Research briefing 01

Learner support

This is one of a series of briefing notes exploring key themes from the Welsh Government's Learner Voice Wales survey. It summarises the positive and negative views expressed by learners, and messages from research on learner support and motivation. We've used this to suggest action points for providers to consider, and further resources for those interested in exploring the topic in more depth.

What did learners say?

Learning support

- Many learners praise the quality of support from their provider. They describe staff as approachable, patient and willing to answer questions.

- Others, particularly in FE, want more recognition of when they are struggling; conversely, some want to be challenged more and to progress faster, especially in Welsh for Adults. Some learners think their tutors should have a better understanding of individual rates of progress.

- Apprentices value the ability to contact their assessor 'out of hours' and have a quick response.

- Some respondents feel that tutors need to take more time to explain exactly what is required for specific assignments, tasks or projects, and to check everyone's understanding.

- One-to-one support is very highly valued in all sectors. Many learners (particularly apprentices) praise the level of individual support given to them by tutors and assessors; however, some FE students feel that classes are too big, and that tutors don't spread their time and attention fairly.

- Areas where learners want more support include:
  - assignment planning and writing
  - revision
  - English, Welsh and mathematics
  - additional support for learning difficulties, particularly dyslexia.

Personal support

- Most learners feel that their tutors treat them as individuals, and understand personal issues such as financial problems, childcare or illness. Some learners had been given additional tuition and time to catch up after periods of absence.

- Learners often see support and understanding from tutors as a crucial factor in helping them to stay on course, by increasing their confidence and motivation. Some, however, feel that tutors need to show better understanding of their personal difficulties such as emotional and family problems.

- Some FE students want their colleges to have more awareness of, and sensitivity in dealing with, mental health issues like stress and depression.

- A few FE students made negative comments about the knowledge and attitudes of student services staff, or said they had been given contradictory advice by different staff.

Financial support

- Many of those who receive Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) feel that systems for payment aren't reliable, and some are concerned that providers' registers aren't accurate or timely enough to enable EMA payments.

- Similarly, some adult learners face long waits for Assembly Learning Grant support.

- Learners want more help with travel, food costs, printing and course materials.

Effective strategies for supporting learners

The strategies below are drawn from a range of publications on learner support, which in turn are based on extensive research into 'what works' in post-16 settings.
For further reading, see the 'Resources' section at the end of this briefing.

Integrating support into the curriculum

Vulnerable learners and those with multiple barriers to participation will often need bespoke programmes, with high levels of support built in. Studies by Ofsted[1] have highlighted the importance of flexible start dates, progression opportunities and extracurricular support in helping to keep at-risk young people engaged. The best providers understand that many learners have had negative experiences at school, and that imaginative approaches are needed to engage them from the outset.

Ofsted identified a number of **barriers to effective teaching and learning**, including:

- teachers' low expectations of learners, their overuse of support to compensate for undemanding teaching, and their lack of promotion of learners' autonomy

- too much focus on completing learning activities without enough attention paid to ensuring that the main learning points are thoroughly understood

- time wasted on unstructured independent work, which involves use of unreliable or irrelevant information with negative consequences for learners' knowledge development, engagement and interest

- unproductive use of learning time because learners' activities are not structured sufficiently or monitored closely, and some lose their way

- insufficient emphasis on ensuring that learning on-the-job is of high quality

Teaching, learning and assessment in further education and skills – what works and why[2]
(Ofsted, 2014)

The Learner Voice Wales feedback shows that learners do not always feel that their individual needs are understood by tutors, or that they get enough support to progress at their own pace. Educational consultant Joanne Miles, who has worked with a number of Welsh colleges and providers, has some useful tips on using **differentiated learning[3]** to meet individual needs within mixed groups, and

suggests that teachers have a toolkit of approaches that they can deploy when required, such as:

- ways to recycle terminology or concepts quickly

- a bank of questions that prompt reflection on learning, tailored to different levels of progress or understanding

- quick activities to engage and challenge early finishers.

