

raising quality
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programme


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Initial assessment: a learner centred process



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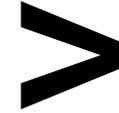
Muriel Green



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and achievement
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The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme is run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency in partnership with the Association of Colleges and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion.

- We aim to reach all colleges and work-based learning providers.
- We offer extra support to colleges and work-based learning providers that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a programme of research and evaluation.
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Learning+Skills Council



Initial assessment: a learner centred process

Muriel Green

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Foreword

If you are involved in an initial assessment process this resource is for you. I hope it can help you be more learner centred in your approach. This short book provides essential background to the things you can experience in using the attached CD-ROM.

The main focus is process. There is no attempt to make evaluative judgements about assessment tools. But because of the high priority given to the improvement of basic skills across the sector, I have included in the appendix information about the definitions and tools being developed through the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit for the assessment of basic skills at entry to post-16 provision.

This document provides an introduction and an overview of the initial assessment process. It also provides background information about the providers whose practice you can explore through the CD-ROM. I expect you may be interested to see some of their documentation? If this is the case you can view it and download it from the disk.

The CD-ROM offers an interactive flexible resource, a medium for your free exploration. It looks at different aspects of initial assessment including learners' perceptions of the process. Each section uses video clips to stimulate your interest and your thinking. Issues and questions raised have been designed to help you challenge some assumptions about your own practice and, I hope, see ways in which you might improve and develop your process to secure greater gains for your learners.

Video footage comes from college practice. However, the issues and questions raised are generic issues that I believe are applicable across the post-16 sector. The context in which you will see learners working will give "life" to what you see. But for the purpose of analysis you may want to think always about the learner experience.

What are learners doing? Why are they doing it? What do they understand about what is happening? How do they feel? How does it help them? What does it all mean to you and the ways in which you operate within your own context?

Where you feel there is scope to improve your own initial assessment process you can use the checklist on the CD-ROM to help you critically evaluate your starting point. You will find a copy of this checklist at the back of this book. I hope that you find the practice, issues and questions on the CD-ROM stimulate your thinking and provide ideas for improvement.

Muriel Green

Development Adviser, Raising Quality and Achievement Programme

Introduction

a learner centred process



Many providers share concerns that initial assessment can sometimes be seen as a bureaucratic exercise rather than as a process about learners and learning. Initial assessment needs to be done with learners rather than to them. It should be of benefit to learners and help them feel positive about themselves and their potential to learn.

Learners who cross the threshold into post-16 education or training come with diverse backgrounds and experiences. As they themselves acknowledge in the accompanying video clips, they are all "individuals", they are all "different". Initial assessment will help you explore those differences with them. Through a staged process, over time, it will help you put together an accurate picture of the interests, aptitudes, abilities and needs of each learner.

Many make their move into post compulsory education or training having previously had negative experiences of learning. They may have only modest or limited achievements:

It remains the case that many young people, who have neither done well at school nor enjoyed it, find their way into work-based learning. They have poor educational qualifications, and often, they are believed to have poor basic skills.

Annual Report of the Chief Inspector 2001-2002. Adult Learning Inspectorate 2002



Because of this, initial assessment needs to be a positive experience. It is important that the process is not seen as part of a deficit model that serves to undermine confidence by focusing only on the things that learners can not do. Learners need to understand why it is happening and how it can help them.

Feedback should be offered as soon as possible after assessment. Ideally feedback should be used to increase the learner's self-awareness, build confidence and motivate them to succeed. Where learners are encouraged to talk about the outcomes of assessment they will be able to develop a language of learning. This will help them take an active role in making decisions about goals and targets for their individual learning plan. You will see examples of how this can work in practice on the video clips.

A learning plan can be a key document for the individual learner when it is a "live" document that provides a frequent reference point for progress review, recognition of success and the setting of new targets.

To what extent does your initial assessment process prepare your learners to engage in discussion to plan their learning?

Initial assessment

Purpose: why do you do initial assessment?

Different assessment processes are needed at different stages of the learner's learning journey. Each has a different purpose. The terms to describe these assessment processes are not used consistently across the post-16 sector.

