

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

A report by the Welsh Association of ME & CFS
Support on post 16 education of housebound
students



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Abstract

This report presents the results of surveys and a literature search carried out in 2004/2005, which aimed to ascertain what educational opportunities were available in the United Kingdom for housebound students wishing to study GCSE, AS and A Levels. A comparison was then made between Wales and the other 3 countries making up the United Kingdom. This enquiry also touched on the issues of funding and how colleges in the FE sector interpreted and complied with the Disability Discrimination Act (not applicable in Northern Ireland) for this particular group of students.

The findings are stark. 81.8% of FE Colleges in Wales make no provision for educating housebound students compared to 58% throughout the rest of the United Kingdom.

Funding for FE education in Wales, compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, is more difficult to obtain. There are few grants available to the housebound student.

Interpretation and compliance with part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act is at best haphazard and at worst discriminatory.

There seemed to be real confusion amongst FE colleges and LEAs as to what the word 'housebound' means, and there were variations in the way in which it is interpreted.

Housebound students are, as it says in the title of this report, "out of sight" and "out of mind" when it comes to being educated post 16.

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1. Introduction

This report has been prompted by one particular student's ongoing struggles to obtain formal educational qualifications whilst remaining housebound through illness, and the experiences of parental and student enquiries to the patient group, the Welsh Association of ME & CFS Support. Over time it became apparent that other students with ME and CFS were experiencing similar difficulties in many parts of Wales as, in desperation, parents turned to WAMES for advice. Therefore WAMES decided to find out what formal educational opportunities were available to housebound students across Wales and how this compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

The investigation has been restricted to the formal qualifications of GCSE, AS and A levels, or in the case of Scotland SQA's and Highers. There are several professions for which it is still mandatory to have 5 or more GCSE's at C or above **(1)** to enable a person to apply for a University place and subsequent qualification in those professions.

There appears to be confusion amongst colleges as to the meaning of the word 'housebound'. Some colleges interpreted 'housebound' to mean that without transport a student could not attend classes, therefore provision of transport enabled that particular student to attend classes. Other colleges interpreted 'housebound' correctly to mean confined to the home through illness or disability. For the purposes of clarification we cite the definition of 'housebound' from the on-line Oxford Dictionary "*adjective – unable to leave one's house, often due to illness or old age.*"**(2)**

Some professions are clearly not practical for housebound people, however not all housebound students will remain housebound forever. Like everyone else they wish to prepare themselves for a future where they can develop their potential and support themselves. This report aims to examine how easy students find it to do that in Wales.

2. Methodology

Telephone interviews were carried out with 46 Further Education colleges throughout the United Kingdom over the summer period of 2004. All 24 FE colleges in Wales were contacted. A random selection was made from the Eduserv website **(3)** of a further 5 FE colleges in Scotland, 3 in Northern Ireland and 14 colleges throughout England. Two of the 46 colleges, both in Wales, did not offer GCSE, AS or A levels as part of their curriculum. These colleges have been removed from the investigation as they were outside the scope of the enquiry. This left equal numbers of 22 colleges from Wales, which were compared with 22 from the rest of the United Kingdom. The information contained from these telephone interviews was then compared with the information available on each college website and selected prospectuses, to check accuracy.

The telephone survey **(Appendix 1)** consisted of 6 specific questions regarding the kind of provision and the cost to the housebound student of studying GCSE, AS and A Levels. The answers have been set out in tables and charts where appropriate. Comparisons have been drawn between Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom.

If colleges answered the first question by saying that they made no provision for housebound students we concluded the interview, although some colleges freely offered other information, which has been included in the report.

A further telephone survey was conducted with all 22 Local Education Authorities in Wales during January 2005. This was to ascertain which LEAs continued to provide home tuition to students who had reached the end of compulsory school age, but who were still unable, through illness or disability, to attend an FE College. This survey of LEAs was mindful that young people with statements of Special Educational Needs were normally entitled by virtue of their special educational needs to be educated up to the end of the academic year in which their 19th birthday fell.

A number of other organisations were found to influence the ability of housebound students to access education and so information was also requested from them or gathered from websites: NUS; ELWa; WAG; Careers; Learn Direct and the DRC.

3. Summary of results from FE colleges' survey

Question and number	Percentages in Wales	Percentages in the rest of the UK
Q.1. What sort of basic educational provision do you offer post 16 housebound students?		
No provision	81	58
Distance Learning *	0	18
Distance, Correspondence & E-learning *	5	5
Flexi and Correspondence Course *	5	0
Distance and E-learning *	5	14
Flexi Study	4	5
Q.2. Do you offer e-learning?		
E-learning **	Yes 41 No 59	Yes 32 No 68
Q.3. What sort of e-learning do you offer?		
Learn Direct	23	4.5
Virtual College	4.5	4.5
VLE	10	0
Set up but not asked for	4.5	0
Developing system	0	9
On-line	0	14
Don't offer	4	0
Not asked question	54	68
Q.4. If e-learning is offered is it offered inside or outside the home?		
Inside the home	18	0
Outside the home	0	0
Both	9	14
Unsure	0	4
Not asked question	73	82
Q.5. If offer distance or correspondence courses is attendance at an educational establishment part of the package?		
Attendance necessary	4	10
Not necessary	23	31
Unsure	9	0
Not asked question	64	59
Q.6. What help re cost of course is available to housebound students?		
No charges	18	18
Concessions	18	18
Concessions and free support hours	0	5
Admin charge only	5	0
Free tuition and discount on pack fees	0	5
Full fees and discount on tuition	5	0
Not asked question	54	54

* Where colleges offered more than one form of open learning this has been recorded only under the relevant combination, not under each individual format.

**These figures include colleges who combined Learn Direct courses with e-learning. Learn Direct do not offer GCSE, AS and A levels, which was the purpose of this survey.

