. It has four main duties. They are to:

- listen and act on people's views;
- encourage people to get involved;
- help people make a complaint; and,
- promote advice and information.

1.2 The Bamford Monitoring Group

In 2002 the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) carried out an independent review of mental health and learning disability law, policy and service provision. It was called the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability, now known as the 'Bamford Review'.

Between June 2005 and August 2007 the review produced a series of 10 reports that made over 700 recommendations to improve mental health and learning disability services. It represented a far reaching vision for reform and modernisation of mental health and learning disability services in Northern Ireland. The Equal Lives report (DHSSPS, 2005) focused on reviewing policy and services for people with a learning disability.

In October 2009, the DHSSPS published the report 'Delivering the Bamford Vision: The response of Northern Ireland Executive to the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. Action plan 2009 – 2011' (DHSSPS, 2009). This sets out the specific actions that Government Departments and their agencies are committed

to take during the period 2009-2011 to improve mental health and learning disability in line with the Bamford Review recommendations.

The Bamford Monitoring Group has been set up by the Patient and Client Council to monitor how changes being made to law, policy and services arising from the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability are affecting people and communities.

The role of the group is to find out from people with mental health needs, learning disabilities, parents, carers, family members and communities whether these changes are making a positive difference to them.

We want to know if people have experienced any changes to services in their area, if so what has been the effect of the changes on their health and wellbeing. We aim to make sure that the voice of people who have mental health needs, learning disabilities, families and carers is heard and acted upon.

The Bamford Monitoring Project Team of the Patient and Client Council carried out the field work for this project, information about the team is in Appendix 1.

1.3 What is the purpose of this report?

The Delivering the Bamford Vision (DHSSPS, 2009) tasked the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) with completing an analysis of provision across the further education and training sector for those with a disability, including those with special educational needs or with mental ill health.

The purpose of this report is to ensure that people with a learning disability have a voice and the opportunity to share their opinions on the courses they attend at college and the level of choice available to them. The aims of this project were to:

- Provide the opportunity for students with a learning disability to voice their opinions regarding further education available to them;

- Identify any concerns regarding the courses available at further education colleges;
- Produce a report based on what students with a learning disability say about the courses they attend at college;
- Use the findings in the report to advise policy and decision makers.

2.0 Our Approach

In the period March 2011 to June 2011 staff from the Bamford Monitoring Group project team at the Patient and Client Council contacted further education colleges in each area of Northern Ireland to arrange focus groups with students with a learning disability.

A total of **88 students** took part in **14 small group discussions**. A full list of venues attended is in Appendix 2. Students were asked to share their views during a focus group and all students were asked the same questions; a copy of the questionnaire is in Appendix 3.

It should be emphasised that this study reflects the experience of people currently at college. It does not address the views of those who have not been successful in accessing suitable further education courses.

Given the nature of the group discussions it has not been possible to assign numbers, percentages or weightings to quantify the numbers of people who raised specific issues. However, as a general guide the following definitions will give the reader an indication of the frequency of occurrence during group discussions:

WHEN WE SAY:	WE MEAN:
“few”	= 10 % or less
“some”	= 11 – 25 %
“many”	= 26 – 50 %
“the majority”	= 51 – 75 %
“most”	= 75% +

3.0 Our Findings

This report should be read in conjunction with the Bamford Monitoring Group report entitled “My Day, My Way”, which gives the view of 1,190 people on day services and opportunities of which college was seen as a vital part.

3.1 Making Decisions About College

Many students said that they made their own decision about what course to do at college and a few added that they had contacted the college directly. Many also said that they had received help from MENCAP. Some students took advice from their families, teachers and careers officers in school or their social worker. Some said that they found out about the class they were currently taking while on another course

However, many felt that someone else had made the decision for them. Some students said that staff at school or a family member had made the decision on their behalf without consulting them.

“I was told this was a popular course so I should do it”

Many students felt that the choice of courses available to people with a learning disability was limited. Some explained that retail and catering were the only two courses offered and a few said that only one course was made available to them. A few people mentioned other courses they would have preferred, such as animal care, but said that they did not have the correct qualifications to register for the course. Some second years felt that they had a better selection of classes in their first year of college.