Throughout this resource I have used the term initial assessment to mean a staged process that helps the learner cross the threshold to the most appropriate post-16 provision. The outcomes of the process inform:

- early judgements about the learner
- the focus and level of learning
- the skills and needs that will be developed and supported

A holistic initial assessment process pulls together information from a range of sources to inform what the individual will learn and how they might learn it.

Assessment is both backward and forward-looking. In other words it makes judgements about previous learning and achievements whilst at the same time attempting to give indications, or measures, of the learner's capacity to progress along one of a number of pathways. The outcomes of the process shape the learning and support that can best secure achievement and progression for the individual learner.

Information about current interests and achievement can provide a strong basis. The outcomes of screening, diagnostic testing, induction tasks and activities can all be used to put together a detailed picture of the learner as he/she moves through the different stages of the process. Induction activities can be fun to do. They can create a positive climate and provide a valuable insight into a new area of learning at a critical early stage.

It is really important to "get it right", so that the learning and support opportunities offered are the best possible match with the interests, abilities, aptitudes, aspirations and needs of the individual. A learner who is on a programme at the right level, and has interest and aptitude for the things they do, will be more likely to be successful.

Initial assessment needs to be a positive experience for learners. Look at the video clips on the CD-ROM to get an insight into the perceptions and understandings of learners from across the country. What are the perceptions of your learners: what do they see as your reasons for assessing them at entry?

Scope: how comprehensive is your initial assessment?

You will want to know a lot of different things about learners as they move into your provision. Each stage of your initial assessment process will generate different kinds of information. It is important that information from a single stage of assessment is not over interpreted or used in a fragmented way. A holistic approach that moves from pre-entry and through induction will provide the most rigorous and comprehensive picture of the learner and their learning.

Snippets of information can come from a range of sources: the learner, those involved in the learner's earlier phases of learning, the results of testing, and the outcomes of practical tasks and activities.

To what extent do the people you see on the video clips have a shared understanding of a learner centred purpose and clear channels of communication? Think about the range of professionals who are involved in working with you to help put together a full picture of your learners. How can you forge strong partnerships with Connexions and Job Centre Plus to help your learners?

Matching the programme offer to the learner's interests, aspiration, abilities and needs

A well-managed selection interview can generate a lot of useful information. This can come from the learner, those involved with earlier phases of their learning or from qualifications. Such information can be drawn on to provide a strong indication of interest, aptitude and ability. It is at this stage that the learner and you can make decisions about the focus of their learning. The interview should help match the programme of learning to the interests, aptitudes and abilities of the learner.

The video clips on the CD ROM give you "stolen moments" from selection interviews with different providers. You will also be able to print out documents that relate to this important stage of the process. How effective are your interviews in creating a good match between learner and programme of study or work?

Identifying a level of study or work

Some providers will also use an assessment test or task at this early stage to help determine the level of study or work. In the case of basic skills, you will be advised to use initial assessment materials that are based on the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy. Details of these materials can be found in the appendix on page 29. In the case of key skills or subject/vocational skills you will be using screening tools/tests.

As a simple rule of thumb, it may help to remember that screening tests provide crude measures and seek to place individuals in a population with others who share a common set of characteristics. A screening test will not give a detailed profile of individual strengths and weaknesses. It will serve to flag up the need for further assessment.

Some providers have concerns about when to use which kind of tool to assess different learners. There can be uncertainty about when to look at basic skills, when to look at key skills. Although literacy and numeracy skills underpin key skills, and there is a continuum from basic into key skills, it is really a question of level. You will need to base your decision on information that comes through with the learner, for example, previous qualifications, school reports, records of achievement.

Where a learner has no evidence of early achievement in literacy or numeracy, or has evidence of performance in GCSE at grade D or below in Mathematics and English, it will be helpful to look at reading, writing and number skills. You may find that some learners have gone through a Basic Skills Screening test with Connexions or Job Centre Plus and this has indicated a need for further assessment. In all these cases you could use initial assessment materials from the Basic Skills Agency to help you determine levels of reading, writing and numeracy. It is not appropriate to use assessment tools designed for use with learners who are at level 1 or below with those who have a GCSE grade profile of C and above in Maths and English. These learners have already demonstrated literacy and numeracy skills at a level equivalent to level 2 in the National Qualifications Framework.

