

Practitioner-led research: 'keeping them warm' – turning college interview offers into enrolments

At New College Nottingham, one tutor's initiative led to a college-wide project to support its new learners. Yvonne Richards, head of school, Entry and Foundation at New College wanted to build up new learners' confidence and self-esteem before they started college to make the transition from school to college easier and less daunting for everyone involved. It also significantly increased the rate of conversion from interview to enrolment.

What did the initiative involve?

Yvonne helped to develop a 'keeping them warm' programme which lasted for two days prior to the new term starting in September. It involved learners studying for an Exploring Enterprise Award, which contained generic elements useful to all learners, including team working, plus specific objectives for their chosen curriculum area. Involving learners in the planning and preparation of the programme was a key part of the scheme, so a focus group of learners was involved in its development.

Student mentors were also introduced to the programme. Known as 'buddies', these students were trained in communication skills, mentoring and professionalism. Their role was to help the new learners by getting involved in the activities and games during ice-breaker sessions. More importantly, perhaps, they were able to offer a student perspective to the new learners who could talk to them about college life. This proved to be a popular aspect to the programme, as the new learners could ask the buddies things that they felt uncomfortable discussing with tutors.

Yvonne explains, "It was important to ensure that buddies were matched to their respective learner in terms of ethnicity or gender to make sure all new learners would feel comfortable talking to that person". The programme contained a number of activities which had to be carefully thought out depending on the type of learner involved. "We were keen to ensure that the activities were fun, but not childish, as we were concerned that learners would feel patronised and therefore gain the wrong impression of what it was like to be a college student".

The impact of the programme

All 468 learners who attended the programme achieved the qualification and were genuinely positive about the experience. One commented for example, "It was fun playing the games and we really had a laugh. It made me feel a lot more confident about coming in September because I knew my way around". And learners who had attended the programme were far more likely to enrol for their programme in September than those who hadn't

(86 per cent compared to 53 per cent). The effect of this on the organisation was that the cross college conversion factor from interview to enrolment for 08/09 was 77 per cent, compared with 55 per cent for 07/08.

Staff members also felt that they benefited from building effective relationships with the learners and having some knowledge of them as individuals before enrolment.

The buddies also gained from the experience. They commented, for example, "I now look at people in a different way and judge people individually...I feel more confident dealing with group discussion and this has helped during my first year at university". The performance of the buddies in this programme was so effective that the college is now keen for them to be involved in other duties, such as acting as tour guides during open evenings, and acting as mentors for students who may be at risk of dropping out of college.



Playing games such as this during the programme made the learners feel more confident

Take action

Many providers run pre-enrolment and induction support programmes. If you liked Yvonne's approach, why not:

- find out from your learners if anything came out of the blue for them when they began your course? Was there anything they felt unprepared for or which made them feel uneasy? They might have some ideas on how you can design pre-course and induction to ensure a smoother entry.
- develop new ice-breaker activities with your learners – you might involve some more experienced learners to run ice-breakers with new cohorts.

Yvonne's inquiry work was supported by the research laboratory sites project run by CUREE on behalf of LSIS. A fuller summary of Yvonne's work will be published shortly on LSIS's research website.