



Direct learning support in colleges: a survey of current practice

Many adults and 16–18-year-old learners in colleges need extra help to enable them to reach their full potential in their studies. In 2005/06 inspectors from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) evaluated the quality of the literacy, numeracy and language support learners receive in 29 colleges across the country. The colleges were selected because they had received good or better grades for their Skills for Life provision in a previous inspection.

Of particular interest to:

Learning support managers; Skills for Life managers

Age group
Post-16

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Executive summary

Many adults and 16–18-year-old learners in colleges need extra help to enable them to reach their full potential in their studies. In 2005/06 inspectors from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) evaluated the quality of support for literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) in 29 colleges across the country, including general further education (GFE) and sixth form colleges. The colleges were selected because they had received good or better grades for their Skills for Life provision in a previous inspection. This report also draws on the findings from the broader inspection of colleges in 2005/06.

Overall effectiveness of learning support was at least satisfactory in 27 out of the 29 colleges inspected as part of the survey, and good or better in 19 of them. In the colleges surveyed, and more broadly, learning support improved retention rates. The most effective learning support also improved pass rates. Good support enabled many adults and young people who failed at school to gain vocational or academic qualifications whilst improving their literacy, numeracy and/or language skills. The stigma that used to be attached to receiving learning support had largely gone.

Colleges with good learning support had a college-wide strategy that was actively supported by the principal and senior managers. Expertise in literacy, numeracy and ESOL was used effectively throughout the college. Staff with expertise in key skills, Skills for Life and learning support worked closely together. In these colleges, all adult learners and learners aged 16–18 on full-time and substantive part-time courses received initial assessments in literacy, numeracy and, where appropriate, language. If they needed support, it was provided quickly. The type of support, and the time and place for it, were matched carefully to learners' needs. Comprehensive performance monitoring systems included observations by tutors. Data were analysed and used well to monitor effectiveness and improve quality.

Learning support tutors who worked closely with subject teachers ensured that the development of literacy, numeracy and language was contextualised and made relevant to learners' substantive course and interests. The support developed learners' underlying literacy, numeracy and language skills rather than focusing merely on helping learners to complete assignments.

Two issues raised in Ofsted's earlier reports on this area had not been dealt with fully.¹ Some areas of the country still had a shortage of experienced and qualified tutors for literacy, numeracy and ESOL. Although a number of colleges

¹ *Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision* (HMI 1367), Ofsted, 2003; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/1367. *Skills for Life in colleges: one year on* (HMI 2458), Ofsted, 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2458.

had found ways to develop their own staff to overcome this, the shortage of support tutors in other colleges meant either that learners had to wait too long for support or received support of poor quality. This was especially true for ESOL. Setting and monitoring individuals' targets for learning support were still weak in many colleges.

Key findings

- ❑ Colleges who collected and analysed data reliably showed that success rates for learners identified as needing and receiving learning support were at least as good as for those who did not need it.
- ❑ Many of the colleges did not evaluate the effectiveness of learning support or set targets to improve it, although most had identified this as an area for development.
- ❑ The proportion of learners who received learning support after being identified as needing it varied widely from at least 95% of learners in three of the colleges visited to only 50% in two.
- ❑ The initial assessment of literacy, numeracy and language needs was routine for learners aged 16–18 in all the colleges visited but, in a minority of them, not for adults. Assessment was weak in a small number of the sixth form colleges because it relied too narrowly on English and mathematics results at GCSE level.
- ❑ The most effective support was relevant to the learner's main programme, achieved through close liaison between the support tutor and the subject teaching team or by integrating support into lessons. It developed transferable skills in literacy, numeracy and/or language.
- ❑ Target-setting, monitoring and reviewing the progress of support were generally weak. There was little correlation, however, between the quality of the support learners received and the quality of their individual learning plans.
- ❑ Support for literacy was generally satisfactory or better, although it was poor where demand for such support had grown rapidly and recently. Support for learners with dyslexia was often very good.
- ❑ Very good learning support reflected the active involvement of the college principal and senior managers in its strategic development and monitoring of provision.
- ❑ In some colleges the expertise of specialist literacy, ESOL and/or numeracy staff was narrowly confined to working on discrete Skills for Life courses. Arrangements to share expertise with the learning support team were inadequate.