4. What educational opportunities are available to housebound students?

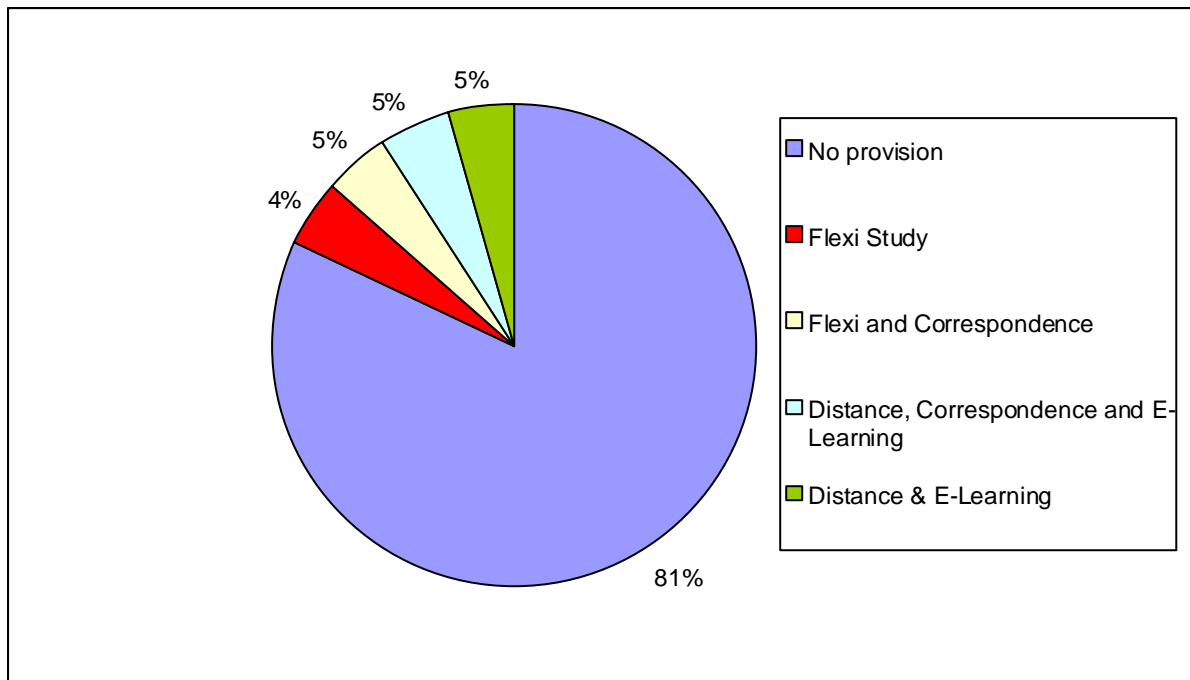


Diagram 1 – Welsh provision for housebound students

4.1 Education opportunities for housebound students in Wales

By far the largest proportion of FE colleges in Wales, 81% (18), have no provision for housebound students at all although 5 of these would, if approached by a student look at making some form of provision. One of these colleges had obtained one-off funding from ELWa to provide one student with home tuition who otherwise would have had to go to a specialist residential college to be educated.

4% (1) of colleges offered flexi study but this method of teaching was not normally offered. Flexi study was described as the college providing written work for the student to complete in their own home. Some tutor support in the student's own home was given. Flexi study was only being offered to one particular student on request and because they were a student who had become ill whilst at the college.

Another college offered both distance and e-learning. Distance learning was described as a pack of learning materials sent to the student for the student to complete in their own home. The e-learning was offered via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The college was unsure if either of the formats had ever been taken up by any students.

5% (1) college offered 3 different formats: distance learning: correspondence courses, described as a pack of learning material sent to the student for them to complete in their own home: and e-learning. Again the e-learning was by VLE.

5% (1) college offered both flexi study and correspondence courses but attendance at the college for tutorials was compulsory. Therefore it was not suitable for housebound students.

Another college facilitates one student with e-learning whose e-learning is provided from outside of Wales. This e-learning is conducted through video conferencing and is close to learning in the classroom as a teacher leads the lesson. It also provides for social

interaction between the students, similar to that which would be found in a conventional classroom, thereby cutting down on the isolation felt by the housebound student.

In Diagram 1 the answers to Question 1 from FE colleges in Wales only have been outlined. The answers received have been separated into what the college offered to students via home based learning and whether there was more than one form of education available to them. When calculated the percentage figures do not show true values i.e. although 18 colleges have no provision for housebound students, when calculated it equates to 81% on the pie chart but 81.8% when using a manual calculator. Therefore the results shown in *Diagram 1* are slightly skewed.

4.2 Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (4) is available in all colleges across the United Kingdom. The majority of colleges who have access to VLE use it as a type of message board. Tutors and students have the ability to leave messages about coursework and term dates. VLE can be extended to include video conferencing. Video conferencing seems to be vastly under used in colleges across Wales. Some colleges in the past have used their VLE for video conferencing between themselves and other educational establishments but have never used it to provide lessons into the home. There may be good reasons for this, including cost. Colleges, especially in Wales however, were mostly ignorant that VLE could be used in this way.

4.3 What educational opportunities are available to housebound students in the rest of United Kingdom?

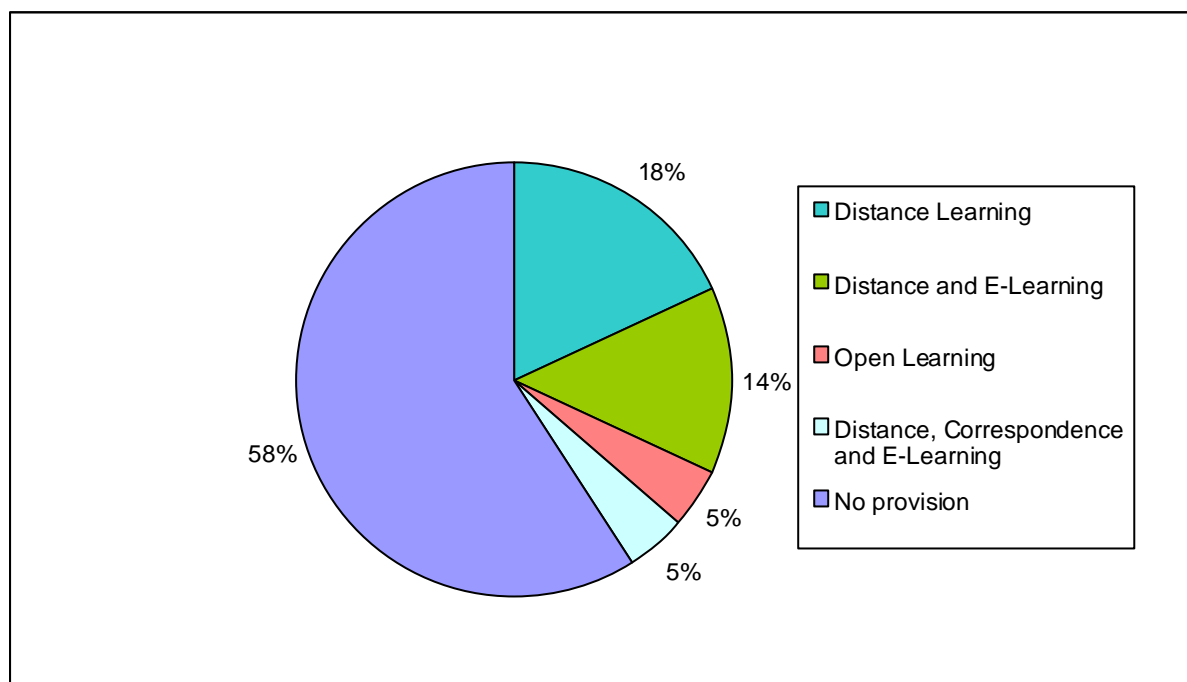


Diagram 2 – Provision in the rest of United Kingdom.

58% (13) colleges throughout the rest of the United Kingdom had no provision at all for housebound students.

18% (4) colleges offered distance learning alone.

14% (3) colleges offered both distance and e-Learning. 1 of the colleges offering e-learning was providing a form of education whereby the student accessed the course

online to download and work at their own pace in their own time. The other 2 colleges offered e-learning as video conferencing via VLE into the student's home. 1 of these was still under development and therefore what was being provided to the student was experimental.

5% (1) college offered distance learning but called it open learning. This was conducted in exactly the same way as distance learning.

Another 5% (1) college offered 3 forms of education: distance learning; correspondence courses; and e-learning, the e-learning being delivered into the student's own home.

When comparing the provision between Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom for distance learning packages suitable for housebound students Wales is clearly lagging behind. Colleges outside of Wales had a larger selection of different forms of education suitable for the housebound.

5. Is e-learning available for housebound students?

5.1 Is e-learning available in Wales?

Question 2 of the survey asked "*Do you offer e-learning at GCSE, AS and A level?*" This question was only posed to those colleges who had previously said they offered e-learning. It was discovered that some colleges only offered Learn Direct or University for Industry (UFI) courses (5) which do not cater for GCSE, AS and A levels. This confused the responses at Question 1. Therefore only 2 colleges in Wales out of 22 actually offered e-learning for academic courses, although 9 colleges had claimed to. All the colleges who offered Learn Direct were unaware they were not offering courses at GCSE, AS and A levels. This could be misleading for students requesting information on courses.

