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Providing effective learner support for part-time learners

Philip Barker, City of Bristol College
Jim Crawley, Bath Spa University

September 2005

research report

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Throughout the report anonymity of the participating organisations has been maintained.

Executive summary

Introduction

Learner support, here defined as the '*strategies which empower learners to establish and fulfil their learning, career and personal potential*', remains a key issue in current thinking in the post-16 education sector. An earlier project report from the West Country Learning and Skills Research Network (WCLSRN) showed that part-time learners were considerably disadvantaged in terms of the learner support that they received when compared with full-time learners. This project set out to explore further the experiences of part-timers, their needs, and the factors that affect their support.

Context

The project took place between September 2003 and September 2004, with the data collected between the beginning of October 2004 and the end of March 2005. The data was collected from students in five post-16 provider organisations within the WCLSRN region. One of these was a higher education institution. The remaining four could all be described as general further education. The learners were studying a wide range of courses, from level 2 to level 4, and were all studying part-time – some of them by distance learning. The learners included some work-based learners.

Research methods

One-to-one interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire survey were used to gather data in the organisations. Researchers agreed on a common semi-structured interview schedule for use in the interviews, as well as a framework for the use of focus groups. Although there were differences in the number of students contacted in each organisation, all sites conducted at least one focus group and 12 interviews. The research team held pre- and post-data collection events to prepare for the interviews and focus groups, and to analyse and moderate their findings. They also met to contribute to the production of the final report.

The research team also conducted a literature review and produced context statements for each site.

Research findings

The research findings fell in to six broad areas as follows:

1. Students' awareness and understanding of their entitlement to learner support and its availability.
2. Students' needs for learner support.
3. How students' needs for learner support are met.
4. The barriers and negative experiences that some part-time learners experience.
5. Being part-time.
6. The implications for key stakeholders.

Conclusions

The research findings suggest that:

- Some part-timers are not aware of their entitlement to learner support and they have limited access to learner support facilities.
- Peer support is frequently mentioned by part-time learners as important. Some (not all) refer to a feeling of isolation.
- Part-time learners have many demands on their time and feel that providers need to recognise that their study, although important to them, may at times not be the first priority in their lives.
- Part-time learners state that high quality teaching increases their motivation.

Recommendations

- Providers need to ensure that the planning of learner support facilities includes provision to meet the particular needs of part-time learners.
- The provision of learner support needs to be more flexible to ensure part-time learners can use the facilities (for example, longer opening hours, access to training to use the facilities).
- Part-time learners need high quality information about their courses and provider; providers need to ensure that learners have received and understood this information.
- Teachers and tutors should enable the development of peer support at the start of part-time programmes.
- Part-time learners need high quality teaching.

Introduction

Context and rationale

Learner support remains a key issue in current thinking, debate and research in the post-16 sector. The need for high quality support, individualised to meet learner needs, is evidenced in a range of current research contexts including Fletcher (2002), Green (1998 and 2001), Hughes & Smeaton (2001), Macleod (2003), Walters & Quilter (2003). There is also ample evidence from national LSC statistics on retention and achievement rates of the need to identify effective mechanisms for raising these rates. The role of learner support is considered to be fundamental to the development of appropriate strategies to raise these rates, although the relationship between learner support and retention and achievement is not always clear.

In the context of this project, the concept of learner support is used broadly. The project team recognised that the concept of learner support is frequently used in the context of providing financial assistance for learners. While this project's definition does not exclude this view, it certainly goes beyond it and includes more than the financial aspects of support. The project's protocol of definitions provided the following discussion and definition of learner support:

Learner support:

The term 'learner support' receives considerable use, but in practice it can be seen to mean considerably different things in different contexts. Most definitions tend to be situated along a continuum which has the notions of supporting learners with disability and/or additional needs at one end, and a life empowering growth towards personal autonomy at the other end. There is little clarity in an overall definition, resulting in the potential for considerable confusion. This project proposes therefore to adopt the following definition, where learner support refers to:

Strategies which empower learners to establish and fulfil their learning, career and personal potential.