Recommendations

Colleges should:

- conduct initial assessments of the literacy and numeracy skills of all adult learners on substantive courses
- ensure that support for literacy, numeracy or language is relevant to the learner's main programme of study
- ensure that all students who have been offered support take it up
- develop more effective and appropriate systems for setting, monitoring and reviewing learners' targets for literacy, numeracy and language
- provide sufficient support for numeracy and language to meet demand and ensure that support for ESOL is of good quality
- plan strategically to provide support for literacy, numeracy and ESOL, supported by the principal and senior managers, and use fully the expertise available in these areas
- collect and analyse data about learning support to monitor performance, assess impact and improve provision.

Sixth form colleges should:

- assess thoroughly learners' literacy, numeracy and language skills.

Background

1. In September 2003, Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) published a report, *Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision*, which evaluated the implementation of the government's Skills for Life initiative.² As part of that survey, inspectors evaluated the quality of learning support. They reported as follows:
 - In colleges, the best practice was often found in discrete provision and the expertise available was rarely used to teach learners on learning support programmes. Good practice was not shared throughout the college.
 - There was a serious shortage of literacy, numeracy and ESOL teachers.
 - In a few colleges, managers recognised that good learning support had improved achievement but most colleges had not evaluated the effect of learning support.
2. A subsequent report, *Skills for Life in colleges: one year on*, found that:
 - the serious shortage of specialist teachers continued

² *Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision* (HMI 1367), 2003; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/1367.

- the initial assessment of learners' literacy, numeracy and language skills was a strength in most GFE colleges
 - the setting and monitoring of individual targets using individual learning plans were major weaknesses in colleges.³
3. This report assesses the quality of literacy, numeracy and ESOL learning support in colleges. All references to language support and language skills relate to ESOL. The report does not cover other important forms of support such as speech therapy, assistance with mobility or personal care, or 'embedded' Skills for Life development. Increasingly, the development of literacy, numeracy and/or language skills is integrated (embedded) into learners' subject lessons. However, unlike direct learning support, skills development is aimed at all members of the class, rather than designed to meet the specific needs of a small group or an individual.
 4. The following modes of literacy, numeracy and language support are common:
 - During a lesson taught by a subject teacher, the learning support tutor works alongside a learner or a small group of learners.
 - The learner works with the learning support tutor outside the timetabled lesson.
 - Learners from a variety of programmes attend 'drop in' workshop sessions, more or less regularly.

Achievement and standards

5. Of the 29 colleges visited, 15 had reliable data on learning support. In all but one of these colleges, retention rates for those receiving support were higher than those for learners who did not require support. In nine of these colleges, pass rates for learners receiving learning support were higher than for other learners. The attendance of learners receiving support was generally good.
6. In many of the colleges that held accurate data, the number of learners who refused support was very low but, where there were sufficient data to make valid comparisons, the retention and pass rates for learners accepting support were far higher than for learners who refused it. Many of the learners receiving support reported that they would have dropped out of college if they had not received the extra help. Very few learners felt that there was any stigma attached to receiving learning support. There were many examples of learners who had started and left courses at other colleges in the past because they were not supported adequately.

³ *Skills for Life in colleges: one year on* (HMI 2458), 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2458.

Successful learners who have received learning support

R joined the college on an entry level course for learners with no formal qualifications. He wanted to pursue a career in art but his attendance at school was poor and he did not have the necessary GCSE grades. R received literacy and numeracy support throughout his first year. He attended well and was able to join a level 1 art course in his second year in college. He continued to receive learning support to help him with his written work; he passed with merits and went on to a level 2 and then a level 3 art course. R progressed to an introductory foundation degree programme and continued to receive support as appropriate. Without the support, R said he would have left the college.