5.2 Is e-learning available in the rest of the United Kingdom?

8 colleges replied that they provided e-learning when asked, although, like Wales, not all was suitable for the housebound student. There was a smaller element of confusion surrounding Learn Direct courses. 4 of these colleges offered e-learning for GCSE, AS and A Level courses.

There was less confusion about e-learning in the rest of the United Kingdom compared to Wales. They were also more aware that Learn Direct did not offer GCSE, AS and A Levels. Therefore housebound students approaching colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are more likely to be given accurate information about e-learning than those in Wales.

5.3 Nature of e-learning

Question 3 asked the colleges to expand on the type of e-learning they offered and whether it was offered inside or outside the home. Varying answers were given. Whilst some colleges offered e-learning by video conferencing which enabled the student to participate fully in interactive lessons, others offered a system where the work was downloaded from the college website to be completed in the student's own home. When the work was downloaded from the college website the work was completed without teacher participation.

All colleges claimed to be able to offer e-learning, both into the home and outside the home. Although e-learning into the home was not always provided. The reasons given for this varied from not having been asked for home e-learning or the infra-structure was not quite in place as yet as it was still under development.

6. Is attendance at college mandatory for housebound students?

6.1 Is attendance at college mandatory in Wales?

Question 5 asked if attendance at the college was a compulsory part of the various distance learning packages. Of the 5 colleges who offered distance or e-learning, correspondence or flexi study, 4 insisted that attendance at the college was not mandatory. 1 college was definite that attendance was mandatory making the courses they ran unsuitable for housebound students.

6.2 Is attendance at college mandatory in the rest of United Kingdom?

Of the 10 colleges sampled in the rest of the United Kingdom 2 of them expected attendance at the college as part of the course. Although 1 of them agreed they could, if necessary, offer support by e-mail or telephone instead. This made at least 1 of these courses unsuitable for housebound students. It would therefore be much easier for such students to find suitable courses in the rest of the UK than in Wales.

7. What support do you offer housebound students?

7.1 What support do you offer housebound students in Wales?

The question was then expanded to ask what kind of support was offered to the students following the different packages away from college. Only 2 of the 5 colleges who answered this question offered tutorials at the college but they also offered support to students by e-mail, telephone or post.

Only one college knew that extra funding was available to enable tutors to provide home tutoring. The other college offered home visits to collect and deliver work and to help the communication between college and student. They also offered support by e-mail, telephone and post.

It was said by several colleges that it was difficult for them to provide housebound students with individual learning in their homes as it meant that one or more of the college tutors (two tutors due to health & safety regulations) had to be absent from the college.

7.2 What support do you offer housebound students in the rest of United Kingdom?

8 colleges did not expect the student to attend college and were willing to provide support.

2 colleges offered tutor and support worker visits to the student's home to carry out lessons, in effect the same as home tuition. This support was in addition to support by telephone, e-mail and/or post.

2 colleges were willing to tailor the support they offered to meet the student's needs whatever these may be.

The other 4 colleges offered support by telephone, e-mail or post.

More support was offered to students in the rest of the United Kingdom than was offered by Welsh colleges.

8. What are the costs of courses for housebound students?

Basic funding would appear to be uniform across the UK. The student in full time education up to the age of 19, in either a 6th form or FE college, does not have to pay for their education. This includes examination fees and any support for a student with

special educational needs. This is not the case for students who choose, or are unable, to attend college full time.

Students over the age of 19 in full time education are still educated free in FE colleges whilst studying GCSE, AS and A levels. Students who are part time or studying via the various distance learning packages do have to pay.

Housebound students are disadvantaged when colleges levy fees on them but not on those students who are full time.

8.1 What are the costs of courses for housebound students in Wales?

FE Colleges vary in the extent to which they charge part time and housebound students.

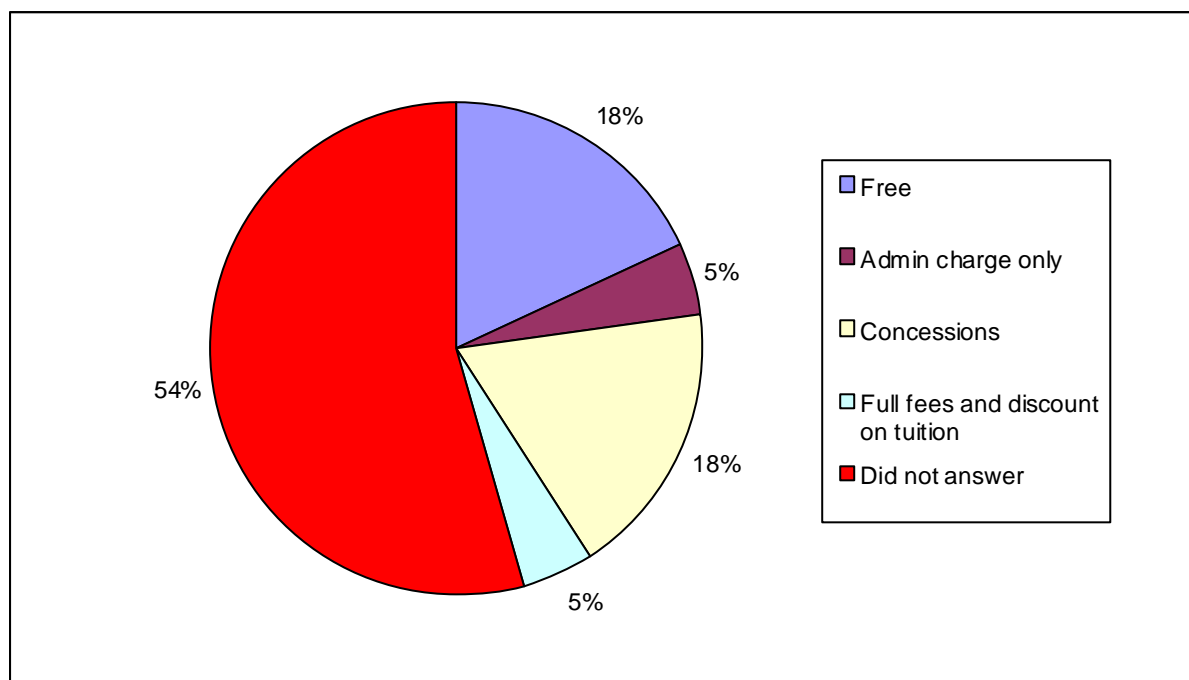


Diagram 3 – FE college fee structures for part time & housebound students in Wales

13 of the colleges, even if they did not offer courses suitable for housebound students, answered the question on funding.

18% (3) colleges said they levied no charges against students for any aspect of their education.

5% (2) colleges charged only an administration fee, which ranged from £10 - £30.

18% (8) colleges only offered concessions to students on means tested benefits, otherwise full fees were payable. Three of these colleges also charged examination fees, which would be free if the student, were full time.

