

Progression pathways for learners experiencing mental health problems

Case Study: College of North West London

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Background information

The College of North West London (CNWL) is one of the largest education colleges in the UK having approximately 12,000 students and 700 staff. It has two major centres in North West London: Willesden & Wembley site. The college provides a wide variety of courses to students. The learning programme includes:

- Faculty of Arts, Community and Leisure Studies (ACLS)
- Faculty of Business and Computing (B&C)
- Faculty of Technology (Technology) -
- Faculty of Skills for Life (SFL)

CNWL's past experience of working with mental health learners

Over the years the percentage of students with mental health needs attending college has increased. Through the Learning Support Department each student is supported by working in collaboration with Brent Community Mental Health Team (BCMHT). This involved a staff member from the BCMHT being seconded to work in the college on a yearly basis as a Mental Health Coordinator from 2006-2009. The post was made permanent in 2010.

CNWL's previous experience of developing progression pathways for mental health learners

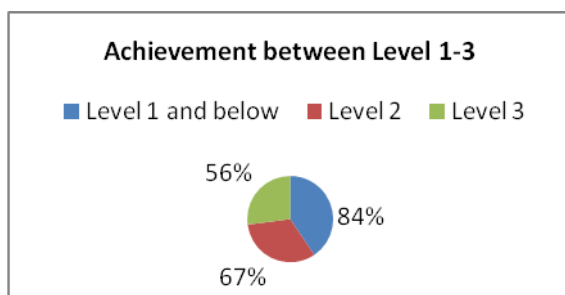
Throughout the year 2010-11 all faculties referred students to the Learning Support Department who required mental health support. Each student was assessed and support needs identified. This included working in partnership with Community Mental Health Teams, G.Ps, Consultants and other organisations involved in that individual student's care. Weekly one-to-one support is offered to students by a Mental Health Link Worker to monitor their progress in class and to identify specific support needs during progression. There has been an increase of

referrals for students disclosing mental health diagnosis year-on- year to our current level reaching approximately 80+ and will continue to increase throughout the year to approximately 100.

Purpose of project

The project can be broken into two parts:

1. This project involved investigating whether CNWL promotes mental health awareness within the college faculties overall and whether it impacted on student learner's with mental health difficulties.
2. The project also involved investigating the success rates for students at Level 3 who disclose mental health difficulties within CNWL. Although students succeed well at the lower levels in achieving and moving on to further studies at a higher level, particularly L3, students are less likely to succeed. The chart below illustrates the overall percentage of achievement for Level 1 and below, levels 2 and 3 for 2009-2010.



Methodology

I have chosen to conduct my research using mixed methods. This involved using quantitative and qualitative data using surveys and experimental research strategies. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used to acquire data to be analysed.

Results

Focus Groups

The groups were divided into two: Level 1 & below and Level 2/3. There were five students within each group.

- Results revealed that most students within both groups thought the College of North West London played a major role in promoting mental health awareness within the

college, as they felt supported to cope with their mental health difficulties, while on their course.

- They considered the approach to be discreet, minimising discrimination and stigmatisation by other students and tutors, if they knew they had a mental health disorder.
- They described the college's approach as providing an atmosphere of acceptance and security, to study effectively despite their own feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability within a new learning environment.

A number of tutors were interviewed and questionnaires completed

- Results revealed that tutors are willing to work and support students with mental health difficulties, if they are aware of student's disclosure of a mental health issues and needed support.
- However, due to confidentiality and a lack of disclosure by students, teachers are limited in the support they can provide although they may recognise that a particular student may have mental health needs.

Level 3 student perspectives on contributing factors that affect their areas of study, resulting in withdrawing from the course

- Results revealed that a number of Level 3 students are most likely to disengage, due to the lack of appropriate support, during their time at college.
- Most students believed that adequate support is available during class time via the tutor. However some specific support needs were not identified as tutors were not always aware the expectations of the course related to independent study were challenging for some learners.
- Levels 1 and below and Level 2 students felt the 1-1 support received was very beneficial toward the completion of their studies, whereas in comparison Level 3 students felt unsupported and were unlikely to complete their course.
- Students and tutors have highlighted a 'bridging' course is needed and would be very beneficial to support students with mental health difficulties, especially those coming straight into education at Level 3.

Conclusion

The findings of the overall project highlighted a number of key areas to consider concerning the methods applied to teaching and supporting students with mental health difficulties. Although

the main focus is to support students with their learning, the approach applied needed to be re-evaluated especially for students on Level 3 courses with mental health concerns.

Based on the results and the information analysed the success rate of Level 3 students would increase if additional support was available to them, for example developing a course to support Level 3 students with learning tailored specifically to their needs. However, it was suggested that some students struggle as a result of being placed on the wrong course and although tutors are aware, they try their best to support that particular student knowing that that they are destined to fail.

Impact and outcomes

- Students may perform well to gain entry onto the course (i.e. potential), but may lack the higher level study skills needed to remain on their course. Developing a 'bridging' course between levels would help to equip students with advanced level study skills for further progression.
- Some students are successful at Level 1 & below and Level 2 but when they get to Level 3 they are less able to cope. It would be better to allow students to function independently from Level 2 in order to develop a pattern of working independently gradually before reaching Level 3 courses. Whilst recognising that students with mental health needs may require more support at this level compared to students with other types of support needs (e.g. dyslexia).
- Create a step by step 'toolkit' for tutors to follow in terms of recognising and supporting students with mental health issues. It will also include signposts for further help and advice. This is in addition to the usual Learning Support referral system.

Key learning points

- College of North West London played a major role in supporting students with mental health difficulties, through the Learning Support Department within the college. Teachers have an awareness of mental health but lack the procedure and skills needed when working with students with a mental health need. Therefore, a step by step guide/toolkit will be useful to support students on programmes or in a crisis.

- External and internal factors contribute significantly to the learning process. This includes familiar issues such as side effects of medication and low self esteem; these are issues which we are all aware of.

Benefits

- All students described the Learning Support Department as a vital resource towards their learning and the support they received contributed to their achievements and the completion of their course.
- They felt the overall approach of the department to supporting individuals with mental health issues was very effective and consistent in identifying specific needs for support.

Challenges

- The project ran smoothly overall, although I encountered a few difficulties when meeting with tutors and students.
- Contacting past Level 3 students was very difficult due to change of addresses and phone numbers. However out of 4 students contacted 2 students participated in the study.
- It was also difficult working around student's timetables to arrange the focus group session which was challenging, to ensure all students invited attend.
- Also as part of the project, arrangements were made to run a few workshops for tutors, but due to a visit from Ofsted, the Workshops were placed on hold but are scheduled for the summer term.

If you require further information regarding this project, please do not hesitate to contact Linda Austin or David Andrews on 0208 208 5182 who would be available to answer any questions you may have.