S was a qualified midwife in Iran and came to the UK in 2002. Her native language was Farsi. She joined an entry level ESOL course in 2002 and then moved onto a 'language links to learning' course which included modules in level 1 ESOL, level 2 numeracy and level 1 information technology. In 2004/05, she joined an access course at level 2 and attended a language support session once a week. She obtained 93 credits on this course and progressed to a level 3 course in 2005/06. She found the language support sessions invaluable.

7. Learners receiving literacy, numeracy or language support gained additional Skills for Life qualifications in only a small number of the colleges.

The quality of provision

8. In the best 'in class' support, the subject teacher and support tutor planned the lesson together. The subject teacher had a good awareness of literacy, numeracy and language development and shared responsibility for it with the support tutor, who had a clear role, a working knowledge of the subject area and familiarity with the content of the course. Where 'in class' support worked well, the teacher and tutor had planned carefully to ensure that learners developed literacy, numeracy or language skills for their long-term goals as well as their immediate needs.
9. 'In class' support was less effective when the support tutor acted mainly as a classroom assistant, handing out worksheets or clearing up art materials. Support was largely ineffective when the tutor focused too narrowly on the task in hand rather than developing transferable skills, for instance, providing a correct spelling rather than encouraging the student to practise spelling strategies or consult a dictionary. Support was least effective when tutors took on much of the learners' work themselves, including writing down answers for those who could do this themselves.
10. Support tutors working with learners outside lessons were most effective when they liaised closely with the vocational team and were thoroughly familiar with the learner's programme. They prepared support materials which were relevant in terms of the skills needed and subject context, anticipating rather than simply reacting to the needs of learners.

Good support for ESOL

X, a recent arrival to the UK, joined a business studies course. Her written English was very good, but her course tutor at the college referred her for language support as she found it difficult to understand other learners in her class who spoke with strong local accents. As a result, she was reluctant to answer questions or join in class discussions and this hampered her progress.

X received individual language support which focused on her listening and speaking skills. Each session included a range of activities, such as:

- watching and discussing video clips from TV programmes and films in which the characters spoke with local accents
- X's dictation of a passage to the tutor from behind a screen to develop her confidence in speaking loudly and clearly
- speaking exercises using a tape recorder to improve her intonation and pronunciation.

All the learning materials were relevant to X's main course or her personal interests. Support sessions were relaxed and X found them very enjoyable and useful.

The support tutor also liaised closely with the course tutor to identify future demands of the main course. She used part of the language support session to prepare X for specific forthcoming activity such as making a presentation, and previewed any specialist vocabulary X would need in the following week. The tutor regularly asked X if there were any topics or aspects with which she would like additional help.

X's speaking skills improved rapidly and her confidence increased. During the survey, she volunteered to be part of the group of learners who met the inspector. She joined in the discussion, making her points confidently and clearly. X also reported that she was more confident when talking to people from outside the college.

11. The following illustration of ineffective support highlights the importance of identifying the learner's needs and relating the support to the main areas of study.

Weak support for ESOL

Y was studying A-level mathematics and physics. Her tutor had referred her for support as she struggled in key skills and general studies lessons. Y coped quite well in mathematics and physics because she got help from another learner with the same first language who had much better skills in English. Y rarely asked or answered questions in class.

In her support sessions, Y worked through generic worksheets with her tutor on different aspects of grammar. The work was not related to Y's other studies and nor was the content of particular interest to her. She did not receive any help to improve her confidence in speaking English. There was no liaison between the support tutor and Y's other teachers.

On two occasions, Y had asked the support tutor for help with general studies questions. The first time, the support tutor corrected Y's spelling and punctuation errors in pencil and Y inked them in. On the second occasion, the support tutor provided the answer and Y copied it. The support tutor did not attempt to elicit any of the language or ideas from Y herself, and the syntax and vocabulary used did not link to any of Y's other work.

Y did not enjoy her support sessions and tried to find valid reasons to miss them, although she was pleased with the help that she was given with the general studies questions.