8.2 What are the costs of courses for housebound students in the rest of UK?

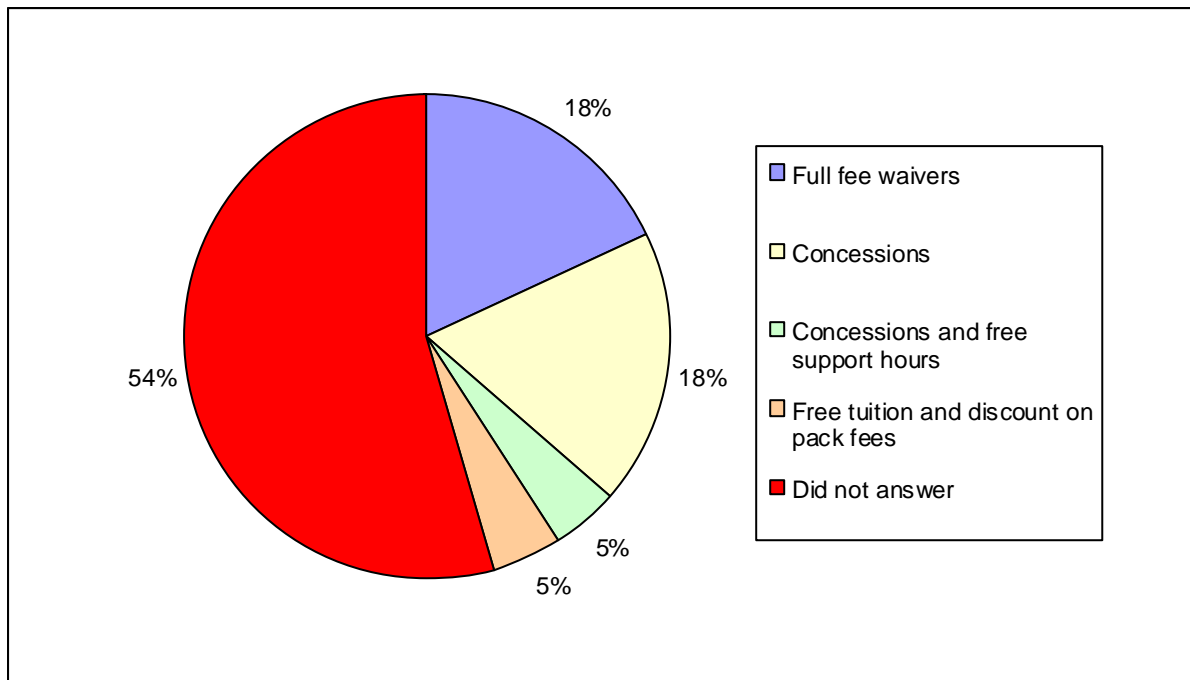


Diagram 4 – FE college fee structures for part time and housebound for rest of the UK

10 of the colleges from the rest of the United Kingdom elected to answer the question on funding.

18% (4) of the colleges did not charge for tuition, exams or any extra support the student might need. This in effect meant they would educate a housebound student free of charge.

5% (1) of colleges offered the same fee structure to housebound students as was applicable to full time students. Again the student would be educated free of charge.

18% (4) of colleges offered full fee waivers for students up to 19 and concessions to students over 19. These concessions could result in the housebound student not being charged for their tuition.

5% (1) of colleges offered free tuition, a 50% reduction on course pack fees and also charged examination fees.

Funding opportunities for housebound students in Wales are less flexibly applied than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Colleges in the rest of the United Kingdom are prepared to offer free support hours and free tuition, which is not available in Wales. Therefore students in Wales are disadvantaged in comparison to their contemporaries in the rest of the United Kingdom.

9. Availability of information about education for housebound students

In contacting the 44 colleges by telephone we were also attempting to ascertain the ease of access to information on courses for housebound students. Only 20% of the colleges were able to provide all the necessary information in one telephone call. 40%

required 4 or more calls. Our experience shows that the effort in contacting colleges by telephone could be disproportionate to the outcome for the housebound student.

No of calls	No of colleges	Percentage
1	9	20
2	9	20
3	8	18
4	9	20
4 + 1 e-mail	1	2
5	4	9
5 + 1 e-mail	1	2
6	2	5
6 + 1 e-mail	1	2

Diagram 5 – Number of telephone calls to FE colleges to collect information

A comparison of all 44 FE College websites was undertaken to ascertain if the information matched that gained from the telephone conversations. 1 website was under construction, 1 website was unavailable and 1 website would not allow public access. 14 of the remaining 41 gave information which differed on the website to that which was offered on the telephone, 6 from Wales, 8 from the rest of the UK. In the remaining 27 the information was the same as that which had been given on the telephone.

Prospectuses were only requested from those colleges who had answered that they provided some sort of learning for housebound students. The 15 prospectuses requested covered the academic year 2004/05. Only 1 prospectus contained the same information as had been given on the telephone and as was contained on their website. 3 contained the same information in 2 of the 3 sources, and 11 differed in all respects.

This showed that students are very unlikely to receive the same information from any two sources i.e. telephone and prospectus, website and prospectus or telephone and website. This leads to a very confusing situation for housebound students who by virtue of their illness/disability may not have the skills or energy to trawl through and make sense of all the differing information being offered. This could well explain why there are so few enquiries for distance learning or e-learning to FE colleges. Lack of demand was one of the reasons given for not providing more distance learning packages or those distance learning packages being withdrawn from some colleges. This discovery suggests that the difficulty in obtaining accurate information could be as much, if not more of a reason for the lack of demand, than lack of interest on the part of the student.

10. Post 16 learning provided by Local Education Authorities in Wales

All 22 Local Education Authorities in Wales were contacted to see if any continued to provide home tuition or e-learning to young people who had received either home tuition or e-learning from them prior to compulsory school leaving age (**Appendix 2**). There was a 77% response from LEAs. Given the difficulties of obtaining home tuition for sick children it is estimated that the numbers of young people post 16, still receiving home tuition via their LEAs, to be very small.

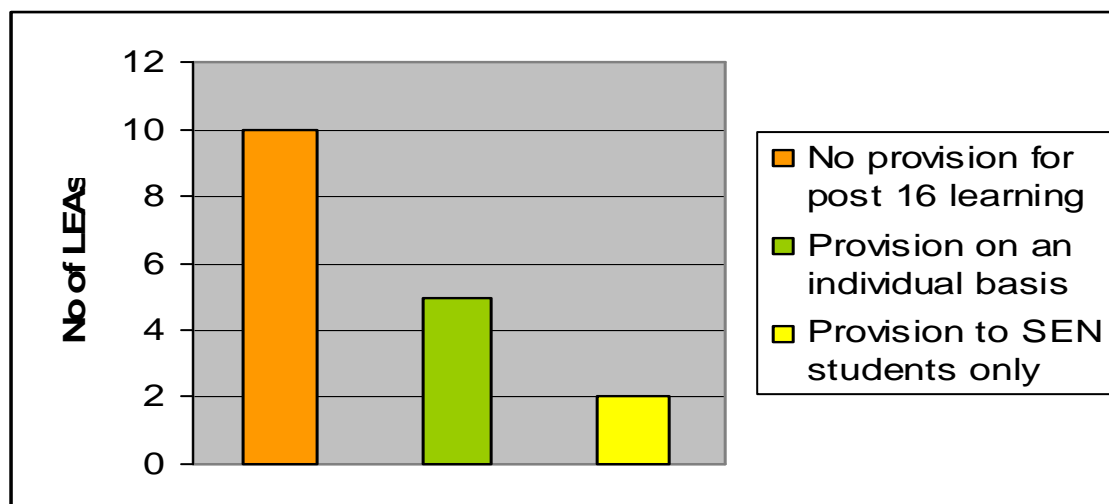


Diagram 6 – Provision of post 16 learning by LEAs in Wales

It was found that of the 17 responses received 10 LEAs did not provide home tuition for young people post 16. 5 LEAs were prepared to provide home tuition to post 16 students on an individual basis. 2 of the LEAs who replied would continue to provide home tuition only to students with a statement of special educational needs. There is no legal requirement on the part of LEAs to educate post 16 students with a statement of special educational needs **(6)** unless the student expresses a desire to remain in education. In those cases the LEA has a legal obligation to educate young people with statements up to the end of the academic year in which they attain their 19th birthday. A transition plan would be implemented for those young people who wish to transfer into further education in preference to continuing home tuition. It is not clear how those young people with statements who wish to continue their education via distance learning packages fund their education.

