

New College Stamford



Mel's Story

This Case Study demonstrates how a learner with severe autism has been supported to succeed and progress within the college onto a degree level programme.

It highlights the key successes and positive ways of working with the learner, as well as addressing some of the challenges there have been for the college.

New College Stamford

New College Stamford is a small general further education college that serves a mainly rural area and is situated at the southernmost point of Lincolnshire.

The college is located within a mile of three other county boundaries and recruits around half of its full-time learners from Peterborough, Rutland, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire.

The college's core business is vocational education with the majority of its further education provision funded by the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA). The college now offers provision in all 15 subject areas.

The majority of learners are aged 16 to 18 and study on full-time programmes. Around 5% of all learners study on entry level programmes, around 13% at foundation level, 31% at intermediate level and 26% at advanced level, with the remainder on programmes classified as „other“ level. Some degree level courses are offered.

The college has approximately 1800 learners, with 752 learners declaring a learning difficulty or disability – 42% of all learners.

The college has a discrete provision provisions for 74 learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities.

About the learner

Mel is a learner with autism and a severe social phobia.

Her school background has been difficult – yrs. 7 and 8 she was educated at home, yr. 9 she attended mornings only and often only in a discrete provision and yr. 10 and 11 she attended some lessons with support, achieving some GCSEs.

Mel's home life has been stressful. Her parents have separated and her Mum has on-going problems with ill health, sometimes requiring hospitalisation.

History in college

Mel started in college on a National Diploma in Photography in September 2008. Prior to starting she came into college with Mum to be shown around and had an interview with the manager of Additional Learning Support (ALS).

The manager of ALS wrote a pen profile of Mel detailing the support she should be given. (Included as appendix 1, Pen profile of Mel). This support was agreed in conjunction with Mel and her mother.

Initially Mel was supported full time at college to include all lunch times, breaks and toilet visits. In the mornings her mother would have to accompany her into the building.

Mel completed this course well – with little academic support needed. The support which was required related to enabling Mel to go into and remain in lessons, cope with unstructured times of the day, manage any changes, and to speak in class. She also required some support in interpreting and understanding spoken language and non-verbal communication such as gesture and body language.

In September 2010 Mel started on a Foundation Degree in Lens Based Media at the college. Mel and her mother did not feel that she would be able to cope with going away to university and that doing this degree at the college offered a good opportunity for Mel. Mel claimed and received the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) which funds her transport to and from college and a learning support assistant (or as DSA call it – a Non – Medical Helper).

The college also employed an autism specialist in 2009, who meets with Mel regularly and does some 1:1 work on social anxieties and understanding, as well as negotiating new targets with Mel during the day.

The Autism Specialist, Mel's main LSA and the Course Coordinator have weekly meetings to discuss Mel's progress and any concerns – this has been very beneficial and enabled everyone to know exactly what is happening and how best to address issues.

The third year of the Foundation Degree takes place at Lincoln University – Mel has decided to apply for this and a staff member from the college will be supporting her at interview.

Key Successes

- Mel now walks in herself from the car to an agreed meeting point with her LSA
- Mel will now find the Autism Specialist if she is stressed or concerned about anything.
- Mel has been actively involved in planning her support the whole time she has been in college. Mel will tell staff what support she thinks she needs and a negotiation will then take place. This is largely due to the fact that Mel's autism and personality means that she will resist trying new things – any targets that are put in place for new things are always agreed with Mel, often after explaining clearly why they might be important, although they are seldom initiated by Mel.
- Mel is now unsupported at break and lunchtimes - she finds her way to the Learning Support Centre where we have a quiet area for students to eat and eats there.

- Mel has struck up a tentative friendship with a young man with autism and she has even asked him to be a model in one of her photography project.
- Staff now know Mel well enough to be able to calm her down if she is distressed and re focus her. Whilst contact between Mum and college is still good, staff talk more to Mel about plans and issues than with Mum – this has been supported by the use of effective electronic contacts with Mel: emails, blogs, texts and so on
- Mel has managed to go to London to the V&A museum supported by the Autism Specialist. Mel had never been on any school or college trips prior to this or indeed anywhere unknown to her without her mother. The trip was very positive.
- During the critiques of photos in lessons Mel has been set a target, that she now regularly achieves, of asking and answering 3 questions - previously she would not speak in a class setting.
- Application to Lincoln University for final year of Foundation Degree – staff supporting at interview.
- Autism Specialist attends multi agency meetings allowing college better insight into Mel's life and enabling more accurate support and targets.

Challenges for the college

- To identify appropriate members of staff to support Mel – some staff found it didn't suit them or there were personality conflicts. Success has been achieved with a degree of trial and error.
- To maintain consistency of staff at all times – there is now a main LSA with an identified responsibility to stand in for illness or absence and other roles and responsibilities are juggled to facilitate this.
- To balance the need and desire for Mum to be heavily involved with giving Mel as much independence as is possible and appropriate.
- To have the flexibility required to be able to provide both the time and the level of support necessary when 'meltdowns' occur.
- To help mainstream teaching staff – particularly in Higher Education to understand and meet Mel's needs, which are significant. This has largely been achieved through effective CPD training in autism and weekly meetings with ALS and curriculum staff.

What Mel says

"Learning support has made it so I can go to college by having someone with me to help me understand and to get about. They help me understand what the briefs mean. They encourage me to do things I didn't want to do like answering or asking questions to get to where I want to be and I think that's good"

What Mum says

“When Mel left her secondary school I was advised that to go to college was too big a step for her, but I had confidence in the offers from New College Stamford and what they would provide for her. Without New College Stamford, Mel would not have had a future. Now she has the chance of a future career that she enjoys and they have helped to develop her personality, but none of this would have been achieved without the care, support, kindness and thoughts of the college. They have supported her in every way that she has needed it, whilst enabling her to become as self-reliant as possible.

The staff are always consistent, they are always reliable, they liaise well with the student and parent if required. This is enabling Mel to attend the lectures, comprehend the lectures and extend her further to be able to go on trips beyond the college environment which before she would never have had the confidence to undertake.”

What the LSA says

I use specific strategies with Mel, for instance

- Everything is written down for her - lists with times, things to do, when to do them and in order. Any work that is to be done is also written down.
- Regular communication with the Autism specialist.
- Regular meetings (every week) with the Course lecturer.
- Regular meetings with selected members of her peer group.
- Communication with students' immediate family.

My skills are:-

- Patience but being firm when required.
- Understanding of student and autism.
- Understanding of student's difficulties and problems.
- A good knowledge of the student.
- Reliability, punctuality and good attendance.
- Listening skills - listen to the student but don't offer an opinion.
- Reliability.
- Not being afraid to ask if I need help.
- CPD training.
- Studied and researched Autistic Spectrum, Asperger's, and other difficulties/disabilities for my Degree. (used student with Autism for research project and module on differentiation)
- Sign Language- I have found this a great help when student is in panic or upset mode, as she has to look at me when I speak to her.