12. The most effective learning support tutors used a good range of resources and approaches, including learning technology. Homemade resources such as glossaries of technical terms translated into everyday language were also effective. One tutor, for instance, who worked with a learner who needed to keep his hands moving to help his concentration produced cards with algebraic symbols for him to hold.

Adapting resources

In one college, the learning support organiser for sport and public services arranged shared Intranet access to the faculty's resources. He planned his support sessions so that learners were prepared for the forthcoming activities and tasks on their main programme. He also adapted handouts, presentations and assignments in advance to ensure that they suited the learners' individual needs. Improvements suggested for the subject learning materials benefited the whole class.

In another college, the learning support tutor working in the catering department rewrote recipes and reformatted them to include pictures and symbols. Learners used them both in the literacy lesson and in the kitchens.

13. Whatever the mode of support, it was most effective if literacy, numeracy or language skills were developed in the context of appropriate activities.

Contextualising numeracy

Numeracy development was integrated very effectively into a series of carpentry lessons for learners with very few formal qualifications who were making hexagonal plant pot stands. The project had been very carefully planned with clear performance criteria for carpentry and numeracy skills at each stage. The carpentry tutor demonstrated and checked the use of handsaws, sanders and drills while the support tutor showed other learners how to use a protractor and a pair of compasses to produce the necessary scale drawings. The learners moved between the two tutors during the lesson. The learners had all failed at school and found mathematics difficult and boring but they concentrated hard to produce high quality scale drawings and enjoyed the work. One very enthusiastic learner reported: 'This isn't like maths – it's useful and I can do it.'

14. Teachers with both vocational and Skills for Life qualifications were being used effectively to ensure that any learning support was made relevant to the subject.

Dual-qualified teachers

One college had a growing core of teachers with both a vocational qualification and a level 4 Skills for Life teaching qualification. These teachers promoted the benefits of support very effectively to colleagues in their vocational area and helped the support tutors to produce relevant learning materials. These dual-qualified teachers also produced highly successful learning packs which integrated literacy/numeracy skills with vocational learning.

Vocational tutors in another college were studying for a range of Skills for Life teaching and teaching assistant qualifications. Learning support tutors worked towards qualifications in the vocational area where they provided support.

15. Initial assessment of the literacy, numeracy and language skills of adult and 16–18-year-old full-time learners, and part-time learners on substantive programmes, was standard in most of the GFE colleges visited. In five of the colleges, however, adult learners did not receive initial assessment. To receive support, they had to refer themselves or be referred by a tutor for learning support. Learners had often struggled for too long before being referred and the support arrived too late.
16. Initial assessment for 16–18-year-olds was weak in one of the sixth form colleges visited for the survey and was also weak in five of the sixth form colleges inspected in 2005/06. Some placed too much emphasis on GCSE English and mathematics grades which did not identify reliably whether a learner needed support or not.
17. Individual learning plans varied in quality and usefulness. Some were over complicated, took too much time to complete and were difficult to understand. Others contained negligible amounts of relevant information and were of little use. Good quality support was not always found where individual learning plans were of high quality, and vice versa.
18. Too much of the target-setting, monitoring and reviewing of the progress of support was weak. Although there were examples of very rigorous systems being consistently applied, in most of the colleges this remained an area for development. Monitoring and tracking were generally better when learners were receiving individual support. Tutors found it more difficult to record individuals' progress when they were monitoring a group of learners with diverse needs.

Simplifying the system for recording individual learners' progress

A college devised a simple system for recording learners' progress. The vocational teacher and support tutor agreed the goals for a group who needed support in vocational lessons. The support tutor tracked learners' progress via a simple grid with learners' names listed against five or six targets referenced to the appropriate core curriculum. When a learner started working towards a target, the tutor entered a '/' in the relevant column. The tutor marked significant progress with a " in the relevant box on the grid and, when the target had been met, the tutor added a '\'. A learner who had not started