Where learners demonstrate achievement equivalent to level 2 you may use a key skills screening tool to:

- inform decisions about the key skill level to be achieved through the learning programme
- signal where diagnostic assessment is needed to identify individual strengths and needs
- indicate where specialist assessment of learning difficulties or disabilities might be needed
- contribute to aggregate data to use for strategic planning

I hope you will be able to print from the disk the example of aggregate data from Lewisham College. How could you use this kind of data in your own organisation for the benefit of your learners?

Identifying individual strengths and learning needs

Diagnostic tests, tasks and activities should provide details of individual strengths and weaknesses. They are usually administered during induction. The outcomes can be used to shape the detail of an individual learning programme. They should inform the support needed to help the learner build on his/her strengths and overcome weaknesses. Some learners who need specialist testing for specific learning difficulties can identify themselves at this stage or even later.

The video clips give you an insight into a range of approaches that have been successful in helping learners achieve. It is important that there is no stigma attached to learning support or those who need it. What strategies do you use and how effective are they for your learners?

Assessing and responding to learning styles

Learning styles inventories will tell your learners about the ways they will learn best. Outcomes can be used in different ways. Knowledge of learning preferences can help learners exploit opportunities to learn through activities that match well with preferred style. But there should also be support for learners to learn when teaching/training strategies do not match well with preferred learning style.

Look at the way that learners and staff at Middlesbrough College use information from a learning styles inventory to secure more effective learning. You can print out documentation developed by staff at Middlesbrough to help form a more detailed picture of the ways in which the practice supports learners and their learning. How does this relate to your own practice?

A holistic approach

Now is not the time to attempt to go into a lot of detail about different tests. The important thing is that where they are used they are well chosen and fit for purpose. An individual test provides one source of information. It needs to be pulled together with information drawn from different sources so that the learner and provider can see the whole picture when decisions are made about learning and support. The learner's own view of their interest, ability and needs may bring a different but important perspective.

How do you and colleagues triangulate evidence from across the process to form a basis for decisions?



Management: how consistent is your process across your organisation?

Consistency

Consistency is a key management issue. This is particularly so for large organisations with dispersed provision or those that have several different areas of learning. Consistency is best demonstrated when the process is equally effective for each individual learner. It can be judged to be effective when it helps secure the best match between the learner and the learning. For each individual it should initiate feelings of confidence in their ability to achieve through a programme that offers learning opportunities, and support, of a level and kind to match aspirations, aptitude, ability and needs. It can seem so simple but evidence from inspections has shown it to be difficult to achieve.

Consistency is about the process and the learner's experience of that process. It is not about using the same initial assessment tools or tests at the same time with all learners. To improve consistency you will need to focus first on the process and look at what needs to happen, where and when it should happen, who needs to make it happen and whether or not the people involved have the understanding skills and assessment tools to be effective in their roles?

Explore the learner experiences witnessed through the video clips on the CD-ROM. What do these tell you about the consistency of the quality of the initial assessment processes? What does this tell you about your own practice?

Staff confidence and competence

Staff need to feel confident and be competent to fulfil their roles within the initial assessment process. They need to understand what they are doing and how what they do can benefit the learner. There needs to be clarity about how one person's role relates to that of others, with clear channels of communication and information flow.

Training to improve understanding of purpose, process, structures and systems can be cost effective if managed at whole organisation or large group level. The development of skills to interview, mark and interpret tests, analyse a range of information from different sources and give feedback are likely to be most

successful on a smaller group basis with opportunities to practise skills as a feature of the sessions. In the case of some specialist assessment instruments, staff will need to achieve qualified status to administer tests.

What do you learn from the video clips on the CD-ROM about the understanding and skills of staff? How can you use your learning to improve your own practice?

