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Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education Improving success rates for ESOL learners

Summary

Following the issue of a minimum level of performance Notice to Improve due to low success rates on short courses for ESOL learners the service requested support from the LSIS Improvement Adviser Service to look at ways to improve the whole learner experience from initial contact through to undertaking an exam. The adviser worked closely with the Community Skills Development Officer and the Curriculum Development Officer (CDO) for ESOL to review all aspects of the provision. The commitment of staff and their passion to bring about improvements resulted in a revised initial advice and guidance process; new initial and diagnostic assessments; a bank of individual learner targets with accompanying underpinning small steps to achievement; improved teaching and learning and improved success rates. The Notice to Improve was lifted.

About Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education (ACE)

Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education (ACE) provides a wide range of courses to approximately 6,000 students each year. It works closely with community organisations and other teams within the council to deliver learning matched to local needs. All courses are part-time and take place in a variety of community venues including libraries and flexible learning centres over a geographically wide area. The great majority of teaching staff are part-time.

The challenge

Following a period of successful support from LSIS in 2008 the service requested a second package of support to look at the issues impacting on success rates in ESOL. The great majority of staff delivering ESOL sessions were part-time, in many cases only working for a few hours a week. The challenge was to provide them with support which would enable standards to rise consistently across the wide geographical area the service covers. Any new processes and procedures feeding into quality improvement measures which were to be introduced had to be clear, easily implemented and as self-explanatory as possible to enable the tutors to use them with minimum coaching from senior staff. An additional challenge was to ensure that ESOL learners at lower levels of ability could fully understand their individual learning plan (ILP) targets and could benefit from initial advice and guidance, assessment and review documentation in a format which was meaningful to them.

ESOL learners provide a unique challenge in that they are frequently only temporarily resident in an area. In order for this not to have a negative impact

on retention and success rates it was necessary to revisit most aspects of the learner journey and to consider how to maximise learners' understanding of what an ESOL course covers and the need to commit to remaining on course long enough to take an exam.

The activity

The activity focused on a full review of ESOL delivery and took place in conjunction with senior managers and the Curriculum Development Officer for ESOL

A review of initial advice and guidance procedures led to the provider changing the process to accommodate the specific needs of ESOL learners by using simple language and sentence structure within a power point presentation to ensure they were fully informed of what would be expected of them should they choose to enrol. It emphasised the service's expectation that learners would commit to remain on course for the full duration of the programme.

A revision of the initial and diagnostic assessment process led to them being rewritten to ensure the questions and activities contained within them were far more closely linked to the skills learners would be expected to demonstrate during their course and final examination. The results of these assessments led to very clear and accurate indicators of learning need. Staff were then able to use them to set the first set of learner targets within their individual learning plans.



The Curriculum Development Organiser for ESOL produced a bank of very comprehensive learner targets covering all levels from foundation through to advanced. These were accompanied by a set of underpinning small steps to achievement. They were written in language appropriate to the learners' level of ability and focused closely on the language skills they needed to improve. The new targets enabled learners to see exactly what they needed to do to progress.

The outcomes

Outcomes from the support led to learners having a clear understanding, from their very first contact with the service, of what they could expect from the provision and the requirements of their own commitment to studying and remaining on the course for the duration.

The new assessment process generated a clear picture of the areas a learner needed to develop.

Two targets were set at initial assessment, before a learner joined a class, and were available to tutor and learner from their very first lesson with the service; two further targets were set after in-class diagnostic assessment. The bank of targets at entry level were particularly valued by delivery staff who had been struggling with the problem of how best to write meaningful targets for learners at lower levels of ability. Staff teaching at all levels were able to see how they could use the targets to provide differentiated learning experiences while still following a group functional theme such as visiting a doctor or going shopping. In turn this supported their writing of lesson plans and the reviewing of learning. As the targets were written in learner-friendly language it meant that learners took far more ownership for their learning and were better able to review their own progress at the end of each session. The fact that the targets were contained within a bank allowed staff to choose those most appropriate for their learners. The target bank guidelines emphasised the importance of adjusting the targets to meet individual learner needs. It also meant that should teachers or learners wish to write their own targets they had a large range to refer to for guidance and support. Targets and language acquisition skills were linked to ESOL Core Curriculum references for ease of use.

The impact

Success rates improved by 12 percentage points in the first year of the new system.

Retention improved significantly as learners were clear as to what they were signing up to and the need to stay for the full duration of a course.

The observation of teaching and learning process noted a greatly improved focus on meeting the needs of the individual learner in lesson planning; delivery; the use of the individual learning plan and learners' ability to review their own progress.

Marianne Grace, Community Skills Development Officer said 'The support gave us the opportunity to focus on our ESOL provision. We were able to look at the whole learner journey and to see how we could improve it through using the expertise of the adviser.'

Helen Martin, Curriculum Development Organiser said 'The most important thing for us was that the adviser highlighted the need to use fully accessible language and to ensure language acquisition skills were reflected in the targets. It shifted the way we thought and continues to have an impact in the classroom and on success rates. The support started something which we continue to refine.'

The lessons learned

The service realised that although a culture of sharing best practice existed it was necessary to implement additional support mechanisms and processes for ESOL learners and staff to overcome language and cultural barriers that were impacting on ESOL success rates.

Staff felt supported to deliver individualised learning. Through the use of the target bank they felt confident to write individual learning plans and to promote their use as an additional learning resource to their learners. This in turn

helped to foster a culture of independent study and review in the learners themselves.

The use of a bank of targets, adapted according to subject area and level, can be shared across other areas of the provision to support staff to deliver truly individualised learning.

The idea can be used by other providers who can write their own target bank according to need.

Useful links

Milton Keynes Adult Continuing Education website

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk

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