working towards the target had no entry in the relevant box and a learner who had achieved the target had a 'Δ'.
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19. The best provision was adapted to the needs of all the different cohorts, including adults studying part-time, work-based learners and 14–16-year-olds. It was available in the evenings, at different college sites, at times convenient for learners and in a range of modes. Care was taken to match the type of support to learners' needs. In the best colleges, the support was reviewed and adjusted regularly. A shortage of specialist staff in some colleges, however, meant that learners had to wait too long for support, particularly for numeracy and ESOL.
20. The proportion of learners who received learning support after being identified as needing it varied widely from at least 95% of learners in three of the colleges visited to only 50% in two.
21. Many of the colleges visited actively promoted the availability and benefits of learning support in their pre-course guidance material, reinforcing the message effectively at interview and during induction. One college scheduled extra publicity to promote it at critical times in the year, for example, after learners had completed their first assignment. Personal tutors knew which learners had initially refused support and repeated the offer at appropriate times; they provided an important source of additional referrals throughout the year. Arrangements for self-referral were well publicised.
22. In the three colleges in the survey where progress was monitored most effectively, learners benefited from close liaison between learning support and personal or course tutors. Learning support tutors contributed to progress reviews and, in some colleges, were part of the course team and attended progress review meetings. Personal tutors knew of their learners' progress in support sessions and any problems such as poor attendance. Learning support was seen as an important and integral part of the programme of study.

Leadership and management

23. In the three colleges with the best provision, the principal and senior managers led a college-wide strategy for improving learners' literacy, numeracy and language skills. Learning support and other Skills for Life provision were well resourced. Their importance was recognised in all areas of the college. In one college, the governors also showed a keen interest. An annual report on learning support was presented to the corporation.
24. Colleges with successful provision had a clear management structure and good communication. Although their learning support teams were often spread across several college sites, all tutors, including part-time ones, were well informed and effectively supported and deployed. Particularly

effective managers held frequent meetings, supplemented by the effective use of the Intranet and email. However, in colleges where senior managers failed to provide enough support, provision was weak in at least some areas. Even where there was good support, it relied too heavily on small groups of staff and middle managers working in isolation.

Developing a successful college-wide strategy

The principal of a large GFE college had provided considerable resources for literacy, language and numeracy support and expected results. The college had set a target for 16–18-year-olds of an 80% pass rate within two years in the key skills of communication and application of number.

The strategy for developing support involved recruiting and training a team of 50 new staff. Senior managers formed part of interview panels for the posts. Staff involved in learning support, key skills and Skills for Life were relocated to form part of vocational teams based on their experience and qualifications. Each team decided how they would provide support, which was a mixture of one-to-one, fully integrated and 'in class' support. The learning support team leaders met weekly to share good practice, discuss any problems, plan and review.

Learning support was monitored closely with regular observations in lessons. The content and format of individual learning plans were audited, with feedback given to staff. The college provided a comprehensive range of professional development to learning support staff.

25. Continuing professional development was a key factor in improving learning support. In colleges with high quality learning support, staff shared good practice and were supported and encouraged to work towards appropriate Skills for Life teaching qualifications. Career paths for support workers were clear. Where learning support, key skills and Skills for Life were managed separately, staff from the different teams met regularly to share resources and expertise. Vocational tutors received staff development to help them contribute to developing the learners' literacy, numeracy and language skills; in some cases this included improving their own literacy and/or numeracy skills.
26. Colleges sometimes found it difficult to recruit appropriately trained and qualified staff, especially those with expertise in numeracy and ESOL. Some of the colleges therefore trained and developed staff themselves.

Recruiting staff

Having had little response to advertisements for staff in the Skills for Life area, a college re-evaluated its approach, revising advertisements, and when and where they were placed.

The revised advertisements appeared locally and nationally. They promised high quality training and clear career progression routes for applicants with a good general education and potential. Training to subject specialist level 4 was offered in the college's own Skills for Life professional development centre. Salaries were linked to applicants' qualifications and vocational experience. The

college received 1500 applications. Senior managers were fully involved in the rigorous selection and interview process, which included testing applicants' literacy and numeracy skills.