Standardised administrative systems

Where standardised administrative systems can be set up it will be possible to capture and record data from a variety of different sources. It will be helpful to involve a range of staff in the development of such systems so that colleagues working at all levels across different sites can feel a sense of ownership for a common approach. Ideally information systems will provide opportunities to use data both for the benefit of individuals and their learning, and also at a strategic level to inform longer term planning and resourcing decisions.

What sort of information is captured and recorded by providers that feature in the CD-ROM? How do you see the information used to benefit learners? How do you use your own data to benefit learners?

Quality assurance

Continuous review and evaluation of initial assessment processes will help your organisation monitor its practice and improve it where needed. Ideally, you will build in quality systems from the beginning. It will be important to seek the views of learners through learner feedback mechanisms as soon as possible after the experience. Questionnaires, group discussions or individual interviews can be used to collect data. Staff and partner organisations can also provide valuable feedback on how they have found the processes.

Listen to learners reflecting on their experiences and understandings in different video clips. If your own learners had similar views how could you use the information to help improve practice?

Provider Case Studies



Huddersfield New College

Background

Huddersfield New College was established as a sixth form college in 1974 following a local reorganisation. It is one of two sixth form colleges in the town. There are also two general further education colleges and 16 schools with sixth forms within 10 miles of the college. It draws the majority of its students from the borough of Kirklees which is a vibrant multi-cultural community. Recruitment in 2001 was 1358 students. The college aims to provide a broad and balanced curriculum and courses are offered at level 1, 2 and 3. All are supplemented by a variety of enhancement and enrichment activities.

Learner experience

The college puts a high priority on helping learners feel comfortable in the college and confident that they can be successful. You will see and hear on the video clips a number of learners who are moving in to programmes at level 2 and level 3 at the college. By witnessing their experience you will be able to learn something of their interview experience. You will also be able to find out about later stages of learner assessment and the ways in which this informs learning. Support for learning is clearly seen in a positive light, part of an entitlement to extend and develop skills rather than as part of a deficit model with associated stigma attached.

Scope: comprehensiveness

All learners have an admissions interview with a member of the senior management team. The interview offers an opportunity to explore, with each learner, evidence of interest, aptitude and predicted performance in GCSE. It is interesting to note the way in which the college actively pursues written evidence of earlier learning. The interview is used to determine the likely level of study for each learner.

Further assessment takes place through induction. Learners complete a written task through tutorial. The outcomes are used to indicate where learners may benefit from support with writing/language skills. The same assessment task is used with all learners. Support specialists centrally mark it and the outcomes are fed back to individuals by tutors. Subject specialists use induction assignments specific to their own areas to identify a profile of skills and needs for individuals in relation to the demands of their programme. Outcomes are fed back to learners by subject staff but information is made available to the tutor.

Time is given to allow for the learners to settle into their new environment. After four to six weeks each learner has an individual review session with his or her tutor. This offers opportunities to check out ability to cope and progress with the programme. Information from the induction task and the subject specific assessment is considered alongside evidence of progress in the mainstream programme.

Where it is clear that a learner will benefit from support with their learning they are actively encouraged to go along to the Study Centre. Mainstream subject staff are timetabled in to the Study Centre with specialist staff. The centre has a positive image with learners. Attendance at the Study Centre is regularly monitored and subject staff review learner progress with those who attend.

I hadn't been to an interview before... a bit worried. I could get turned down. They could say "no we don't want you"

Deepak from Huddersfield New College

Management

There is a common set of administrative procedures in place with standardised documentation for collecting and recording data relating to interviews and the whole college assessment of writing and literacy skills. All subject areas use induction assignments to determine a profile of skills for individual learners but the shape and form of these differs according to the level and nature of the subjects to be studied.

Feedback from learners is collected and used to inform quality improvement of both assessment and support.