Since completing the information gathering exercise for this report it has been brought to our attention that one Local Authority, who were adamant about their non provision of post 16 learning, does in fact fund one post 16 student as an experiment with e-learning.

It is not clear what happens to young people post 16 whose home tuition had been stopped at the end of school year 11, as there do not appear to be any figures in the public domain to cover this. Do these young people drop out of education until they are well enough to attend FE colleges? Do they attempt to access courses to enable them to go to University when they are older? Do they enter University as mature students? Do they go out into the workforce into poorly paid jobs because they are poorly educated and under qualified? Or do they remain too ill and disabled to access education or the workplace?

There appears to be an element of confusion amongst members of LEA staff about their policies with regard to post 16 learning. This can be very confusing for parents who approach their individual LEA for advice when their young person reaches the end of compulsory schooling.

All Local Education Authorities who responded said that all young people who were being home tutored by them received careers advice in Year 11. This careers advice can vary across the country.

11. Parentsnet

As part of their policy of openness the Welsh Assembly Government include a section on their website called “Parentsnet” **(7)**. These pages hold some very useful information on education, from pre-school to post school, and are specifically aimed at parents and students. The site was searched for information on the education of sick young people and on funding for housebound students.

No information was found in the ‘post school’ section **(8)** of the website about the education of young people who were, by virtue of their medical condition, unable to attend an educational establishment. The search criteria used was that of both distance and e-learning.

The search was then extended into the “Options for continuing education” section **(9)**, which is concerned with A and AS levels, vocational qualifications and the Welsh Baccalaureate. Nothing for students wishing to do GCSE level qualifications and nothing on educating students with special needs, whether these are learning or medical needs. For information about funding, a link was given to ELWa, the funding body for post 16 learning in Wales.

There are also links to pages about “Careers Wales **(10)** and “Financial Help”. The Careers Wales page gives a brief resumé of how they advise young people about career options. It includes a link to the Careers Wales website, which holds no information on educating housebound students.

On the “Financial Help” **(11)** pages there is no advice offered, nor any mention of funding for post 16 housebound students. There is no help or advice on funding for students who wish to study by distance learning.

The “Secondary school” **(12)** pages contained information on special educational needs but did not recognise children and young people with medical needs as having special educational needs.

On the whole the “parentsnet” pages of the Welsh Assembly Government website offered no help, advice or incentive for housebound students to continue in education. More importantly there was no mention of e-learning and given the statements on the Cymru-ar-lein website, about the importance of e-learning being available to all, this shows a lack of continuity in information.

We were unable to find similar pages aimed at parents on other countries’ education websites to compare.

12. Careers Advice

Careers advice is given to all year 11 students receiving home tuition so an assessment was made of the type of advice that may be given and the quality of such advice.

12.1 Careers Wales

Two randomly chosen Careers Wales offices were telephoned to ascertain the advice they would give to a housebound young person of school leaving age, who wanted to continue in education. One was unable to help at all. The other office, where we spoke to a Special Needs Careers Adviser, offered the following advice and was also willing to visit a housebound student in their own home to help identify their specific needs.

- continuing education – advice would be given about the availability of distance, flexi and e-learning courses and as much ongoing support as the student needed

would be offered when their health improved and they were ready to either enter the job market or education in an educational establishment.

- funding – Careers Wales would be prepared to telephone relevant organisations to see what kind of funding is available. It is not within their remit to campaign for funding on behalf of the young person.

The Careers Wales website **(13)** was then accessed to see if it held information about distance learning or the education of sick young people and to compare the website with what we had been told on the telephone. The search terms used were “disability”, “home tuition”, “learning from home” and “distance learning “ but no information was found.

The search of the Clic **(14)** website was time consuming. The information on distance learning was easy to find but not immediately obvious, being under the heading of “Disability, education and courses.” There is a statement on the first page you access which says:

“Having a disability doesn’t stop you learning, training or developing as a person.”

It then goes on to say:

“By law all schools, colleges, universities and other learning providers must make sure you have access to the same learning opportunities as non-disabled people.”

It further states:

“Many now provide learning coordinators, easy access buildings, special teaching and assessment units. Depending on your disability, you may be able to ask for special arrangements for taking exams.”

Unfortunately no mention is made of providing learning into the home. It seems Careers Wales and the young person’s site Clic is also unaware of this particular group of students.

Clic also has a page on “Home Learning” and describes distance learning as follows:

“Distance learning and e-learning is becoming very popular, as you can study from your own home, on your own PC and in your own time – giving you the chance to combine learning with other responsibilities such as work and family in a flexible way.”

This statement omits any reference to distance and e-learning being suitable mediums of education for the housebound or disabled young person.

Links are given to two websites that Clic believe may be of interest to the target audience, Learn Direct and a distance learning company. Learn Direct do not offer GCSEs but they can put you in contact with providers and give information on the Individual Learning Account (ILA).

The distance learning website that Clic refer you to is a commercial distance learning provider. On their website they have an “Advice” page. The information on this page is contrary to the findings in this report in that they say “Most colleges and universities offer some distance learning programmes now...”. Our findings show that 81.8% of FE colleges in Wales and 58% of the selected colleges throughout the rest of the UK do not offer distance learning packages.

They go on to say that:

“Distance learning programmes are ideal for people who have a full-time job or other commitments, who can’t take time off to study full time.”

This website is targeting their distance learning packages at professionals and mothers who want to refresh their qualifications in order to re-enter the workplace. This is a very narrow view of the scope of people distance learning packages can benefit. There appears to be no information on GCSE, AS and A levels studied by distance or e-learning.

It is said on the Clic website that they are the national information and advice service for young people in Wales aged 11-25”. Clic is funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and is under development by Careers Wales, it says “in consultation with young people in Wales over the next 3½ years to April 2007.” As there is no information on the Careers Wales website for housebound students will this group of students play an active part in the development of Clic?

The information held on both Clic, which is intended for the 11 – 25 age range and on the Careers Wales website for the housebound student is both sparse and inaccurate.

12.2 Connexions, England

The careers service in England is called Connexions (15). Connexions are willing to visit housebound students in their own homes in order for them to discover what direction the young person wants to go in.

The advice given to housebound students in year 11 wishing to continue with education would be the same as in Wales in that the student would be advised of distance, correspondence and flexi study courses as well as e-learning opportunities. The Connexions service would also offer advice. They also take students on social outings to build up their confidence to enable them to attend a 6th form or FE college. It was difficult to grasp how this part of the service would be relevant to housebound students.

The Learning and Skills Council administer funding for post 16 learning in England. This covers 6th forms in schools and FE college students. Therefore it is up to individual LSCs how they share out the money and then up to individual schools and colleges as to how it is spent or divided. The Connexions service confirmed the findings of this report that funding is available but can be problematic to obtain. Unlike in Wales, there is no supplementary funding from the LSC.

The following phrases were input into the Connexions website in order to see if any information on distance learning etc was available: ‘sick child’; unable to go to college’; and ‘education of young people with medical conditions.’

Information on the site includes data on part time, open, distance, flexi and what they call online learning. There are good explanations of all these types of learning. None of this is targeted at the 11 – 25 age range although this is the target audience of this website.

Information on funding is also offered for part time courses but this information is again not suitable for students wishing to sit GCSE, AS or A levels.

There are also 3 links to outside websites, which may be of help to students wishing to follow courses by distance learning. None of these outside links would be of benefit to students wishing to study GCSE, AS or A level courses.