“I had to do this course because there was nothing else available for me to do,

otherwise I would end up on jobseekers allowance”

“We would like more choice around the courses we are doing”

The option was to stay and do retail or leave and have no qualifications”

This lack of choice led a few students to say that they were bored at college, especially as they had *“no input as to what goes on the timetable”*. Some felt that they would rather be at home, out working or on other courses; for example, one person said that they did not like the catering course because *“it was a woman’s job, I would rather be working on cars”*. Another person explained that they were previously on a mechanics course but they were transferred onto the Lifeskills course without any explanation. It was later explained to the person that the college felt that the mechanics course was too difficult for them but this was not explained at the time *“nobody told me why I was being moved, the tutor explained afterwards”*.

A few students mentioned that they had repeated courses. They felt that there was nothing new for them to do at college as they had already completed all the courses available to people with a learning disability. Some of these students said that they had been repeating the same courses for up to six years.

However there were a few exceptions, a few students said that choosing a course could be difficult as there were a lot of options. *“I picked this course when I was at school, it was really stressful, there were so many options”*.

3.2 The Student Experience

Most people said they enjoyed being a student, *“It’s nice to go to college everyday”*. Some people said they would like to be doing something else.

Subjects

Many people enjoyed the subjects they were studying at college including Maths, English, Computers, Art, Retail and Catering, *“I really wanted to do Maths and Computers, this course offered both. I’ve really enjoyed the work”*. Many also talked about how they enjoyed the projects and presentations that they worked on throughout the year.

Some people said that they liked the pace of work at college, *“you work at a good pace”, “the course was well organised”*. Others enjoyed the change from school and the bigger workload, *“it is more challenging than school”, “there is a lot more to do here than at school”*. A few added that they liked being kept busy, *“I like to be kept busy with the different work we do”*.

Variety of the course content was also important, *“you get a good education. You get to explore what you want to do in life and find out what is out there for you”*.

Learning new things

Some people said that they enjoyed being a student because they got to learn new things and develop new skills. A few referred to the practical skills they learned at college.

“You get good support when you come here, you learn new skills and grow in confidence”

“I have learned to talk out more. I am confident now and enjoy speaking out”.

“I enjoy learning new skills like how to use Power Point”.

Some people said that the course helped prepare them for employment.

“I like that you are preparing for work, that you are experiencing different environments and different things”

“It is good preparation for the world of work; you cover a lot of information in the course”.

One person felt that the course would help them get a job because *“we discuss the skills needed to get a job and what jobs we would like to do”*. A few people mentioned that they enjoyed doing practice interviews. Working towards a goal was also important, *“I like the different things we do on our course and getting a certificate when the course is over”*.

Students felt anxious about life after college, some were worried about the lack of support outside of education and some voiced their anxieties about the lack of jobs available.

“I don’t know what we will do when the course is finished”

“There is no one and nothing available to help us with the next stage after college. This means we are just going to end up on benefits, so all of this is for nothing.”

“Leave and do nothing, just stay at home, because there are no jobs for us.”

Staff and Support

The majority of students felt that they received great support from tutors, classroom assistants and support workers at college *“staff are 100% brilliant”*. Many mentioned how well they got on with the tutors, *“the tutors are very nice here, it is easy to ask for help if you need it”*. One student added that they can ring their tutor on their mobile if they need extra support.

Many people said that they also support one another in class, *“one person is good at Maths and another is good on the computers. We help each other out”*. A few said that they get help with college work from parents and MENCAP. One student talked about the additional services available to students including financial advice, careers guidance and counselling services and another said that they had received extra support getting their materials in large print format.

However, some students raised issues with the level of support they receive at college. Some felt that their college tutors were difficult to approach and a few had a particularly negative experience with one tutor,

“One teacher shouts a lot for no reason, she wastes her own time but she blames the students”.

A few people felt that large class sizes meant that they did not get enough support “*some teachers can’t cope because the class is too big*”. Others noticed a big difference between the level of support in school and college

“some of us had very good support in school then with coming to tech you see a very big difference. We don’t think there is enough staff as some of my friends in class would still like to have one to one sessions”.

Some people said that they liked the more casual relationships between tutors and students at college, ‘*the teachers are less strict than the teachers in school. They treat us as adults and we can call them by their first name.*’ One person said that the tutors “*take time out for you*” and another person said that they liked being a student because they had “*the best teachers in the world*”.