Documentation from Huddersfield can be viewed or downloaded from the CD-ROM:

- Invitation to interview
- Guidance notes: preliminary admissions interview
- CDAR
- IDAR



Lewisham College

Background

Lewisham College is a large general further education (FE) college in the London borough of Lewisham. It has two sites: the long-established campus on Lewisham Way, close to the centre of Lewisham, and a newer campus in nearby Deptford, which opened in 1996. Lewisham College provides courses in all the areas of learning funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). Most are vocational courses. In 2000/01, the college had 12,840 students, of whom 80% were aged 19 or over. The average age of students was 29. Some 31% of all students studied full time, 43% part time and 26% in the evenings only. The largest proportion, 37%, studied at entry level or for qualifications at level 1, 31% studied at level 2 and 33% at levels 3 and 4, or above. Some 52% of students were male. Students from minority ethnic groups comprised 60% of the student body.

Initial assessment at Lewisham College seeks to inform decisions about the kind of programme, the level of programme and any individual support that may be needed.

The learner experience

Through the video clips in the CD-ROM you will meet a number of learners from Lewisham College. Learners represent a variety of programmes and are working toward qualifications at different levels. You will catch "stolen moments" from interviews. You will see and hear learners talk about key skills screening tests and you will be able to observe learners enjoying induction activities designed to introduce them to their area of learning and identify important information about them as individuals. You will hear learners talk about how information from assessment is fed back to them by tutors and used as a basis for what they learn and how they learn it.

Scope: comprehensiveness

Initial interviews are designed to make the best match between the learner and the programme of study/work to be followed. All programme teams have identified the aptitudes, attitudes and skills needed for success in their areas and have set out clear criteria for entry. The interview seeks out evidence that

the learner meets the entry criteria. Practical tasks give additional rigour to the process.

For example, Engineering use a manual task to explore the learner's ability to follow written instructions to sequence actions and complete a practical job. In the video you will see auditions for places in a different vocational area, dance.

They are honest, they're really honest, they tell you "This is good. This is very bad. Work on it." They give us hope.

Eva from Lewisham College

All learners do a key skills screening test at entry to determine the level at which they will work. The test is done on-line. Test items have been taken from those developed through QCA and used by awarding bodies in key skills external tests. The outcomes of testing at this point are seen as an indicator of current performance and are used alongside other assessment information to inform any decisions about an individual learner.

Aggregate data from screening is collected and used to inform strategic planning across the college. This year the information has shown that many learners entering trade and craft areas are below level 1 at entry but that the profile of learners applying for level 3 programmes is improving. This information has been used to make decisions about allocations of support. You can find out more about this by viewing the documents on the CD-ROM.

Further assessment is done through induction tasks and activities. These are developed by programme teams, supported appropriately by key skills co-ordinators. All are vocationally relevant and give the learners an early insight

into the programme they have chosen to follow. They provide a more detailed profile of skills and needs than earlier forms of assessment.

The outcomes of all assessment is fed back to learners by tutors. Information is used holistically to detail the individual learning plan. On level 1 programmes a high priority is given to skill development. In some areas this can mean as much as 50% of the learning time is focused on key skills, 50% on vocational work. On higher level programmes learners needing help will be supported through Skills Upgrade. The image of support provision is recognised as being critically important to take up. Much support is integrated into programme areas with specialist support staff working in partnership with vocational colleagues to plan, implement and monitor support.

Management

A senior manager has overall responsibility for initial assessment but operational management is delegated to programme teams. All learners are assessed at entry though an interview, screening and induction activities. The focus of the assessment and the tools and techniques used can differ to meet the specific needs of learners and the programmes they want to follow. Central guidance is available to provide for flexibility within a common framework. The framework seeks to secure consistency in the quality of the process.

Documentation from Lewisham can viewed or downloaded from the CD-ROM:

- Course entry criteria and initial assessment
- Assessment in induction
- Aggregate data from key skills screening tests



Middlesbrough College

Background

Middlesbrough College is a newly established college formed on 1 August, 2002 as a result of a merger between Middlesbrough College and Teeside Tertiary College. It is now one of the largest tertiary colleges in the country. The college provides courses in all areas of learning. The current enrolment is 3,383 full-time learners and 10,595 part-time learners. 10,841 learners are over eighteen. The college provides courses from entry through to level 3 in most vocational areas. There are opportunities for distance learning and work based learning. The college collaborates with the University of Teeside with several HNC/D programmes and Foundation Degrees. The college works with local schools as part of Excellence in Cities project.