12.3 Careers Scotland

Careers Scotland (16) advised that students residing there can have access to a careers advisor by telephone, e-mail or in person either as a drop-in at a centre or in their own home by appointment. They would offer housebound students open, distance and e-learning and would encourage and help students to work towards their aspirations regardless of the difficulty that housebound students have in accessing education.

Funding in Scotland is easier to access for all students and advice would be given to housebound students in accessing this funding.

The information on the Careers Scotland website was very easy to find, necessitating only a search on the phrase 'distance learning' to come up with the information. The information on different forms of distance, flexi, open and e-learning is also good. Unfortunately the website information is aimed at people with family or work commitments who do not have the time to study at an educational establishment full time or who do not wish to learn in this way. It is not aimed at housebound students wishing to study SQA's or Highers.

12.4 Careers Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland careers advice (17) is provided by a government department, rather than a separate organisation, as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

It was very difficult to find the right person to speak to and because of this most housebound students will find it requires too much effort. The special needs careers advisor spoke knowledgeably about the different forms of distance learning that were available. Advice was also given on funding namely that there was no funding for these courses and it would be the responsibility of the individual and their circumstances as to whether they studied the course. The Careers advisors were also prepared to liaise with the FE colleges to see what courses were available to the housebound student, although there are not many options available.

Funding is not dissimilar to Wales in that there is no specific funding for housebound students wishing to follow distance learning packages. The careers advisor was also able to advise knowledgeably about this and advise them accordingly.

The Northern Ireland website was very difficult to navigate and information was very difficult to find. Limited information on distance learning was found, but it was only aimed at courses provided by Learn Direct, who do not offer academic courses.

In comparing all the information received both from the various careers advisors and their websites in all 4 countries it was found the information given on the telephone to be of a reasonably good standard. Whereas the information contained on the websites was often confusing, difficult to find and in some instances inaccurate. The information was also not aimed at the target audience of 11 – 25 in most instances, thereby making the websites of little benefit to housebound students in this age range.

13. Exam Concessions for housebound students

Students with medical conditions who follow exam-based distance learning packages are responsible for providing their own medical evidence for examination boards in the same way as pre 16 students do. This medical evidence for post 16 students can be difficult to obtain, certainly in the case of students with ME in Wales, due to the lack of specialists in this field.

The student's GP therefore usually has to supply the medical evidence to support any exam concessions. **(18)** Some GPs are failing to provide this evidence in a timely fashion due to lack of knowledge, both about the conditions such as ME & CFS, and of the educational needs of the student.

When this happens it makes it more difficult for the student to apply for the exam concessions, which would allow them to sit their exams on an equal footing with their peers. It can also prevent housebound students from obtaining examination passes and by default extend the time it takes for the student to gain the necessary qualifications to compete in the world of work until much later.

The difficulties in obtaining appropriate medical evidence and relevant exam concessions can also discourage even the most determined student. The student can then become discouraged from taking any exams in the future, for fear of the same difficulties recurring. It also undermines the doctor/patient relationship.

14. Funding of education for housebound students

14.1 Funding of education for housebound students in Wales

Funding for post 16 education in Wales is the responsibility of ELWa. **(19)** ELWa have publicly announced that they will not fund educational packages from outside of Wales for housebound students **(20)**, although they are prepared to fund students going to specialist residential colleges. ELWa do not directly fund distance learning or any other type of educational package, which can be completed at home by students nor do they fund e-learning.

Funding of post 16 learning in the way of home tuition provided by Local Authorities comes out of their education budget.

As part of this report enquiries were made of Learn Direct regarding funding for Distance Learning via the Individual Learning Account (ILA) **(21)**. This is a means tested grant available to students who have little or no qualifications. The maximum amount available to any one student for any one course was £200 in 2004/05. If a student is following a 2 - year course they would still only be entitled to the maximum grant of £200 and this would depend on their circumstances. The ILA, although accessible to housebound students, is not necessarily available for all GCSE and AS level courses. Students wishing to study A Levels are not eligible for the ILA.

The ILA is only available to students following courses by recognised organisations who are registered with ELWa. These organisations, although registered with ELWa, then need to further register each course to make them eligible to students claiming the ILA.

The maximum amount of money offered through the ILA does not cover the full cost of course materials for a distance learning package. The average cost for one GCSE utilised through distance learning is £275. If a student wishes to go on to take examinations at the end of their distance learning course they have to find and fund an examination centre, and the examination fees themselves. This can vary from centre to centre. If the student remains housebound at the time of taking examinations then it is their responsibility to find an examination centre and to find out if they will allow the student to take an examination away from the centre. Some examination centres may not have enough staff to allow an invigilator to visit a student's home.

Aside from this the student has to arrange for the examination centre to co-ordinate with the examining boards to allow them any special arrangements, such as taking the exam in their own home, a scribe or rest breaks. This will probably involve the student in extra

cost, as the examining body are not responsible for the cost of any negotiations or for allowing a student to take the exam in their own home. All in all housebound students will incur substantially more costs in following courses and taking the resultant examinations in their own homes. This cost is not taken into account by grant giving bodies even if the student is eligible in the first place.

The only other form of funding available to a housebound post 16 student is via special Charities or Trusts. Those that allow funding for housebound students are rare and the hoops one has to jump through in order to comply are enormous.

This enquiry has established that housebound students in Wales are at a disadvantage when trying to access funding for their education.

14.2 Funding of education for housebound students in England

Funding in England is the responsibility of the Learning and Skills Council. The LSC, in comparison to ELWa, funds all types of education including distance, correspondence, flexi and e-learning. Obtaining funding can be problematic, but not impossible. **(22)** If a student is following a distance learning course directly with a provider, then it is possible that the costs of the course will be substantially reduced or fees waived totally due to special funding from a major UK charity whose wish is that their monies are used for the benefit of students resident in England only. This is unfair to students living in other parts of the United Kingdom.

14.3 Funding of education for housebound students in Northern Ireland

Funding for post 16 education in Northern Ireland **(23)** is distributed amongst the FE colleges and they have full responsibility for what areas it is spent on. Like Wales there is no specific funding for housebound students or students, who for reason of disability or illness, are unable to attend an FE college full time. Full time students up to their 19th birthday are educated free.

14.4 Funding of education for housebound students in Scotland

Funding in Scotland **(24)** is more advanced due to the geographic and climatic make up of the country. It is not possible to expect students living on the islands to travel across to the mainland in bad weather to FE colleges therefore e-learning is more advanced in Scotland. Of the 5 colleges contacted in Scotland all offered total fee waivers for part time and disabled students, regardless of whether the part time learning was completed in an educational establishment or the student's own home. This is an area of good practice.

This however is in variance to their official guidance wherein it says they do not fund part time learning via distance learning but they are looking into this area of funding as a priority.

15. Students Union and the NUS card

As the National Union of Students plays a part in the lives of many students in FE colleges and at university, it was felt necessary to ascertain how easy it was for a housebound student to obtain a Students Union card. We contacted one students union in an FE College, the head office of the NUS in London and also searched the NUS website for information.

It would be useful to describe how a student goes about obtaining an NUS card from their local union. According to a former student it is necessary to provide the local students' union with their name, a recent photograph and a small fee to obtain the NUS card. In addition to this they have to state the course they are studying and/or the

department. This would be difficult for the housebound student studying e-learning, as neither the course nor the department, would be known to them if the college were only facilitating the e-learning.

The NUS website gives some useful information for all students except the housebound student:

“Q: How do I become a member of NUS?”

A: Membership of NUS is only available through your local students’ union at university or college....” (25)

“Q: Where do I get my NUS card?”

A: NUS cards are only available from your students’ union at university or college. NUS cannot send cards directly to students.” (26)

“Q: Are part time students eligible for an NUS Card?”