However, a few people found it difficult to adjust to this different style of teaching; for example one person said that they didn’t like being a student because “*there is lots to take in, you’re on your own, the teachers aren’t with you all the time*”.

Friendships

Many people said that college gave them the chance to socialise and make new friends, “*I have more mates here than at school*”. Some people liked seeing familiar faces.

“It’s good to know students in other classes”

“I know a lot of people here”

Some talked about the fun they have with their friends at college “*you see your very best friends and have fun*”. A few people mentioned how much they enjoyed helping people and *looking out for each other*’. However, one person felt that it was hard to

make new friends at college, *“I am fearful the other students would say something to you”*.

The classroom and the building

The majority of students said that they like the classrooms and the college building, *“just what we need in the modern education system”*. Some students said they felt comfortable at college because they knew the layout well and there was a *“lovely atmosphere”*. People talked about different parts of the college they liked most; a few said they liked the warm classrooms, others liked moving about different classrooms, some enjoyed going to the canteen and one student preferred the library because it was so quiet. Some students liked how spacious the building was and others commented on the nice, modern surroundings *“It’s like a hotel”*. A few people said they were disappointed that the student’s union had closed because they enjoyed going there. Others mentioned how much they liked the central location of their building which meant they were near the bus station and they could walk into town at lunch if they wanted to.

However a few students felt that the building was too big and too noisy, *“I preferred school because it was quieter”*. A few felt that the classrooms were too warm and that better ventilation was needed and others said that the canteen was too busy and it was sometimes difficult to get a seat. Some students wanted more facilities; one class said they would like more computers so they could do job searches and another group said that the kitchen facilities for their catering class were very old and they did not enjoy going there.

Independence

Some people talked about the freedom they had at college, *“there’s much more freedom here than at school where you were ‘trapped’*. *You can go out at lunch now if you want to”*. Some said that they enjoyed not having to wear a uniform and others liked that they could wear make up or have their hair dyed, although one person felt that it was harder to choose your own clothes to wear everyday than to put on a uniform. A few students said that they liked being able to use their mobile phones at

college as these were banned in school. One person felt that they had more choice and variety at college

“You have your own personal space, you have more personal choice here than at school”.

Some people said that coming to college made them feel more grown up, *“it’s more grown up here than school; you are treated like an adult”*. A few believed the reason for this was that tutors treated them differently at college, *“there are no teachers on your back, no staff following you about”, “the teachers are less strict, you can call them by their first names”*. Others felt that the student experience had given them more independence, *“I have gained a lot of independence and confidence from coming here this year”, “it has been a real journey of self discovery”*. However one person still felt that they were not treated with respect at college, *“you still get treated like a child, this is hard to accept when you are 18 years old”*.

Benefits of being a student

A few people said that one benefit of being a student was getting paid every fortnight as part of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme. However a few students felt that they do not get enough money through the EMA system. One student stated that she does not receive the EMA because it is measured against her parent’s income, not her own income. Another student said that they would like to get paid for their work placement but they can not as it would affect their benefits. A few people mentioned that there were good discounts available to them as students, such as half price bus travel.

A few people said that they liked going to the work placement that had been arranged by the college. Others enjoyed going on trips through college; for example one class said they had an amazing time on a work experience week in Malta. A few people said that they like having a Friday off because it gave them the chance to relax and get other things done.

Feeling accepted at the college

Most people felt accepted at college "*nobody picks on us here*". Many felt they got on well with their classmates and fellow students, "*I get along with everyone else in the class and the college*".

However some did add that feeling comfortable at college very much depended on what other students were around, "*it depends, I don't feel accepted all of the time, it depends on what people are around*". One person said that college was very different from school in this respect, "*you don't know most of the students here which is different from school*".

Some people talked a bit more about bad experiences with other students at college. A few students said that they were seen as "*the disability class*" or "*the retard class*" and that they were "*embarrassed about what course we are doing when other students ask*". Students said that they usually ignore people who are "*cheeky*" to them, but added that they would report it if it continued, "*sometimes people are cheeky to me and call me names. If it keeps happening I report it*".

If your course was stopped tomorrow what would you miss the most?

Many students felt that they would miss their friends and tutors the most if their course was stopped tomorrow. Some said that they would miss the work they did at college and having access to computers. Others said that they would just miss having a laugh.