Learner experience

Through the video clips on the CD-ROM you can find out what level 2 and level 3 learners in Catering and Health and Social Care know about their learning preferences. Learners talk positively about their learning and demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which their learning preferences can effect the

way they learn. They also show how knowledge of their peer's learning styles can be used to good effect to develop individuals through group work.

Discussion in individual progress reviews centres more around learning since learners have become more confident to talk about the ways in which they learn best.

Scope: comprehensiveness

Information about learning preferences comes from the learner's response to questions on a questionnaire. This is administered during induction. It can be done on-line. It is interesting to note that learners call it a questionnaire and do not refer to it as a test. They seem to have enjoyed their experience and are positive about it.

The assessment of learning preferences is one part of an extended assessment process that also looks, where appropriate, at basic skills and/or key skills. The assessment of basic skills and learning styles is done by course tutors. Key skills assessment is carried out by key skills specialists.

The outcomes of assessment are fed back to individuals and are used appropriately by the course tutor and other colleagues to plan learning for individuals and for the group. When the outcomes indicate a need for formal diagnostic testing it will be done through the learning support co-ordinator.

Management

Initial assessment is managed across the college through curriculum areas. Each curriculum area has in the region of 600 learners and 10-12 members of staff. This college's work on learning preferences is co-ordinated across the college by a Learning Preferences Co-ordinator who works through Learning Preferences Champions who are allocated to specific curriculum areas. Learning Champions offer on-going support to staff as they plan their teaching to respond to information about their learners.

Classroom observation offers an opportunity to monitor and feedback to staff on the ways in which teaching is responding to the needs of individual learners. Learning Mentors fulfil the role of observer in this context. Champions and Mentors work closely with Tutorial Co-ordinators to regularly review practice and build support to secure the maximum opportunity for development relating to teaching and learning issues.

We found out which were our strongest points and what were our weakest and we put them on graphs and put them on the wall.

Georgina from Middlesbrough College

Staff training sessions have been used to introduce the assessment of learning styles to staff. These sessions offer opportunities for colleagues to support each other in developing schemes of work. This process has allowed them to identify where particular strategies need to be used to develop learning preferences.

Documentation from Middlesbrough can be viewed or downloaded from the CD-ROM:

- A tutor guide to learning preferences
- Appendix 5: a range of teaching and learning methods
- Checklist for developing learning preferences in my teaching
- Draft report: lesson observations of learning mentors



South Nottingham College

Background

South Nottingham College is a General Further Education College, with provision from entry level to level 4. The college operates from 2 main sites and also has several satellite bases in the city and local community. It has approximately 1,800 full-time and 21,000 part-time students. The college is recognised as a major provider for vocational education and training in Art & Design, Print, Photography, Media, Trade Union Studies, Sport, Leisure and Recreation, Service Industries, Hair and Beauty and Care. It is designated a Centre of Vocational Excellence by the Secretary of State for Education for the provision of Digital Imaging, Photography and Print. It successfully recruits students who have not traditionally entered Further Education or training. The college is proud of the way it supports learners with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Learner experience

The learners you see on video from South Nottingham College are learners who have learning difficulties or disabilities. They all present a very positive picture of themselves and their ability to learn. It is clear that they have understood the purpose of initial assessment and that they value the support that has been identified and offered as a result of assessment.

Scope: comprehensiveness

This case study focuses on the assessment of learners who have learning difficulties or disabilities. It looks at the scope and comprehensiveness of the process for this particular cohort of learners.

The college is proactive and positive in marketing an inclusive approach to learning for those who have learning difficulties or disabilities. A lot of work is done to build strong relationships with earlier providers of learning or training. This helps with information flow and offers staff opportunities to begin to get to know learners before they actually arrive in the college. Where a learner is transferring from a local school the college will seek the learner's consent to request the transfer of all records from the school. This can include things like Educational Psychologist's reports, records of classroom support, progress reports and records of achievement.

Learners can themselves identify their need for support well in advance of their arrival. After completing name and address sections of the college application form the form offers an early opportunity for them to signal that they have a need for support. The nature of needs will always be checked out further through contact with an earlier provider of learning or an individual interview and specialist testing.