Source: Protocol for WCLSRN Project as at 6th February 2004

Effective learner support is frequently accepted as having a positive impact on the learner's experience. It may also impact the motivation, retention and achievement of both full and part-time learners. However, an earlier project conducted by the West Country LSRN (WCLSRN) identified differences between part-time and full-time learners in terms of the learner support they received. Part-timers received significantly less learner support than full-time learners. This is particularly significant in the national context of concerns about the management and quality of work-based learning provision (ref Ofsted and Adult Learning Inspectorate reports) given that many work-based learners will in effect be part-timers.

There are also different interpretations of what is meant by 'part-time'. The project has used the term to mean part-time in their own organisation, rather than using a formal definition which relies, say, on the number of hours a learner studies. It was felt likely at the start of the project that the following types of part-time learners would be included:

- work-based learners
- learners on adult and community education programmes
- vocational and academic learners
- e-learners.

For the purposes of this project, all learners would be doing programmes that lead to accreditation such as NVQ, AS/A2, or professional qualifications.

Limitations of other research

While it could be argued that the issues concerning the provision of learner support for learners have, to some extent, been well researched, this research has frequently dealt with the needs of full-time learners. Although there are some notable exceptions, the needs of part-time learners remain relatively unexplored.

Collaboration with other organisations

This project has involved network members and their organisations within the WCLSRN's geographic area. This includes Gloucestershire, Somerset, parts of Wiltshire and Dorset, Bristol, North Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, and South Gloucestershire. Other organisations who are not currently active members of the network will have access to the results.

Benefits that will be gained as a result of the project and by whom

The anticipated benefits of the project are greater understanding of the needs of part-time learners, and the implications of these needs for tutors and managers. The project was conducted in five different organizations from across the area, including both higher education and further education. This involved ongoing collaboration between the participating organisations and the regional LSDA office.

The target audience

The target audiences for the project were tutors and teachers in the post-16 education sector, their managers and policymakers, including local, regional and national staff of organisations such as the Learning and Skills Council, Department for Education and Skills, Regional Development Agencies, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, and other interested bodies.

The partners involved

The partners in the project were all members of the West Country Learning and Skills Research Network (WCLSRN). Six organisations participated in the project and comprised four further education colleges and two higher education establishments. One of the organisations did not contribute data to the project, although a member of their staff played a major part in managing and contributing to the project.

Duration and funding

The project was conducted between September 2003 and August 2005. The data collection took place between September 2004 and April 2005. The project was funded by the LSDA.

Confidentiality

Individual students who participated in the research activities were assured of the confidentiality of their identity. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the research, the organisations participated in the project on the understanding that their identities would be kept confidential, and not referred to in the final report.

Research questions

The **research question** was as follows:

- How might learning providers improve learner support for part-time learners?

The **research aim** was as follows:

- To inform ways of making learner support for part-time learners more effective in order to improve their motivation, retention and achievement.

The **research objectives** were to:

1. Evaluate the current literature relating to effective learner support for part-time learners.
2. Identify and appraise the factors affecting learner support needs from a sample of part-time learners.
3. Evaluate the extent to which these needs are met.
4. Explore the implications of these factors for key stakeholders including learners, tutors, and programme managers.
5. Identify barriers and enablers that exist in meeting learner needs.
6. Develop the research capacity of project participants.
7. Involve and collaborate with learning providers to apply evidence-based research to inform practice.

Method

The research team identified a variety of approaches to address the research question above. The methods also addressed some of the development needs of researchers within the network. Identification of the needs and experiences of part-time learners required a qualitative approach that would provide an in-depth understanding, rather than statistical data. This coincided with the particular needs and circumstances of the researchers, as well as being appropriate and realistic within the timescale of the project. This approach highlighted the experiences of individual learners and groups of learners. It might be supplemented by reviewing existing policies and practices and statistical data available within learning providers and in the public domain.

Phase 1: Literature search, including identification of concepts of learner support that relate to effective provision for part-time learners. This took account of recent work concerned with learner support and the needs of part-time learners. This phase informed the next stages of the project and was particularly relevant to the development of a framework for the interview and focus group schedules. The project team conducted the work from January to April, 2004.

