

New College Stamford

Working effectively with learners to support achievement

This case study explores:

- How we work with learners to identify support needs and plan appropriate learning support.
- How this support impacts on achievement and learners destinations and challenges low expectations.

About the college

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 for learners with more pronounced learning difficulties and disabilities of 74 learners.

Process of identifying need

Students are invited to declare a learning difficulty or disability on their application form for mainstream courses – if they do this then a separate interview is arranged for them to discuss their support needs. This meeting is held by one of the Additional Learning Support Team – (if the student has dyslexia or autism then the meeting will be with a relevant specialist).

The Learning Support Meeting is always started by saying to the student

‘This meeting is to discuss what support you would like, what you had at school and what worked for you and what didn’t’.

In our experience the students are often very clear about what worked for them and what didn’t.

All learners for the discrete provision are assessed in their present learning environments as are complex learners for mainstream. This assessment also includes identifying what the student enjoys and how they believe they can be supported.

Students are presented with options of the kind of support they might like – although they are made aware that this can be re-evaluated at any time at the request of staff, student or parents.

Types of Support Available

LiveScribe pen – this is an amazing little gadget. A student need only write key words on special dot matrix paper and the pen will record whatever is being said when that word is being written. So with only writing a few key words or symbols, the student has access to a whole lecture which they can download onto an MP3 player and transcribe into writing. We use these pens for students who wish to be independent but find writing notes difficult. It is particularly useful for our students who have dyslexia or dyspraxia.

My Study Bar – this is a package of various applications to support a variety of study skills which include: mind mapping; organisation and planning tools; text reader, screen tints and magnifiers and voice recognition software.

The application is available on all our computers at college and since it is free to download, students are able to use exactly the same applications at home. We are able to train students in using the programmes effectively and then they are able to work independently with the option of coming down to the Study Centre for further information or support at any time.

Learning Support Assistant – this can vary from someone needing pastoral and emotional support, reader, scribe or someone to differentiate the work. The student will usually decide if the LSA sits with them or is just present in the classroom for when they need them.

Learning Support Mentor - students can book hourly slots to see a Learning Support Mentor once a week. Support may focus on literacy or maths skills. The aim is to make the learning relevant to the student by linking skills closely to the chosen subject area but without being totally subject-specific. The aim is always to encourage progress towards independence. An Individual Learning Plan is drawn up with the student where SMART targets are agreed and each lesson for 10 weeks will be linked to those targets. These are then reviewed and discussed. The student will discuss whether they find the support effective or whether there is an alternative method which may be more beneficial to their progress. Obviously the support is flexible and if a review is needed prior to the 10 week deadline, then it will be carried out sooner.

Dyslexia specialist - the dyslexia specialist is able to carry out dyslexia assessments. She also works with students on a 1:1 basis to help support their literacy needs. The students allocated her support will generally be those with more complex needs. It may be recommended that a student see the Educational Psychologist if further information and guidance is required.

Autism specialist – any students on the Autistic Spectrum are seen by our autism specialist. This may be a one off session or a session which is put into a weekly timetable. Any student who is experiencing difficulties may come down and seek her specialist advice.

There is also a form for students who decide that they want to refuse support.

Some students decide to declare a learning difficulty later on in the year – often when they are beginning to struggle – and the same system will be put into place then.

What a Learner says

“I didn’t want support at first - I thought I was doing alright anyway. Then I realised that I was getting a bit behind and was getting into trouble and wanted to sort it out. I spent a long time with the Language and Communication Co-ordinator talking about the kind of support which might help and now I come down to the Study Centre each week to chat about how I’m getting on and if there’s anything that’s winding me up. I know that I’ve got problems with my anger and she listens to me without being biased and helps me see things differently. She talks to my parents and my lecturers about what’s going on and helps sort things out. I have an LSA in class now too and she helps me to keep focussed and get through the work. Sometimes I find it a bit annoying but most of the time it’s good to have someone there or I don’t think I’d still be on the course. I want to go to university so I’ve got to do really well here. I think now that I’ve recognised that I’ve got a problem, it’s a lot better.”

Individual Learning plans (ILPs)

For the students in the discrete provision ILPs are particularly important and will detail their learning support needs.

This year we have started to use Person Centre Learning Support Plans from the Helen Sanderson website: with Entry 3 and Level 1 learners within the discrete provision. These encourage these learners to think about where they want to end up, how they are going to get there and what help they may need to achieve this.

When working with Learning Support Mentors SMART targets are agreed with the learner – the learner identifies the skills they would like to improve and these are the skills targeted.

On-going Evaluation

Staff – either Additional Learning Support Staff (ALS) or Teaching Staff – or students can discuss a need to alter support whenever necessary.

This will often happen by curriculum staff calling a meeting if they feel a student is struggling or by the student coming to talk to staff in the ALS Team.

If students return for a second or subsequent year then their needs are automatically re assessed – this is all recorded on the bespoke ALS data base.

What changes have been made to improve the quality of support provided?

- We specifically ask students (rather than teachers or parents) at their ALS interview 'What type of support worked for you in school?'
- Students are encouraged to ask for help when they need it and if they feel they are fine the LSA is now asked to step back – whereas before an LSA often felt they were allocated to a student and so should be supporting all the time.
- We are more willing, with curriculum staff, to let a learner try something without support – their way – and fail if that is the case – before discussing extra support. Some learners insist they don't want support and allowing them to do this has resulted in an improvement in the self-recognition of support needs.
- The college has employed 2 specific specialists (autism and dyslexia) meaning that some students are now coping without support in class but seeking help, using the open door policy that these staff have, when they need it. In the past some students would have been given LSA support 'just in case'.
- More focus has been placed on the development of ILPs with Entry 3 and Level 1 students in the discrete provision. This has made them more focussed on their goals and although progression was already high (84%) this has seen more of the students ask for and take up additional numeracy and literacy sessions.
- Some learners who work 1:1 with the specialist are helped to identify realistic goals and how to achieve them in terms of destinations. For example the dyslexia specialist can help with Disabled Students' Allowance Applications for University and this year the Autism Specialist has helped one young man identify that he wants to do an Open University degree instead of going away to University.