

Progression pathways for learners experiencing mental health problems

Case study: City College, Birmingham

Contact: Colin Jones
CJones@citycol.ac.uk



Context/background

City College Birmingham is a medium sized FE college with six sites in the inner-city. The college has approximately 1500 learners age 16-18, approximately 4000 adult learners and about 500 staff. There is provision in most subject sector areas with courses from Foundation Learning through to HND and Foundation degree. The majority of provision is at Entry Level and Level 1.

The college has run discrete provision for people with mental health difficulties for over 10 years. This provision takes place within Foundation Learning and in 2010-11 there are 28 adult learners on discrete programmes. The college has a designated Mental Health Co-ordinator responsible for supporting students on mainstream courses (approximately 50 learners in 2010-11).

The aim of the discrete programme is to provide a platform for progression into mainstream provision. However, in the past we have had students referred back from mainstream programmes due to low Basic Skills and / or inability to cope with the pace of the mainstream course. This project was designed to investigate how we could overcome these difficulties. We chose to work with the mainstream Information Technology team. Together we aimed to find ways of helping students become used to the pace of mainstream provision and to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches.

What did you plan to do?

Our plan involved work with students, teachers and managers:

- We double-staffed action research sessions drawing on the expertise of subject specialists and mental health specialists;
- We reviewed progress with learners through fortnightly focus groups;
- We built up staff expertise through joint materials development;
- We developed recording systems to ensure appropriate safeguarding was in place;
- We identified key features for managers involved in curriculum planning.

What we learned

Through focus groups with learners and evaluation by staff we identified the following barriers to learning:

- Most students experienced difficulties in concentrating at length and retaining information within the session and from week to week;
- Most students lacked the confidence to participate in group discussions;
-
- Some students lacked the confidence to work independently on IT tasks;
- Some students felt drained by the length, pace and intensity of mainstream sessions.

The approaches which were found to be most effective were:

- Lesson plans based around short chunks of learning;
-
- The planning of tasks which enabled learners to work in pairs when they wanted to;
- Particular attention on the part of teacher to recap throughout the lessons;
- Access to one to one support (potentially from Additional Learning Support);
- Establishing a group ethos within which learners felt able to ask for help;
- Planning which encompassed the full range of differentiation appropriate to the group;
- The use of checklists to enable learners to track their own progress through lengthier tasks.

How did you measure/observe impact?

- In class feedback from students when using mainstream activities/course content;
- Tutor assessments (formal/informal);
- Focus groups (fortnightly).

What we will do next

We will modify the content and approach of the discrete provision to prepare learners more effectively for the expectations of mainstream courses. This will include:

- Extending the college day to help learners get used to the expectations on mainstream courses;

- Developing approaches using task sheets and checklists to help learners develop the skills to organize their own work more effectively;
- Developing the confidence of learners to ask for help including creating more opportunities for learners to practise speaking in front of the group;
- Planning and delivering sessions designed to run at a mainstream “pace” towards the end of the discrete course;
- Developing and extending reading skills so that learners can manage the variety and quantity of materials which they will need to work with;
- Building in tests / mock exams into the discrete provision so that learners can develop their confidence;
- Building in practical approaches to aid memory such as writing lists, keeping a diary, using Moodle;
- Visiting potential progression opportunities (both within and outside college) to ease anxieties.

We will recommend that teachers working on mainstream programmes should, wherever possible:

- Include demonstration followed by learners practising the task with support;
-
- Design step by step checklists to track activities and assess their own learning;
- Include confidence building activities (linking with Personal and Social Development);
- Offer written instructions for activities to enable students to follow through at their own pace;
- Utilize written examples and use of screen shots to reinforce learning;
- Attend training on mental health awareness.

Impact

As this was an in-year project impact was measured through learner feedback in class and at focus groups.

Typical student comments were:

‘There was more work to do. I got a good sense of achievement’

‘It gives me more confidence knowing this is a mainstream session’

'I was frightened and though I can't do this, but when she (tutor) started I realized I could do it'

'It's been a great experience'

Six of the seven students who participated in the project are considering progressing into mainstream in September 2011.

Key learning point

Differentiation should be regarded in a very broad way including amount of support, level, pace and complexity of work. Building confidence through successful completion of small chunks of learning is the key.

How did the project benefit learners and staff?

It provided students with a realistic 'taster' of what to expect on a mainstream course.

It provided opportunity for the mainstream tutor and Supported Learning tutor to share good practice, and discuss and develop appropriate approaches and activities.