The college runs specialist diagnostic tests to provide a detailed individual profile for learners who are:

- Deaf
- Visually impaired
- Dyslexic
- Experiencing physical disabilities/medical needs
- Demonstrating significant behavioural difficulties
- Experiencing mental health difficulties

The college aims to use the information generated to secure support for the individual in mainstream provision. This year they have been able to do this for over 200 learners, with a further 60 supported through discrete provision.

Management

The Learning Support manager has a whole organisation responsibility for specialist support. There is an extended team of staff who go in to curriculum areas to work alongside mainstream colleges to provide help for targeted individuals. The team includes 30 learning support assistants, 12 specialist support staff (includes five dyslexia tutors each with different subject specialist

knowledge), ten communication workers, one mental health specialist, a visiting psychologist and nurse.

A key strength of the model is in the relationships between teams. Specialists meet every six weeks to review and plan provision. All work to a common set of protocols. All are keen to secure a rigorous and professional approach and have this year been using feedback from observation of their practice to plan for improvement. There is also regular contact between those who offer specialist support and curriculum specialists. For organisations that are at the beginning of their journey to offer specialist support the college advises a slow and careful start.

In the case of South Nottingham, they chose to adopt an incremental approach. They started from a position of strength by preparing to move high quality support for the deaf or dyslexic out in to curriculum areas. Specialist staff worked first with mainstream colleagues who were more confident in their ability to learn to cope. Together, they looked at applications and made decisions about how they would work to ensure the success of their learners. Gradually the college extended the range of specialist support and the number of curriculum areas taking learners diagnosed as needing it.

In all cases the support offered is tailored to the needs of the individual and the demands of the programme. As it has been found to work, learners and staff have grown in confidence and the college is able to use its good practice to help extend boundaries and bring in more curriculum areas, more specialist needs.

A central feature of the provision is the individual review process. These reviews offer regular opportunities for learners to look at their progress with their mainstream and specialist support tutors. The outcomes of the reviews very much inform the detailed nature of the support provision. It is often unique to an individual learner. For example it could be help with research in the library, it could be communication in an art workshop. Look at the video clips and see where you can see evidence of this kind of support.

Documentation from South Nottingham College can be viewed or downloaded from the CD-ROM:

- Information for course teams
- Support review – students
- Support review – staff
- Support review – support staff

I was feeling nervous. I was hoping that support would be there at college. When I arrived I had a tutorial and an interview.

Paul from South Nottingham College

Improving initial assessment

a checklist

You can use the checklist to record your strengths and areas for development.

Key: A : Well developed practice
 B : Practice which has some strengths but needs further development
 C : Practice which needs much development and support.

Learner experience : how learner centred is your process? Circle one		
Learners have a clear understanding of the purpose of initial assessment	A	B C
Learners understand how and when they will be assessed and what they can gain from the process	A	B C
Learners are engaged in the assessment process, they feel that assessment is done with them rather than to them	A	B C
Learners receive feedback from initial assessment	A	B C
Feedback is positive and helps learners feel confident that they will be successful in their learning programme	A	B C
Learners are able to use the outcomes of initial assessment to help them understand their learning	A	B C
Learners are encouraged to discuss their learning and support needs as they are supported in drawing up an Individual Learning Plan	A	B C
Learners use knowledge of strengths and weaknesses to set their own short term learning targets that are challenging, specific, achievable and time related	A	B C
Learners have opportunities to review their progress and set new targets	A	B C
Learners are given support where initial assessment and reviews identify needs	A	B C
Scope : how comprehensive is your Initial Assessment?		
Information is sought and used from earlier experiences of learning: schools, employers, careers	A	B C
Learners are themselves invited to assess their interests, ability, aptitude and potential	A	B C
Assessment tools and tasks that are used to help provide a more detailed picture are fit for purpose	A	B C