Some lecturers could explain things a lot more. I've found myself stuck on an assignment and asked for help, yet it still hasn't been explained.

Differentiation should be seen as integral to learning, not an add-on for those situations when things do not go as well as planned and problems occur. Differentiation is not about troubleshooting. It is a concept that has to be seen in an inclusive way, applying to everyone.

Geoff Petty[4]

Many learners study **literacy and numeracy** as part of their programmes, and from autumn 2015 this will increase as more learners resit English/Welsh and Mathematics GCSEs. This is often a challenge where learners have struggled with these subjects in school, or fail to see the relevance to their chosen route. Research by NIACE[5] on engaging learners in GCSE Mathematics and English shows that learners need:

- to understand the purpose and importance of holding these qualifications

- to see the relevance of what they are learning, with feedback relating activities to the main qualifications they are pursuing

- to have the time they need to practice topics which they find difficult

- to be clear on the way they will be assessed, including open sharing of marking schemes

- timely initial assessments to identify support needs

- to be encouraged to ask for help, including from their peers.

Pastoral provision

Your organisation may not use the term 'pastoral provision', but it is something every provider delivers. LSIS defines pastoral provision as 'provision offered to all learners in a personalised way to meet their individual needs so that they have a successful learning experience, achieve and progress'.

Estyn inspections have found that most post-16 providers have good arrangement to give learners individual support, but very few systematically evaluate learners' take-up of support, or its impact.

Effective pastoral provision:

- has the commitment of the senior leadership team

- is continually evaluated and reviewed, with input from learners

- is supported by a planned CPD programme

- is delivered in partnership with external agencies

- is a structured and resourced element of all stages of the learner journey

- fosters self-confidence and independence

- recognises and values the diversity of learners, and encourages learners to choose development and support services appropriate to their needs

- is dynamic, recognising that individuals' needs may vary over the course of a learning journey

- ensures access to information, advice and guidance services, enabling learners to make the right learning and progression choices

- recognises and enables learners to take steps to address relevant personal, social, faith, moral, health and financial issues.

Adapted from **Supporting learners to succeed: Guidance for pastoral provision** (LSIS, 2009)

The Learning to Learn in FE[6] research programme emphasises that not all post-16 learners are ready to take responsibility for their learning, and teachers can help them to understand that the ability to learn is something that can be developed gradually, rather than being something that you either possess or you don't. The research also recommends the use of peer-to-peer relationships so that learners can support one another.

A scoping study[7] into the **mental health** of FE students found that success factors include:

- sound strategic and mid-level leadership

- having in place staff with specific mental health responsibilities

- building college-wide awareness about how mental health affects learner retention and achievement

- tiered professional development for staff so that all are, at least, aware of basic mental health issues, and some are able to provide more intensive support

- addressing mental health as part of a wider health-related programme, rather than tackling problems on an ad hoc basis

- using external expertise, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

> I think that it's **imperative** that there should be more staff training for picking up students who have learning difficulties and emotional issues, e.g. depression and anxiety, etc., so that relevant support can be given.

Holistic support around the learner

The identification of learners' individual needs, whether these relate to learning support or personal barriers to participation, often depends on partnerships which foster 'wrap around' support for the learner. Our own evaluation[8] of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework shows that where protocols are in place to share information between local authorities, post-16 providers and other partners, this enhances learner tracking and identification of learners at risk of dropping out.

Research[9] by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, based on feedback from 5,500 further and higher education students, shows that **counselling services** can have a significant positive impact on the learning experience. Around 75 per cent of students said that counselling had helped them to stay in learning, and nearly as many said that it helped them to develop skills useful for obtaining employment. Counselling can provide a safe space to deal with a new and challenging learning environment, and can increase learners' confidence and their hope for the future.

> It is absolutely amazing that this college offers a counselling service. Words cannot describe how much it has helped me become a stronger person and control my anxiety.

Action plan

➔ Consider how to integrate evaluation of learner support, including monitoring of take-up of support services, into existing systems such as learner tracking, individual learning planning, and self-assessment.