A: Yes, NUS have not produced a part-time version of the NUS Card for 2004-05, however both full and part time students are eligible for this year’s card.”

For the Associate Membership card the student has to be *“Currently studying Year 12 or 13 at a school.”* This therefore means that students who are being educated by their LEA post 16 are not eligible. **(27)**

On the NUS website they have a “Mission, vision and values” page **(28)** in their Mission statement the NUS state:

“NUS will constantly improve the lives and experiences of students in the UK: by ensuring their voice is heard and effectively represented; by developing democratic and strong students’ unions; and by providing collective benefits and access to information for all students.”

Their Vision statement says:

“Every student will play an active part in and be a respected member of a society that values learning, participating with their students’ union locally and nationally through NUS, which will be the recognised voice of UK students.”

Given the “Mission” and “Vision” statements above it would be interesting to discover how the NUS support housebound students when there is no mention of them on their website.

The NUS office in London was asked how housebound students could obtain an NUS card. Their advice was clear and concise: The housebound student should communicate with their local students’ union by telephone or e-mail and request a card. If the local students’ union is unclear what to do they should seek further advice from the main NUS office. It is left up to individual unions to decide how to send out NUS cards. This advice seems reasonable in theory, although it is unclear whether every local students’ union understands this.

We decided we would try to obtain a Students Union card from a local college for a housebound student who was registered with the local college to ascertain how easy it would be.

Over a period of 4 days, 13 separate attempts were made at various times of the college day to contact the Students Union of an FE college by telephone.

Sadly we were unable to contact the Students Union. There was no answer phone on which a student could leave a message either. Therefore the effort involved in a housebound student trying to join the Students Union at this local FE college could be seen to be disproportionate to the possible benefits they may receive.

16. Disability Issues

16.1 Reasonable Adjustment

It was discovered during our investigations that colleges across the United Kingdom had difficulties in understanding what the term 'reasonable adjustment' meant and how it could be applied to housebound students. There was also some misunderstanding as to the meaning of the word housebound which compounded the problem. We found that some colleges do try to make 'reasonable adjustment' for housebound students but their efforts are sometimes misguided. Implementation of this practice was found to be patchy across the United Kingdom. We give some examples of what could be considered 'reasonable adjustment':

1. Listen to what the student can cope with, before telling them what the college can offer.
2. Be willing to explore alternative ways to provide courses, possibly exploiting existing technology or materials, in order to devise a suitable teaching package e.g. VLE, correspondence courses, home tutorials, e-learning, distance learning, open learning, flexi study.
3. Establish clear pathways for communication about administrative and educational matters i.e. ensuring all memos are e-mailed or posted rather than handed out after class or put in pigeonholes.
4. Ensure student has information about accessing financial and practical assistance in order to study at home (grants, bursaries, computers, textbooks etc.).
5. Ensure students can access appropriate exam concessions.
6. Ensure students can join the Students Union.

16.2 Medical Model of Disability

When assessing a young person for home tuition the LEA, as providers, will have consulted with a doctor as to the extent of the young person's illness or disability and the way in which it affects them. They will also assess the young person's suitability for home tuition. In assessing the child in this way the problem is seen to be the young person or their medical condition and not the school environment. The challenge is then to find ways in which the student's special needs can be overcome so they can fit into a normal school environment, which is seen to be the ideal. This method of assessing disability is called the 'medical model'. **(29)**

An implication of this is that a child with ME can be refused home tuition on the grounds of social isolation. The perceived isolation of long-term home tuition is seen to be a more important problem by the doctors, than the obstacles to school attendance that the child's medical condition presents.

16.3 Social Model of Disability

If that same young person approached their FE college, their needs would be assessed under the 'social model' of disability **(29)**. This approach views the learning environment and what it offers the housebound student as the problem instead of their medical

condition. In practice, however it can still be difficult for a housebound student to gain an education, as few FE colleges, especially in Wales, do not provide educationally for the housebound student.

An example of this is when students with medical needs approach FE colleges to enrol. The college tells the student what is being offered and does not ask the student what they can reasonably cope with i.e. the college tells the student we offer 5 GCSEs, but the student may only be able to cope with 1 or 2. In this way the college see the problem as the student, and not the fact that they are not listening and adjusting the courses offered to suit the needs of the student. A few colleges in our enquiries showed concern that some students with special medical needs were approaching them but then not accepting the places they were offered. It is our opinion that colleges need to be more flexible in their approach to students with medical needs, especially ME and CFS.

Regardless of whether the 'medical' or 'social model' of disability is used in assessing a young person barriers to accessing education for the housebound are still widespread. Although the DDA has made a positive difference to the college environment to make it more accessible to disabled students the same cannot be said for attitudes to and provision for housebound students.

16.4 General Comments

Investigations were also made to ascertain how colleges comply with Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act (30). The findings show that colleges across the United Kingdom are confused about the way the DDA applies to housebound students and their responsibilities to that group of students.

The lack of distance learning packages in FE Colleges acts as a barrier to housebound students gaining education. There is a genuine lack of funding opportunities open to housebound students in the way of grants, bursaries or general funding for their tuition and examination costs. The costs of full time students' education are wholly met by the colleges, and grants are available to all students in part or full time attendance at educational establishments. There are few grants available for the housebound student and there are few charities to approach for funding. Funding from public bodies is also extremely difficult, if not impossible to obtain, without a battle. These are all barriers for housebound students when accessing education.

All 44 FE colleges in our original survey were further contacted either by telephone, through their website or prospectus, where it was available, to discover how many had disability policies or statements and/or equal opportunities policies. All colleges had one or more of these policies although some were still only working on draft policies. Where it was necessary to telephone the college, they were further asked if a copy of their policy was available to members of the public. 2 colleges refused permission for a copy of their policy to be sent, this refusal would be in contravention of the Freedom of Information Act (31). This also shows a lack of openness on the part of these colleges. Where the various policies were available online most were accessible, where they were not they were made available when requested on the telephone. Where prospectuses were previously requested they all stated that copies of their policies were available either in person at the college or by telephoning the college.

17. Conclusion

Our findings show there was a far more positive and knowledgeable approach from colleges in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland than in Wales to questions about educational provision for housebound students. They were also far more receptive to

accepting that certain students were not able, through illness or disability, to attend college at all and were more willing to provide an education that was tailored to the student. There was also more of a willingness to accept that some students may find it difficult to maintain regular attendance at college and were willing to provide varying levels of support for individual students from part time attendance on full time courses to extra individual tutorials in the college or student's own home. This provision did not seem to be available in Wales, except in extreme circumstances. Therefore housebound students in Wales are more disadvantaged than their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.

When comparing figures for educational provision for housebound students between Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom, we found that students in Wales are severely disadvantaged. 81.8% of FE colleges have no provision for housebound students compared to just 58% throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. FE colleges throughout the rest of the UK also had a wider range of study options for housebound students using distance and e-learning than their counterparts in Wales.

