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Outstanding support for construction learners: West Suffolk College

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Brief description

Excellent support effectively monitors attendance and progress to ensure the development of literacy, numeracy and vocational skills that build learners' confidence and help them to achieve well.

Overview – the provider's message



'The journey started following an unsatisfactory inspection outcome for work-based learning in April 2002. Learners were not achieving as well as they should or as well as full-time learners. From that point we set out to change the way that all learners were supported – we started building the construction team. Roles and responsibilities needed to be more clearly defined and best practice shared so that all learners benefited. We recognised home-grown talent and promoted staff and reorganised the structure of the department. The need for additional support staff to supplement the support provided by teachers was also recognised and the role of "teaching and learning assistant" was created to provide extra help for learners. This year the college has enhanced support even further by employing "personal support tutors" who are responsible for attendance monitoring and the tracking of learners' progress.

My advice to others? Focus on providing targeted support using staff with the right skills so they play to their strengths - the number one priority is the learner.'

Gary Clarke, Head of Faculty

The good practice in detail

The college was judged to have outstanding construction provision when it was [inspected](#) in May 2010 and excellent support was a key factor in achieving the grade. So how was this achieved?

Getting the structure right

The college recognised the need to provide a structure that enabled good communications and teamwork, to provide the necessary support for learners to achieve.

The first priority was to identify good team managers who are learner-focused, understand their areas of responsibility and have good communication skills. Staff strengths and weaknesses were identified to enable the college to allocate roles and responsibilities that allowed individual staff to play to their strengths and put their different skills to best use to support learners. A number of different roles were created to provide better support for learners, including senior lecturers, senior tutors, lecturers, work-based assessors, technicians, technical demonstrators, teaching and learning support assistants and personal support tutors.



The result is a departmental structure split into vocational disciplines and focused on enabling effective communications and teamwork to support learners and helping them to achieve. As one teaching and learning support assistant said, 'The primary reason for support being successful for learners is the teamwork. From initial assessment until successful completion, learners are our number one priority.' No wonder the inspection reported noted that support for learners and leadership and management were outstanding. Learners benefit from a structure that places them at the centre and from the support provided by a team of staff that communicate and work very effectively together. Results from the learner survey are exceptionally positive with one comment typical of many: 'I have settled into the course very well, the teachers are friendly and very helpful and I get lots of support. I am really pleased I enrolled.'



Identifying support needs

Identifying support needs early and putting the right support in place as soon as possible are key factors in improving success rates.

Prior to enrolment, learners undergo a thorough screening to assess their literacy and numeracy skills and to identify their learning styles. On many courses, learners also complete a specific aptitude [test](#) that provides further information on their suitability for the course. The results of these initial assessment tests are recorded immediately on the electronic individual learning plan, which is then used by the course director who interviews the learner. Initial assessment results are 'risk rated' to identify, relative to each course, the likely need for support in a particular area. 'We use the information collected to draw up timetables for the teaching and learning assistants to ensure that all identified support needs for each individual learner are addressed prior to the course starting,' says Gary. Learners'

progress is checked regularly and any additional support that is required is identified and is then timetabled for the learner and for the teaching and learning support assistant. As a 'belt and braces' approach, course teams meet monthly to review an 'at risk' report that identifies learners who are at risk of failing the course, to review their progress and support needs.



The inspection report noted that: 'Teachers, managers and support workers provide high levels of support so that learners achieve who might otherwise not have done so. Most learners receiving support achieve their intended learning outcome.'

Monitoring attendance

Attendance and punctuality are taken very seriously and are used to help to create a 'real-life' working environment. Learners are expected to contact the college to explain why they are not attending and if a learner has not reported their absence they, or their parents, and in some cases their employers, can expect to receive a telephone call soon after the scheduled start of a class. Gary says: 'We check on absent learners daily and they soon understand that if they don't attend they will get a phone call. Most are in the habit of contacting us first, and our attendance rates are very high on most courses.'

As part of their duties, personal support tutors identify learners who are not present at the start of a class. Once identified, learners are contacted to find out why they are not in college and this information is recorded and passed to course directors. Attendance expectations are high and attendance rates are used as a key indicator of learners who are 'at risk' of failing to complete a course.

Providing effective support

'There is no such thing as a generic support programme; each one is tailored to the individual learner,' says Gary. This approach enables learners to feel at ease and to get the maximum benefit from the support provided. Staff provide a range of different kinds of support including one-to-one support, in-class support, literacy, numeracy and learning styles support. Learners are encouraged to relax and to talk about their support needs and are allowed to set the pace and direction of the support provided. As one teaching and learning support assistant says, 'It is my job to adapt to support the learners' needs and cover the relevant areas as and when required.'

Learners really benefit from the individual support programmes that are put in place for them following secure diagnosis of need. One learner summarised the view of many when he says, 'I think the support here is brilliant; if I need any help I know I am going to get it.' Providing this level of support has seen retention and achievement rates rise continually and success rates on most programmes are high.



Making sure that learners are on track to achieve

Personal support tutors are responsible for completing tutorials and for the tracking and monitoring of learners' progress. Course directors and teaching staff set individual targets and milestones for learners to achieve relative to the topic they are teaching and these are recorded on the learners' EILP. Progress against these targets is reviewed and EILPs are updated, at weekly tutorials.

Learners value the opportunity to discuss their progress with their personal support tutor as they are seen as an 'independent third party'. One learner commented: 'It's great to be able to discuss my progress with someone other than my teacher. You know they are there to help you.' Personal support tutors liaise closely with teaching staff, teaching and learning support assistants and course directors to ensure highly effective communications within the team.

Provider background



West Suffolk College is a medium-size general further education college with its main campus located in the market town of Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. The college offers general and vocational education and training in all sector subject areas from entry level through to higher education level. The college has beacon status, is a centre of vocational excellence in management, health and social care, and in construction and holds the Training Quality Standard in seven vocational areas.

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](#).

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