

This document was archived in January 2017 because it is no longer current.

Effective numeracy support that makes a difference: New College Durham

URN: 108661

Date published: 31 January 2013

Reference: 130033

Brief description

Many students joining New College Durham have weak numeracy skills and an ingrained fear of mathematics. This example shows how the college has developed a flexible system of support that has proved to be highly successful in building students' confidence and raising their levels of numeracy.

Overview – the college's message

'Numeracy support was [judged outstanding](#) by Ofsted in June 2010 and we have continued building on the good practice. We have identified four key elements that have contributed to our success: a consistent cross-college approach that is well-supported by senior leaders; highly skilled numeracy teaching staff; very effective teamwork and communications; and close monitoring of students' progress and the impact of the support they receive.

Data show that numeracy support is helping to raise both retention and pass rates. Numeracy pass rates are well above the national average. Over the last two years the outstanding success rates on apprenticeship frameworks have not been compromised by functional skills failure. Our aim is to improve college success rates that include functional skills to equal those excluding functional skills.'

Mo Dixon, Assistant Principal Curriculum and Inclusion

The good practice in detail

New College Durham places great emphasis on all types of support for students and has continued to improve the quality and effectiveness of numeracy support year-on-year. As a result, the overall success rate on functional skills (mathematics) courses is over 80% with many more students than last year achieving at the higher levels.

Responsibility for developing students' numeracy skills is shared by all staff, not just the dedicated team of specialists and the multi-layered approach to support has been central to the success. Students know that a range of staff can be approached for help. Critically, all of these staff talk regularly to each other, so that between them they can make sure that the students receive the best quality support, carefully matched to their individual needs and preferences.

The college-wide approach

Students are made aware of the importance of functional skills development from their first contact with the college. The importance of improving both numeracy and literacy skills is stressed again at enrolment and throughout induction. Students accept that functional skills are an integral part of their programme. Numeracy support sessions are scheduled from the start of the course so that the students do not see them as an 'add on'. Learning support is promoted very effectively across the college throughout the year.

Curriculum leaders are held accountable for the students' achievement across their entire programme, not just the vocational components. Governors and senior leaders compare success rates that include and exclude functional skills. Curriculum leaders are accountable for any marked differences.

Senior leaders are fully abreast of national developments and keep the college at the forefront of local and national changes. Participation in the functional skills pilot gave an early warning of the need to strengthen further the already outstanding numeracy support. With numeracy specialists in short supply, the college brought together the functional skills and the adult numeracy teams to make the most effective use of existing expertise. The college is also proactive in 'growing its own' specialists through internal and external training.

A highly skilled numeracy team

Continuous professional development and effective sharing of best practice are central to maintaining the high level of expertise in the team. For example, a highly qualified mathematician regularly takes a supporting role in lessons to learn from the experienced numeracy specialist leading the session. Numeracy teaching courses at levels 5 and 6 have been used well to develop staff.

Numeracy staff are highly skilled at building students' confidence, allaying any deep-seated fears and unpicking misconceptions. The numeracy team is also adept at teaching and supporting students in groups with a wide range of ability. They use activities that are expertly tailored to meet individuals' needs - everyone works on similar tasks but at different



levels. Where in-class numeracy support is required it is provided by numeracy specific Learning Support Assistants. This is excellent practice which ensures that students receive maximum support.

Students from all areas of the college value the rich variety of numeracy learning resources available, including those that can be accessed from home via the virtual learning environment. They talk about how confidence in their own ability has grown and how they can see the relevance of mathematics for

the first time. They also appreciate the way that numeracy development is made relevant to their main area of study and to real life.

Support in numeracy is planned carefully to ensure that it meets each individual's needs and preferred ways of working. The staff are particularly skilled at teaching coping strategies and at weaning the students off support when appropriate. This enables the team to accommodate referrals for support throughout the year. The team keeps abreast of latest developments. For example, one member of staff has completed a post graduate qualification in supporting students with dyscalculia and 'maths anxiety' and is sharing her expertise with the team.

Effective teamwork and communication

Communication between staff and between staff and students is extremely effective and plays a key role in ensuring that students receive appropriate numeracy support swiftly.

The keys to the success are:

- invaluable weekly course team meetings that include functional skills teachers and support tutors
- locating numeracy staff in vocational areas so that any concerns about students' numeracy are detected and supported quickly
- Personal Learning Coaches, who act as mentors and advocates for students, and work closely with numeracy staff to ensure the students receive timely and appropriate support
- the Personal Learning Coaches often accompany students to their first support session to give them confidence
- support tutors keep in touch with the few students who rejected support at the beginning of their course and gently remind them that the offer remains open.

Staff often make changes to the numeracy provision in response to feedback from the students. For example, the students did not like having to go to an unfamiliar area of the college to get help with numeracy and wanted support to be available in their vocational area. Managers have therefore scheduled numeracy workshops across the college. Some students also wanted to be taught numeracy in the same groups as the rest of their vocational programme. As a result there is no 'streaming' for numeracy and teachers and support assistants have developed very effective strategies for teaching mixed-ability groups.

Close tracking and evaluation of impact

Students' [progress](#) is well monitored and the numeracy team is constantly refining systems that measure the impact of their work to improve its effectiveness. Data, going back a number of years, show that students taking up numeracy support benefit greatly, and this is well used to demonstrate its worth to staff and students.

Staff make very good use of internal tracking data for students' development needs and their progress against individual targets. This gives them a detailed breakdown of the results of initial assessment, enabling them to identify topics that need to be prioritised and students who might need extra support.

The college's background

[New College Durham](#) is a large general further education college providing vocational further and higher education in County Durham. A new campus was completed in 2005. In the most recent Ofsted inspection, the college was judged to be outstanding and the most recent inspection of numeracy judged this area to be outstanding.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

To view other good practice examples, go to:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice