

Learning breaks down barriers

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The needs of people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the North East are being put centre stage by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) this month with a firm commitment to ensure learning provision meets individual needs.

This commitment is being published in the LSC's first ever Regional Commissioning Plan, which sets out all the regional targets for the coming year. This new commitment will outline the LSC's priorities for this group of learners in the region, including investing in provision and raising the quality of provision and economic participation through sustainable employment.

This follows the publication of the LSC's national strategy for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and a recent review in the North East which mapped the available provision and identified any gaps. The LSC in the region will be producing its own regional strategy early next year.

The recent review of provision found many areas of good practice in the North East, including a special educational support programme in the south of the region helping a group of learners with learning difficulties gain qualifications and break down barriers to work.

Three young people have taken advantage of the help on offer in order to fulfil their true potential and are preparing to leave Stockton's Riverside College, each with a fist full of BTEC certificates.

Kirsty Hodgson, Dean Jobling and Simon Rasmussen have all overcome personal challenges to study business administration, IT, literacy and numeracy. The final stage of their LSC supported programme will be securing work placements which should lead to full time employment.

Kirsty, 20 and from Middlesbrough has cerebral palsy which hindered her progress at school but with the help of the college team dedicated to supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, she is now on the threshold of work and greater independence.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at college," she said: "As well as gaining qualifications I've gained confidence – becoming a student ambassador. I now feel ready to go into the workplace – preferably in an office environment."

A hearing problem meant Dean, 22 and from Eaglescliffe, had learning difficulties and attended a local school with a special needs unit before arriving at the college. Now he too is keen to secure an office job: "I love business administration and working with computers," he said: "And after my time here I feel ready for the challenge."

Simon, also 22 and from Stockton, arrived at the college from the same school as Dean, determined to improve his job prospects: "I knew I would need to have more qualifications to get a job and I don't think I could have got this far without the help of everyone here," he said.

Carole Trotter, entry co-ordinator for the students, added: "All three of them have done tremendously well and shown great determination and application. I feel sure we will be able to help them move in to work in the months ahead.

"Our aim is to make all the courses at the college accessible to everyone. We have a team of approximately 40 people providing the special support needed to help them get the best qualifications they can to make the most of the opportunities out there for them."

Chris Roberts, Regional Director, LSC North East, said: "We are committed to ensuring that high quality learning provision is available to meet the individual needs of learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the North East. The recent review into provision highlighted that there are areas of good practice that we need to build upon. The report recommends the formation of a regional strategy for this group of learners, and that is what we are currently working on. We are building relationships with providers and other partners to ensure that provision is available in the region so that learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have choices and opportunities to improve their quality of life.

"Various pots of funding are currently available for this group of learners and we want to bring all of this together to ensure individual learners are getting what they need. Our role is to help everyone achieve their full potential through learning and training. By providing the right kind of support, we can have a dramatically positive impact on people's life prospects. Kirsty, Dean and Simon have proved that barriers can be broken down and that problems can be overcome."

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Editor's Note:

Through Inclusion to Excellence, published in November 2005, was a strategic review of the LSC's planning and funding of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The overarching recommendation contained in this was that the LSC should develop a national strategy for the regional/local delivery, through collaboration with partner, of provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities across the post 16 learning and skills sector that is high quality, learner centred and cost effective.

The LSC's national strategy for this group of learners, Learning for Living and Work: Improving Education and Training Opportunities for People with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities, was published in October 2006. The strategy outlines how the LSC, over the next four years, will prioritise its actions to deliver parity and support the sector to deliver the government's vision for improving the life chances of disabled people.

The Regional Review carried out into learning provision for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is due to be published later this month and the Regional Strategy will be published by April 2007

The LSC exists to make England better skilled and more competitive. We are responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for everyone. We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to world-class standards. Our vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have the knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce. Established in 2001, we work nationally, regionally and locally from a network of offices across the country.

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