

Strode College

Learning Support Case Study



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Sharing effective practice to move thinking forward relating to ‘support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability’.

Introduction

Strode College is a small rural general further education college set in the heart of Somerset that offers programmes from entry level to foundation degrees. The college curriculum caters for learners from the age of 14-19, adult learners, apprenticeships, and a thriving business development initiative responding to local employer needs and offering professional qualifications.

Aim

The aim of this project was to look at how the college engages with all learners by ‘challenging low expectations’ through the Learning Support Team and to share it’s experience with others, through the Excellence Gateway.

Approach

The college has been congratulated for its approach to learner support by many students and external observers over a number of years. Learning Support has clear systems and approach to support a smooth transition to college, alerting relevant members of staff to potential support requirements and needs. The College also has a clear procedure for supporting students whilst on programme. The Accessibility Statement captures the essence of the types of support available to meet individual needs and preferences, (Appendix One). Should a student have unidentified needs there is an internal referral system which utilises the intranet to aid speed and efficiency.

The systems in place have served the students and college well over a number of years. Support Plans are created for each student during their first contact with the Learning Support Team, if appropriate.

A survey was completed to enable us to understand what students, staff and manager’s value about learning support and how it enabled them to be successful. It is clear from the results that the Learning Support service does challenge low attainment and expectations.

Key Strengths of Learning Support at Strode College

The feedback received from Staff, Students and Learning Support from across the college is detailed below.

- ✓ The feedback around transition is very positive with students receiving help for the first time. The Learning Support Team attends all the transition reviews that take place in schools that they are invited to.
- ✓ Learning Support reflects personal needs and is more adult in its' approach. The consistency is appreciated, as is privacy confidentiality and respect.
- ✓ Students felt support helps to:
 - Complete assignments
 - Increase understanding of subject matter
 - Increase independence
 - Improve quality of student work
 - Keep students on track
 - Keep organised, motivated lessens opportunity to be distracted
 - Increase confidence
 - Find safe places to go in the college
 - Lessen panics and feelings of being overwhelmed
- ✓ It is best practice that when students are allocated support staff that the Learning Support Assistant has relevant and subject specific knowledge. It is felt that this helps in the provision of a professional service for students and teaching staff. It was reported that this match directly impacts on the successful completion of a qualification.
- ✓ Learning support stop students dropping out of their studies
- ✓ Information on the intranet about each type of learning difficulty is a good guide
- ✓ Meeting with Learning support regularly helps to identify where further support and teaching input is required
- ✓ Flexible and resourceful approach to supporting individuals learning needs
- ✓ Continuous training to address global and specific needs
- ✓ The 'amber alert ' system which picks up potential individual support needs following disclosure by new applicants on their application forms, networking and enquiries, enables early assessment (Appendix 1)
- ✓ Dedicated counselling team
- ✓ Effective signposting to support services
- ✓ Training opportunities for all staff to enable effective support of student need.

Quotes from Students, Staff and Managers

'I was treated with the upmost respect and my supporters maintained this even when I had tough times. I was treated as an individual, which was important, as I was living independently and I feel I was dealt with as professionally as possible'.

'without learning support this year, two of my students would have left'

'because of the nature of the students ability and the range, without help nothing would be achieved'

'Make me feel proud of my achievements'

'Cheer me up and makes me work harder'

'complete my assignments and not fall behind and I will hopefully pass the course'

'For most students receiving support it is important and relevant as they would not achieve their grades or their full potential without it, as many cannot work with out support. It prevents students dropping out of college without any qualifications'.

'students have specific individual needs, often complex, of which all aren't identified initially; therefore having support or access to support is essential for confidence building and to encourage them to reach their potential in a supportive and positive environment'.

Feedback that informs future practice

- We need to remember that in order to support a student that the support needs reflect what it is that students are trying to achieve.
- When planning support and allocation of it that resources both human and equipment needs to be consistent in its delivery availability and access.
- Having full information about an individual's learning needs aids a smooth transition into college and their learning. As a learning support service we need to ensure that information is collected and shared having gained permission and disclosure.
- To improve communication using the technologies and systems available
- To further promote independent learning, study guides should be freely available to help improve the service to students who don't want to attend or who can't access the Study Skills Service for other reasons.
- Pressure at the beginning of term means that information about students may not be necessarily communicated effectively. However this does rely on tutors reading information available on student personal files. The Learning Support Team are undertaking some more work about how best to influence tutors to read student files.
- Students value different types of services depending on their level of need

Next Steps

- Curriculum teams have been encouraged to assess their student's needs as early as possible. It is clear that for students who have been identified either at interview or enrolment through the amber alert system that their needs are provided for. However assessments for exam concessions tend to be slower especially for students who are identified on programme or are following non-examined courses. Late identification that there may be a problem, by the academic teams, can hinder student's chances of being successful. The learning support team are working more closely with tutors to try to rectify this by ensuring that each team are clear about referral systems before the academic year begins. A short presentation is delivered to each of the academic teams.
- Transferring information from schools to college is a national issue and therefore an interesting situation. Constant networking, attending forums and 14+ review meetings, liaising with schools and the Connexions Service does improve the transfer of information, but Data Protection is an issue that prevents some organisations from sharing information without specific permissions. Parents and the young person are often oblivious to the fact that schools have useful information and details of assessments. Young people during interviews will often say that they have been tested for dyslexia on a computer but don't know what the outcome was. Others will say that they have been given extra time in exams but don't know why! The Learning Support Team will continue to raise this with colleagues and at meetings to push for a county protocol to share information to improve the situation and students chances of success in post 16 education.
- Many students come to college having had their needs ignored or because there are no protocols for transferring information their needs are not known. Early identification can make the difference between success and failure. We know that the national average for success for students with learning difficulties and disabilities runs at 80%. The college meets this national bench mark but wants to improve success rate for these students. The team will be looking at other ways of identifying student needs and increase the distribution of Student Information Update Report which is currently sent to organisations of students who are not in mainstream school.
- The Learning Support team will be working with the College Information Systems Team to look at how the current monitoring system tracks student progress and how it can include learning support records to aid personal tutors and students alike.