Care is taken in selecting assessment tools to secure valid and reliable information	A	B	C
Care is taken to avoid the overuse of tests	A	B	C
Aptitude tests and tasks are used to identify areas of interest and potential	A	B	C
Screening/initial assessment tools are used only to identify a need for further assessment or "levels" of performance and are not over interpreted in terms of specific individual needs	A	B	C
Diagnostic tools and tasks are used to identify specific strengths and areas for development in relation to programme demands	A	B	C
Learning styles inventories are used to identify learning preferences	A	B	C
Specialist assessment tools are used to identify specific learning needs	A	B	C
The outcomes of different kinds of initial assessment are used together, and with the learner, to look at the whole picture to inform what is learnt, how it is learnt and how the learner is supported	A	B	C
Management : how consistent is your process?			
Staff understand the purpose of initial assessment in terms of learner gains	A	B	C
Staff understand the initial assessment process	A	B	C
The timing of different elements of the process is linked to purpose	A	B	C
Tools and techniques used are fit for purpose: tests and tasks used provide the specific information that is needed	A	B	C
Staff understand the role they play in the process and the ways in which their role relates to others	A	B	C
Staff training helps them feel confident and competent in their role	A	B	C
Staff understand and use a range of information from different assessment activities to inform decisions about individual learners and their learning	A	B	C
Aggregate data is collected and used to inform organisational planning for learning and support	A	B	C
Monitoring and review systems are used to good effect to improve the process	A	B	C

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Appendix

Assessing basic skills at entry to post-16 provision

Background

The introduction of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy allow providers to identify literacy, numeracy and language skill levels more accurately and consistently. All adult literacy, numeracy and language screening and assessment should be based on the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy. Assessment should inform the development and review of individual learning plans.

Assessment Processes

The Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit uses the following terms to describe assessment at entry to post-16 provision:

■ Screening

Basic Skills Screening is used to identify learners who would benefit from more in-depth assessment. A screening tool has been developed, Fast Track, and is available from the Basic Skills Agency. Versions are being developed for work place settings and community settings. A screening tool for ESOL is also being developed.

■ Initial Assessment

Learners may have different levels of reading, writing, numeracy and language need. Initial Assessment tools can identify skills and levels and will help to place learners in the most appropriate learning programmes. These tools are available from the Basic Skills Agency.

■ Diagnostic assessment

Diagnostic assessment materials can help to identify a detailed profile of skills and weaknesses. Diagnostic assessment materials have been recently developed. Diagnostic assessment must be carried out by a literacy, numeracy or ESOL specialist with level 4 qualifications.

To order a free copy of the National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, contact the DfES publications on 0845 6022260 or by email: dfes@prolog.uk.com.

Free copies of the adult ESOL core curriculum, the adult literacy and numeracy core curricula, the pre-Entry curriculum framework and Access for All are available from: The Basic Skills Agency, Admail 524, London WC1A 1BR. Tel: 0870 6002400 Fax: 0870 6002401 Email: basicskills@twoten.press.net Basic Skills Agency website at www.basic-skills.co.uk

To order screening (Fast Track) and initial assessment materials, contact the Basic Skills Agency orderline on 0870 600 2400. For advice on diagnostic assessment, contact the Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit on 0207 273 1223 or visit the website on www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/teachingandlearning

Using the CD-ROM

System requirements

Microsoft Windows 95/98/2000/NT/XP
Intel Pentium 166 processor
32 MB RAM
800x 600 resolution at 16 bit (thousands of colours)
8 x speed CD-ROM drive
Mouse or touch pad
16 bit audio card with headphone or speakers
Windows Media Player

Instructions

Insert the disc into the CD-ROM drive.

The programme should start automatically.

If it does not start automatically:

1. Click on Start
2. Select Run
3. In the box type D:\LSDA.exe (where D is your CD-ROM drive letter)
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To play these sequences your machine needs Windows Media Player installed. This is likely to be installed already. Windows Media Player can be downloaded from www.microsoft.com

Printable materials

For many of the case studies shown in the video sequences and mentioned here in this booklet there are some accompanying documents. These can be viewed and printed from the disc. You can access these via 'view documents' on screen.

Alternatively you can view these documents without running the disc by opening the documents folder in the disc directory.