A few students said that they would be bored if they could not come to college, "*the weeks would go by and I would get bored*". Day trips, the library, the canteen and extra support were also mentioned as things about college people would miss. A few people said they enjoyed college so much, "*I would miss everything about coming here*".

However a few people felt that they would “miss nothing” about college if the course stopped tomorrow, rather they “would be glad to get finished”. One person felt that it depended on what they had to do at home, “I could be bored if I wasn’t busy at home, it just depends how much I had to do”.

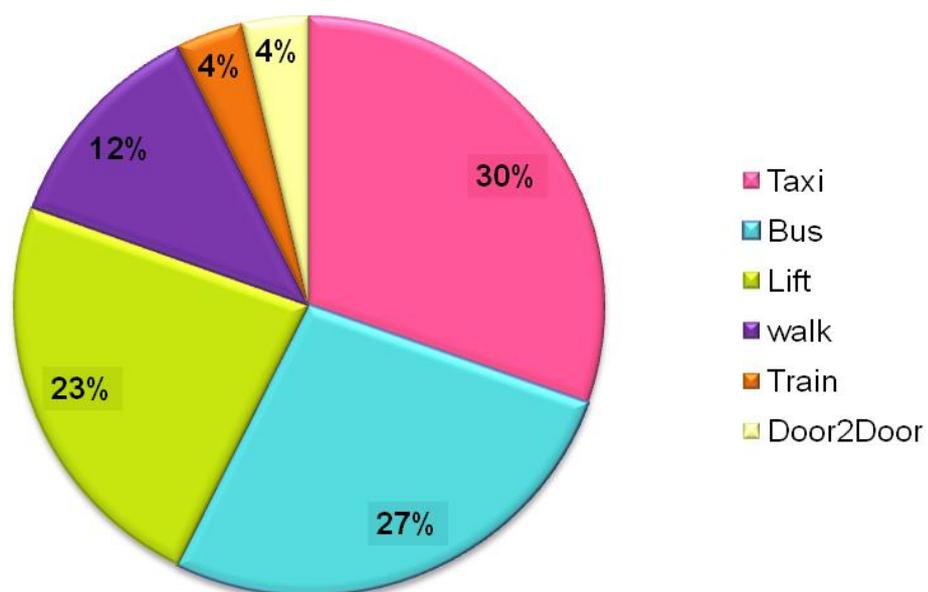
Is there anything else you would like the college to know about?

Some of the students talked about how much they enjoyed being at college and how much they had gained from the experience.

Others mentioned places they would like to work when they left education, including the hospital and the local school. However, some expressed their fears about the future, they were anxious about what kind of jobs, if any, were available for them after college and what level of support would be available.

A few students asked for more choice at college, extra computers to do job searches on and more class outings. One person added, “I wish I had worked harder at school”.

Figure 1: Types of Transport used to travel to College



4.0 Conclusions

It is important to understand what people with a learning disability want and need from their college courses.

It is clearer from the findings in this report that most people with a learning disability really enjoy going to college, learning new things, meeting friends and experiencing student life. There are several key messages in the feedback which are important to highlight:

- People with a learning disability value having a variety of courses and subjects to choose from at college; some people did say that the choice of courses for people with learning disabilities are limited;
- College courses are an important step towards employment for people with a learning disability. It is essential that courses prepare people to progress to work;
- People value attending college an important step in their independence.

5.0 Recommendations

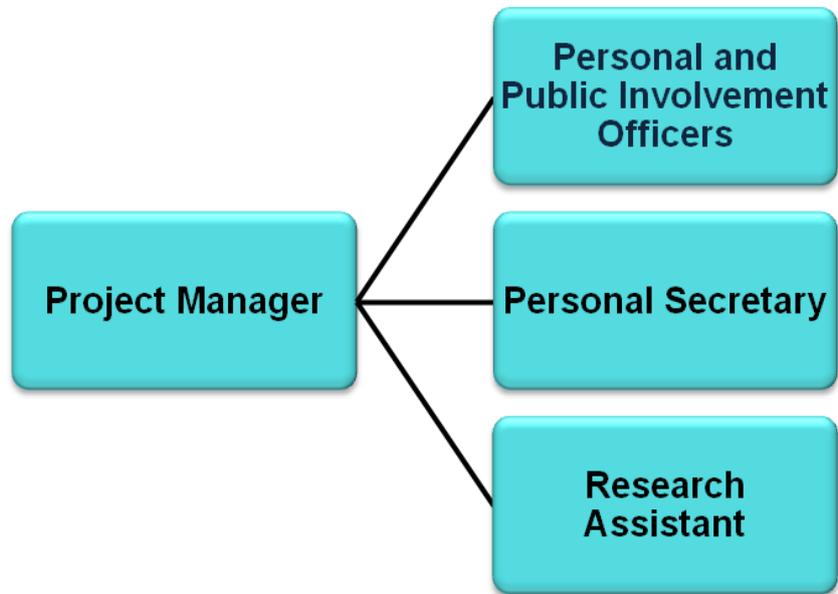
A further study will be required to capture the views and experiences of people who have not been successful in accessing suitable further education.

