

Striving to be heard in a world without sound



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Deaf students must contend with ignorance, bullying and poor provision, writes Henry Hepburn. Yet they are entering further education in large numbers – when will the sector catch up?

A bright, eloquent young man arrives at university, eager to throw himself into a new academic life. Then he discovers he won't be able to hear any of his lectures.

The student is deaf. At school he had been able to call upon technology that enabled him to hear, but at university it takes an entire term to get the necessary kit. "What he was getting out of lectures was very, very limited – he literally lost a term," explains Heather Gray, Scotland director for the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS). "He has spoken very eloquently about how lacking in awareness the university was. One of the most memorable things he said was, 'If I can't be confident in my hearing, I can't be confident in anything.'"

This is not a one-off. University of Edinburgh research for the NDCS suggests that many deaf school-leavers do not have the statutory transition plans designed to smooth progression into adult life. "If the plan isn't in place, the practical arrangements aren't in place and there's the potential for the young person to fail," Gray says.

Support offered in childhood can disappear overnight – a "very common" experience, according to Gray – and some further education (FE) colleges have no specialist provision. The mother of Oliver, an FE student who is deaf and has Down's syndrome, says: "You go from all that support...then suddenly when you turn 19 you don't need it any more...And you're really left in limbo."

Set adrift without a plan

The report from the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research in Education, Inclusion and Diversity (CREID), *Post-school Transitions of People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*, is built around analysis of official statistics and detailed testimony from 30 deaf adults aged 18 to 24. Transition plans should smooth the way to adulthood – but just four of the 30 said they had one. The NDCS believes this is typical and a "clear violation" of additional support needs (ASN) legislation. Fresh research next year will look in more detail at the plans, which are supposed to be led by local authorities.

"I would be very surprised if schools are not planning to meet the needs of children as they go on from school," says John Butcher, chair of children's services network the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. He believes the situation has improved markedly in the time since the young people in the CREID study left school, with transition plans in place for all deaf children and deaf-awareness training provided by most local authorities.

But the report finds particularly worrying trends in FE. Gray says that insufficient support in some colleges has been exacerbated by swingeing cuts to the sector and the "disarray" of regionalisation. A greater proportion of deaf school-leavers (39 per cent in 2011-12) go into FE than do so from the

general population (23 per cent). But part-time FE places have been reduced significantly and support for ASN students varies wildly.

'Strong theme' of inadequate support

Tyler, an 18-year-old student and apprentice, shares his experience of a college support centre. "I asked and I went through the stages, talked about what support I need," he explains. "But they've done nothing from that point – they just let it pass away."

Gray says: "A very strong theme through our research is high numbers of young people who can't sustain a college place because the support just isn't in place. That isn't right."

Deaf students' education in colleges compares badly with universities, where they generally receive better support and do just as well as other students, Gray says. "We're seeing a significant difference in FE, because that support just doesn't exist within the college sector. Where it is in place, young people will have exactly the same outcomes," she adds.

TESS made several requests for a comment from Colleges Scotland, but no one was available for interview and no statement was given.

A Scottish government spokeswoman, although not commenting explicitly on deaf students' experience of FE, says it is "committed to ensuring that all students with additional support needs receive an improved educational experience". In 2012-13, she adds, 22 per cent of all learning hours in colleges are for students with a disclosed disability or requiring additional learning support, up 3 per cent since 2006-07.

The report paints a more positive picture of schools, but there remains room for improvement. Figures for 2011-12 show that 8.9 per cent of deaf children left school with no qualifications, compared with 1 per cent of students with no additional needs. Some 36.4 per cent had Highers or Advanced Highers, compared with 60.2 per cent of those with no additional needs. And schools are coming under increasing pressure: the NDCS has shared findings from an upcoming report showing that the number of full-time teachers for the deaf in Scotland has fallen 15 per cent since 2010-11, to about 260. Meanwhile, the number of deaf children in Scotland has risen steadily in recent years and is now estimated to be about 3,850.

Ignorance and intimidation

Teachers are often very supportive but the CREID report reveals widespread ignorance about deaf children's needs, especially among new and supply teachers.

"A couple of times my teacher was shocked when he asked how much I actually understood and I said, you know, at best 15 per cent, and then it's mostly 'the', 'a', words like that," says Jack, an unemployed university graduate.

Another young person in the study, Erin left school for college but later dropped out. "Assemblies and talks in the school hall, I didn't know what was going on or what was being said and I would spend two hours bored out of my mind," she recalls.

A deaf child may have no deaf peers in school and may not want to draw attention to their condition, which contributes to the bullying and isolation experienced by two-thirds of the survey's participants. One young woman, Leah, recalls her treatment by other students after switching from a deaf school to a mainstream one: "Their attitude was awful. They were bullying us. They called me a 'mongol'. It was because they didn't understand what being deaf is like. They thought it was funny."

Other issues cause concern, too. The NDCS believes that the broader definition of additional needs ushered in by the Children and Young People Bill risks obscuring disabled children's needs. Meanwhile, the national focus on early intervention is diverting resources away from older students and there is a glaring lack of data about deaf learners. Skills Development Scotland, for example, does not record their participation on national training programmes.

But there are positive developments – Curriculum for Excellence and the Getting It Right For Every Child policy are bringing deaf children in from the educational margins, while the imminent national See Hear strategy marks "significant progress" for people with sensory impairments, the NDCS says. In addition, the charity has worked with Skills Development Scotland on *A Template for Success*, a guide to helping deaf schoolchildren progress to college, training or work.

Nonetheless the stigma won't shift, and widespread ignorance about deaf people's needs hampers their attempts to get on in life. As Gray puts it, "We've got a lot of work to do."

Case study: Kieran Gemmeil, 18

I was nervous about leaving school because I had been comfortable at St Paul's High in Glasgow. I had the most amazing teachers. I always had someone to talk to if I had problems. I was able to achieve my potential: six As and two Bs in my Highers.

I didn't really have a transitional plan. I did have an assessment of what I needed at university, but at the time I wanted to go without support to see how I did. I realise now that I should have asked for all the support to be put in place. Then, as time went on, anything I didn't need could have been dropped.

I now have various forms of support. Lecture PowerPoints are uploaded online. Audio and video clips are supposed to be subtitled but this is not always possible. I have a radio system that sends information directly to my hearing aids.

I also have a note-taker, who types what people are saying on to a laptop screen. I can contact a disability coordinator with any problems, and lecturers and tutors have been given deaf-awareness training so that they are aware of my needs.

It was quite stressful trying to get the support in place. I only got my note-taker booked in January, and there were a lot of technical problems with my hearing aids. I would urge any deaf person thinking of going to college or university to trial equipment beforehand, and to make sure that all the support they require is ready for them.

Too often the needs of a deaf person are not met, such as colleges not providing sign-language interpreters. Without support in university, I would have dropped out before I'd even finished the first term.