Developing existing staff

One large GFE college had a comprehensive, college-wide strategy that ensured all staff involved in literacy, numeracy or ESOL teaching and/or support gained an appropriate Skills for Life teaching qualification. All the learning support tutors were working towards or had achieved a level 4 subject specialist qualification. Vocational staff were working towards qualifications at level 3. Tutors saw the strategy as an endorsement of their work. It had had a positive effect on the quality of learning support at the college.

27. In colleges where quality assurance of learning support was good, all aspects of provision were reviewed. Learning support tutors were observed as part of the process of lesson observation, given appropriate feedback and expected to produce action plans. Learners' feedback contributed effectively to colleges' self-assessment reports and planning. Data were used to measure the effectiveness, the take-up and the time taken to provide appropriate support. If action was needed, this was taken promptly.

Analysing performance effectively

A GFE college had been systematically analysing the performance of learners receiving support for a number of years. The data were used to promote the benefits of such support to learners and staff. The data also highlighted any cohort of learners for whom the learning support was working especially well or not working effectively. The learning support team compared the retention, achievement and success rates of learners receiving learning support with the performance of all learners at the college and against national benchmarks. They analysed the data by gender, ethnicity, age, level and programme area and presented the analysis to the team and senior managers.

The data clearly showed learners benefited from support. In 2004/05, of the learners who needed and accepted support, 77% passed their main course. This figure fell to only 54% for those who withdrew from support. Of those who accepted support, only 5% dropped out of their main course but 29% who withdrew from support left college early.

Establishing performance indicators

A college established a set of performance indicators to help assess the effectiveness of learning support, including:

- the percentage of learners taking up support
- the attendance, retention and success rates for learners receiving support
- the cost of learning per learner.

These data were used as part of the college's quality assurance. The college had contacted other local colleges asking them to record similar data so that

they could establish local averages. Data collected had already highlighted the low take-up of support by male learners on public services courses. Successful strategies to improve their participation included sensitive timetabling of learning support sessions and promoting the benefits of support in a focused way

28. Few of the colleges visited collected and analysed data systematically to help evaluate the effectiveness of their learning support. Too often, the self-assessment reports were descriptive rather than evaluative, with no evidence to support the identified strengths and weaknesses.

Notes

29. The survey was carried out to evaluate the quality of direct learning support in colleges and to identify examples of good practice. Inspectors from Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate visited 29 colleges across the country in the autumn of 2005 and the spring of 2006. The colleges were chosen because their Skills for Life provision had been graded good or better at their last inspection. Visits lasted one or two days. Inspectors interviewed managers, teachers, learning support assistants and learners. They also observed lessons, looked at learners' work and scrutinised documentation.
30. This report also draws on evidence from college inspections carried out in 2005/06. Learning support is reported as part of the inspection of the quality of provision. In the colleges where the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) sector/subject area 'Preparation for life and work' was inspected, learning support was evaluated in more detail. It is important to note that areas of learning are inspected only in colleges which have been judged to be satisfactory or inadequate.

Further information

Literacy, numeracy and English for speakers of other languages: a survey of current practice in post-16 and adult provision (HMI 1367), Ofsted, 2003.

Skills for Life in colleges: one year on (HMI 2458), Ofsted, 2005.

Details of relevant teaching qualifications can be found on the DfES website at: www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/qualityandtraining.

Annex: colleges visited for the survey

Basingstoke College of Technology

Brooksby Melton College

Bury College

Cambridge Regional College

City College Manchester

City of Westminster College

Dearne Valley College

East Berkshire College

Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College

Harlow College

Huddersfield Technical College

Knowsley Community College

Lancaster and Morecambe College

New College, Nottingham

Newcastle College

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Peterborough Regional College

Ridge Danyers College (now Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College)

Somerset College of Arts and Technology

South East Essex College of Arts and Technology

Southwark College

New College Stamford

Stoke-on-Trent College

Totton College

West Nottinghamshire College

Wigan and Leigh College

Wiltshire College

Woking College

Yeovil College