The Bamford Monitoring Group recommends that the following actions are taken to address the issues raised in this report:

- The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety should liaise with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that further education for people with disabilities is protected and enhanced in line with service user needs;
- The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety should liaise with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure there is a clear and connected pathway for people with a learning disability to support their progression from school to college and on to the workplace. This planning should be person centred;
- Further education colleges should involve people with a learning disability in making decisions about courses and subjects available;
- Further education colleges should establish an ongoing way to hear what people with a learning disability think about college and courses available.

Appendix 1 – Bamford Monitoring Project Team

The structure of the Bamford Monitoring Group Project Team is as follows:



Appendix 2 – List of venues for focus groups

Date	College	Course	Number of students
24/03/11	Northern Regional College	Life Skills/ Wider Choices/ Training for Success (4 groups)	17
16/05/11	South Eastern Regional College, Bangor Campus	Job Club	2
17/05/11	South Eastern Regional College, Downpatrick Campus	City and Guilds certificate in Employability and Personal Development	17
23/05/11	Belfast Metropolitan College, Millfield Campus	'Towards Work' (NOCN Entry Level Certificate in Skills Towards Enabling progression) and 'Employability' (3 groups)	12
24/05/11	South Eastern Regional College, Lisburn Campus	City and Guilds certificate in Employability and Personal Development (2 groups)	16
09/06/11	North West Regional College, Limavady Campus	'Transitions' course	6
13/06/11	Southern Regional College, Armagh	OCR Life and Living Skills/ Certificate in skills for Working Life Employability (2 groups)	18

Note: Unfortunately the team were unable to arrange any focus groups at the South West Regional College

Appendix 3 – Focus Group Questions

- 1) What courses did you decide to do?
- 2) How did you decide what courses to do?
- 3) Did you get to choose what classes you wanted to do or did someone choose them for you?
- 4) What support is available for the classes?
- 5) How do you get to your classes?
- 6) What do you think of the classroom and building that your classes are in?
- 7) Do you like being a student?
- 8) Do you feel accepted at the college?
- 9) If your course was stopped tomorrow what would you miss the most?
- 10) Is there anything else you would like the college to know about?

Appendix 4 – Synopsis of courses available at the Further Education Colleges visited

College	Course
Northern Regional College (Newtownabbey campus)	Route2work-
Northern Regional College (Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Magherafelt, Newtownabbey campuses)	Wider Choices
Northern Regional College (Ballymena, Ballymoney, Magherafelt and Newtownabbey campuses)	Workready
South Eastern Regional College, Bangor Campus	Job Club
South Eastern Regional College, Downpatrick Campus	City and Guilds certificate in Employability and Personal Development
Belfast Metropolitan College, Millfield Campus	'Towards Work' (NOCN Entry Level Certificate in Skills Towards Enabling progression) and 'Employability' (3 groups)
South Eastern Regional College, Lisburn Campus	City and Guilds certificate in Employability and Personal Development (2 groups)
North West Regional College, Limavady Campus	'Transitions' course
Southern Regional College, Armagh	OCR Life and Living Skills/ Certificate in skills for Working Life Employability (2 groups)

Appendix 5 – Word List

DEL	Department for Employment and Learning
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
EMA	Educational Maintenance Allowance Education Maintenance Allowances are payments of up to £30 a week given to students from low-income households in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland if they stay on at school or college.

Remember you can contact your local office on

Freephone 0800 917 0222

or email info.pcc@hscni.net

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