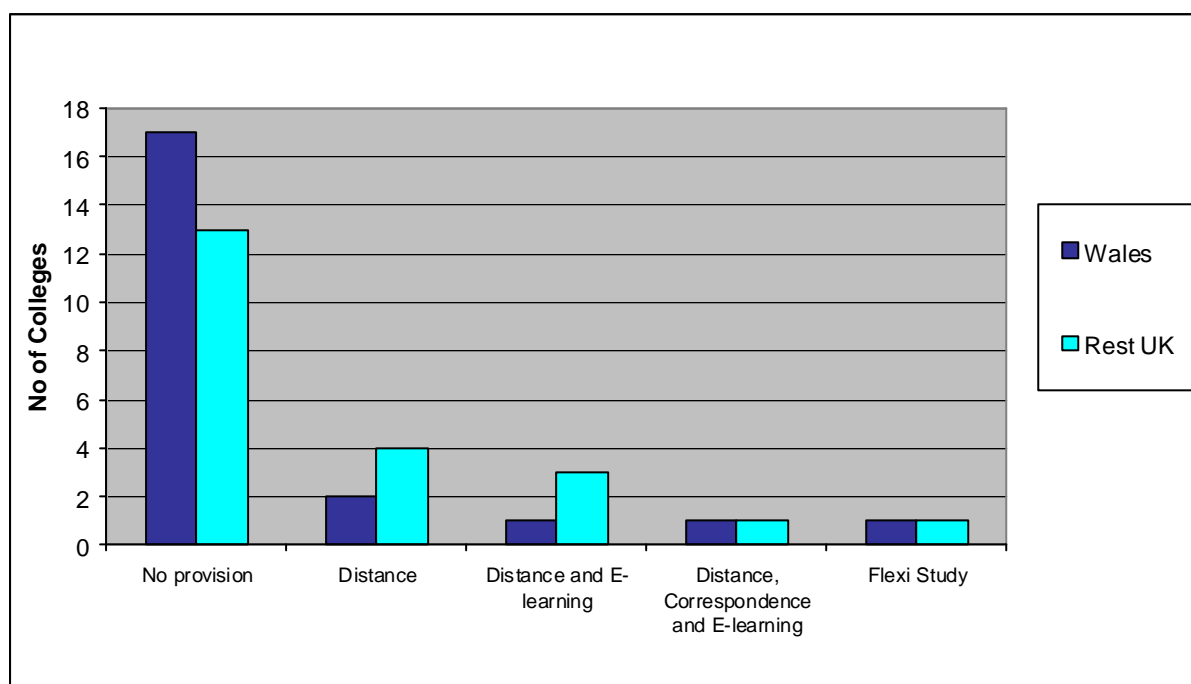


Diagram 7 – Comparison of provision of distance learning packages between Wales and the rest of the UK

When we compared funding offered in Wales with that offered in the rest of the UK, Wales falls behind again, barring Northern Ireland who has similar funding difficulties. ELWa do not fund post 16 housebound students for any form of education. Yet in England and Scotland, although there can be difficulties accessing funding, it is available. ELWa need to revise their funding of post 16 students to include those who are housebound. The Assembly Learning Grant, (32) is not available to post 18 housebound students and the Individual Learning Account is set at a figure that is inappropriately low for housebound students.

A comparison between e-learning opportunities offered to housebound students in Wales and the rest of the UK found that only Northern Ireland seemed to offer as little as Wales. E-learning in Wales is not as developed as in England and Scotland. The Welsh Assembly Government on its website Cymru-ar-lein (33) has several mission statements contained within the section entitled "Our Vision." There is very little evidence of these

statements being pertinent to the housebound person, nor that the Welsh Assembly Government embraces e-learning as a positive step forward for housebound students.

FE Colleges have a duty under the Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act (not applicable in N. Ireland) to make reasonable adjustment to allow disabled students to access education. We found that FE colleges in Wales in particular have a long way to go to reach the stage of non-discrimination against housebound students.

Careers advice is uniform to year 11 students and post 16 housebound students throughout the United Kingdom, in that all careers services are aware of distance learning packages. The various career service websites range from very poor to acceptable, but none of them hold relevant information on distance learning packages for the target audience of 11 – 25 year olds on distance learning packages. The websites tend to view distance learning packages as suitable for people who wish to fit their study around home or work commitments and don't consider the needs of housebound or disabled students. Neither is the information contained on their websites suitable for students wishing to study at GCSE level.

All in all, this report highlights several areas in which housebound students are being let down by the system. The infrastructure to improve access to education for post 16 housebound students is already there, it is the willingness of the funders and the education providers to act, which seems to be lacking. Also lacking is accurate information from the careers service or government departments

18. Recommendations

This section has been split into separate sections of differing responsibilities for ease of reading and reference.

FE Colleges

- i. Recognise the need to make 'reasonable adjustment' for the sick and disabled student, whether this be for the housebound student or for students wishing to attend FE colleges after a prolonged illness.
- ii. Provide educational opportunities for housebound students in the form of distance, correspondence, flexi study and e-learning which are tailored to the individual student's needs.
- iii. Expand the Virtual Learning Environment to provide e-learning into the home.
- iv. When colleges offer any type of distance learning package they should ensure that appropriate support is given to all students based on individual need.
- v. Market distance learning packages so that housebound/disabled students are aware of their existence.
- vi. Ensure that the information given to prospective students on the telephone, in prospectuses and on websites is standardised.
- vii. Train student service operatives to recognise and give the correct information to housebound students regarding the educational and funding opportunities available to them.

Welsh Assembly Government:

- viii. Ensure that the 'e-learning for all' policy really means *all* by including those persons who are housebound by illness and disability.
- ix. Re-assess the Assembly Learning Grant to make it available to housebound students and those doing distance learning and e-learning courses.
- x. Ensure that the Individual Learning Account covers the cost of end of course examinations and additional funding to help meet the extra cost of sitting end of course examinations for those with special needs, whether these be educational or medical needs.
- xi. Provide more explicit guidance to LEAs about the providing home tuition to post 16 students (Education Act 1996: 19(4) and Welsh Office Circular 3/99 revised name in consultation process "Inclusion and Pupil Support")
- xii. Carry out research into what happens to home-tutored students after they finish home tuition with their LEA. Suggested ages for this research 17, 19, 21 and 25.
- xiii. In the absence of Consultant cover GPs need guidance in providing medical evidence for exam concessions for post 16 students.
- xiv. The 'parentsnet' pages of the Welsh Assembly Governments website should acknowledge that pupils/students with medical needs have special educational needs.
- xv. The 'parentsnet' pages of the WAG's website should acknowledge the existence of distance learning packages and their suitability for housebound/disabled students on both pre and post 16 pages.

Learn Direct

- xvi. All FE colleges should be kept up to date about the type of courses Learn Direct offer.

ELWa

- xvii. Extra funding being made available to all FE colleges and LEAs via ELWa to allow home tuition or tutorials in a housebound students' own home to ensure equality.
- xviii. Funding should be made available for all types of distance learning packages for the housebound student, and for all the necessary support and examinations.
- xix. Extra funding is needed for examination centres to allow them to supervise housebound student's examinations in their home.

LEAs

- xx. Extra funding should be made available to LEAs for the purpose of providing housebound students with 2 years home tuition where necessary.

National Union of Students

- xxi. NUS cards should be made available to housebound students by mail.

xxii. Information on how to obtain an NUS card should be provided for the housebound student.

All

xxiii. All bodies should comply with part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act. (not applicable in Northern Ireland.)

xxiv. All bodies that represent or educate and fund students should consult with the housebound student about the best way forward.

xxv. There should be recognition by all that housebound students are capable of learning, given the right opportunities and appropriate support.

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APPENDIX 1

Post 16/19 Education

Name of College/LEA:

Contact Details:

1. What sort of basic educational provision in the way of GCSE, AS and A Levels do you offer to housebound students post 16/19?

Distance learning

Correspondence Course

E-learning

No provision at all

2. Do you offer e-learning? Y N

3. What sort of e-learning do you offer?

4. If e-learning is offered is it offered inside or outside the home?

Inside home

Outside home

5. If offer distance or correspondence courses ask if attendance at an educational establishment is part of the package? Y N

6. What help re cost of course is available to housebound students?