➔ If your provider is involved in administering financial support to learners, such as EMA or other grants, review the timeliness and accuracy of your payment systems; consider how to use timely payments, learner feedback and other metrics to inform ongoing monitoring.

➔ Colleges and other providers which offer a counselling service may find it helpful to use the BACP's impact evaluation tool to assess the service's impact on learner outcomes.

➔ Join the **Mental Health in Further Education** e-network to find resources, continuing professional development materials and advice which is relevant across the whole post-16 sector.

➔ Ensure that your plans for continuing professional development for your staff include structured activities to help identify learners with particular learning or personal needs, and refer them on to relevant support within or outside the provider.

Resources

- **_Supporting young people to participate in education and training_**[10] **(Ofsted, 2014)**
  A review of seven London colleges to identify good practice in re-engaging young people.

- **_Learning to learn in further education_**[11] (Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, 2010)
  Briefing based on research by FE practitioners.

- **_Mental health and emotional well-being of students in further education – a scoping study_**[12]
  (University of London, 2006)
  Research including case studies and an analysis of success factors.

- **_Skills for Life: effective strategies to support learner persistence, progress and progression_**[13]
  (Learning Skills and Improvement Service, 2010)
  Includes key messages for improvement aimed at learning providers.

  The National Association for Pastoral Care in Education
  www.napce.org.uk

  The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has a dedicated site for universities and colleges at
  www.bacpuc.org.uk/index.php

Learner Voice Wales

Learner Voice Wales is the Welsh Government's annual survey of learners in further education, work-based learning, adult community learning and Welsh for Adults. Launched in 2013, it seeks learners' views on a range of topics relating to:

- information, advice and guidance
- support
- teaching and learning
- well-being and responsiveness
- Welsh-medium learning
- overall satisfaction.

Learners are also asked to comment on what they like best about their learning provider, and what they think could be improved.

A summary of the survey is available at
http://gov.wales/learnervoice.

For more information, please e-mail
post16quality@wales.gsi.gov.uk.

[1] *Supporting young people to participate in education and training* (Ofsted, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-young-people-to-participate-in-education-and-training

[2] *Teaching, learning and assessment in further education and skills – what works and why* (Ofsted, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-learning-and-assessment-in-further-education-and-skills-what-works-and-why

[3] 'Differentiation without extra handouts: tips for stretching and challenging learners' (Joanne Miles Consulting)
https://joannemilesconsulting.wordpress.com/2012/08/23/differentiation-without-extra-handouts-tips-for-stretching-and-challenging-learners/

[4] 'Differentiation' (Geoff Petty)
http://geoffpetty.com/training-materials/differentiation/

[5] *Engaging learners in GCSE maths and English* (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2015)
http://shop.niace.org.uk/engaging-learners-gcse-maths-english.html

[6] *Learning to Learn in Further Education* (CfBT Education Trust, 2010)
http://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2010/r-learning-to-learn-in-further-education-2010

[7] *Mental health and emotional well-being of students in further education – a scoping study* (University of London, 2006)
http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82092.pdf

[8] *Formative evaluation of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework – Interim Findings* (Welsh Government, 2014)
www.gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2014/141216-evaluation-youth-engagement-progression-framework-interim-en.pdf

[9] 'The positive wider impact of counselling provision in colleges and universities' in *University & College Counselling* September 2014 (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2014)
http://bacpuc.org.uk/_sitedata/1430485622%20akPtNy4vs/Articles/14%20-%20Sep%20-%20Impact.pdf

[10] *Supporting young people to participate in education and training* (Ofsted, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-young-people-to-participate-in-education-and-training

[11] *Learning to Learn in Further Education* (CfBT Education Trust, 2010)
http://www.cfbt.com/en-GB/Research/Research-library/2010/r-learning-to-learn-in-further-education-2010

[12] *Mental health and emotional well-being of students in further education – a scoping study* (University of London, 2006)
http://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/82092.pdf

[13] 'Skills for Life: effective strategies to support learner persistence, progress and progression' (Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2010)
http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/import-pdf2172-0

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