

National Improvement Strategy: improving learner success rates

Learner success rates (the extent to which learners successfully complete their programmes and progress to a positive destination) are seen as key indicators of provider effectiveness. High quality teaching and learning experiences are, of course, vital for success but what more can be done? According to a recent review of evidence in support of the National Improvement Strategy (NIS), activities such as monitoring, providing support for learners and working out how to enhance learner (and staff) motivation were important too.

Factors that contributed to high quality teaching and learning included:

- planning activities that take account of learners' needs, wants, aspirations, barriers and capacities
- checking learners' understanding and providing feedback on the learning undertaken, and
- learners as well as tutors evaluating teaching and learning activities.



Monitoring achievements

The research identified by the review shows the importance of having all learners' achievements systematically and accurately recorded on a centralised database. Tutors who are encouraged to monitor the data routinely often find they understand its value and use in both improving

and demonstrating standards. A traffic light system for spotting disparities (between ethnic groups and gender for example) and addressing them quickly often helped improve achievement and success. Having clear, measurable, attainable, yet challenging targets for learners was often helpful too. The research points to the value of reviewing learners' progress frequently during review meetings specifically designed for the purpose. When achievements are recorded in ways that show how they relate to the learner's overall progress, such reviews have been shown to motivate learners. Feedback is very important too so that learners can be encouraged to reflect on their own progress and experiences.

Providing support for learners

Many learners receive little academic support from family or friends, so the quality of the support they receive from providers is important. But learners have frequently reported feeling they need to ask for help before they get any. Some are more willing to do this than others. Yet providing support is important even before enrolment. This review of evidence highlights the importance of getting prospective learners on to courses that are right for them, so the quality and accessibility of pre-enrolment information is critical. Other forms of support that have been found to help include buddy

schemes that have enabled learners to integrate into college life more effectively during the first few weeks. (You may find it helpful to read the article on page 9 of this issue which describes how one tutor supported learners from interview to enrolment).

Enhancing motivation

Different learners are motivated to study by different factors – no one size fits all. In some studies, learners showed they valued employment opportunities. Their commitment was enhanced when they were helped to understand the opportunities open to them if they completed their courses and to see how their courses were related to their aspirations. But others, such as unemployed learners improving their basic skills, saw employment as a longer term goal and valued the wider benefits of learning instead. For such learners, 1:1 attention and support, a relaxed and friendly learning environment, learning at the right pace and a safe place to ask questions were particularly valued. Young learners studying levels 1 and 2 on the other hand, appreciated tutors having time to explain work, being treated as adults, and tutors boosting their confidence.

For all learners, e-learning has been found to create a sense of engagement, excitement and involvement and to promote retention through improving communication between learners and tutors.

Motivation of the teaching staff themselves also emerged, not surprisingly as, an important element in strategies to improve learner success. There is plenty of evidence that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) can be highly motivational for staff. Effective approaches to CPD include action research, the observation of teaching and learning, and coaching and mentoring.

Take action

Is your monitoring activity as linked to improving learner motivation as it could be? Could you:

- conduct regular reviews with your learners to help motivate them and monitor their achievements?
- take a more active role in recording learners' achievements on a centralised database and use the data to both demonstrate and improve success rates?
- carry out your own research to explore issues raised by this article, such as learner support mechanisms or what motivates your learners?

Evidence source

Review of evidence in support of the National Improvement Strategy Theme 8: Success rate disparities for different learner groups.

The researchers produced 'catalogues' of themed research evidence relevant to the learning and skills sector in England. Materials from other sectors and countries were not included. All the materials selected were quality assured.