Phase 2: Identification of contextual issues in participating organisations. The context in which part-time learners are studying was described through the use of a common pro forma for each organization. This collected relevant local contextual information which was relevant to understanding the extent to which part-time learners' needs were met, and any barriers to meeting needs that existed. During this phase, the project team determined the sample of learners, tutors and managers to be targeted. The work was conducted by the project team members and completed from April to the end of August, 2004.

Phase 3: Collection of data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups and questionnaire surveys. This phase included the collection of data from learners. Project team members used semi-structured interviews and focus groups with part-time learners. They worked to an agreed framework, interview schedule and focus group strategy in order to gather the data. However, it was recognised that individual organisational structures would affect the extent to which each of the research tools was used, with some researchers using mainly interviews and others focus groups. The resulting content analysis of interview and focus groups has sought to identify themes and analyse the degree of commonality and disparity. The researchers took into account the relative strengths and weaknesses of the data when comparing results from the different methods used. The work was conducted between the beginning of September 2004 and the end of April 2005.

Phase 4: Analysis of data. This phase of the project provided opportunities to consolidate and analyse the data to produce the project's findings. A content analysis of the interview and focus group data was conducted by individual organisations, as a group, and as the final report was drafted. Learners were matched where their context, subject and level has made this possible, but the diversity of the respondents made this particularly challenging. This analysis was conducted between the end of March until the end of June, 2005.

Phase 5: Production of the final report. The project leaders produced a final report to include the key findings from all examples.

The research sample:

Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide details of the numbers and profile of students by gender, age, organisation, and programme qualification. The sample is weighted towards female responses and, of the 193 learners included in the research, 91 were attending an Early Years Foundation degree. These factors need to be recognised when considering the findings.

Table 1: Total numbers of learners by organisation

	No of focus groups	No of focus group students	No of students interviewed	Totals
Organisation 1	6	48	43	97
Organisation 2	1	14	12	27
Organisation 3	1	11		12
Organisation 4	5	46	23	74
Organisation 5	1	10		11
Totals	14	129	78	221

Table 2: Learners by gender and organisation

	Interviews		Focus groups	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Organisation 1		43		
Organisation 2	4	8		
Organisation 3				11
Organisation 4	26	7	19	27
Organisation 5				10
Totals	30	58	19	48

Table 3: All learners by gender

Females	106
Males	49
All learners	155

Table 4: Learners by age

	16-19	20-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+
Organisation 1	1	8	14	21	10		
Organisation 2	1	4	4	1	2		
Organisation 3	10	1					
Organisation 4	23	16	10	12	8		
Organisation 5		10					
Totals	35	39	28	34	20		

Table 5: Number of learners by qualification

Qualification	Number of learners
AAT NVQ level 2 Foundation	16
AAT NVQ level 2 Payroll	9
Youth Award Diploma	5
Bricklaying NVQ level 2, year 1	3
Carpentry NVQ level 3, years 2 & 3	4
Early years foundation degree	91
Early years NVQ level 3	14
Hairdressing NVQ level 3	11
Heating NVQ level 3 year 2	3
Motor vehicle NVQ year 2	10
PGCE/Cert Ed	24
Supported housing OCN level 3	3
Language courses	
Total	193

Findings

The findings from the data collection fell into six broad areas which have been summarised in this section. The broad areas are:

1. Students' awareness and understanding of their entitlement to learner support and its availability.
2. Students' needs for learner support.
3. How students' needs for learner support are met.
4. The barriers and negative experiences that some part-time learners experience.
5. Being part-time.
6. The implications for key stakeholders.

1. Students' awareness and understanding of their entitlement to learner support and its availability

Summary issues:

It is clear that many students are not fully aware of the learner support available to them, or how to access it. There are mixed and variable levels of understanding about what constitutes learner support; from clear and precise to virtually non-existent.

This raises the question 'How real an entitlement is it when learners don't know it exists?'

2. Students' needs for learner support

Summary issues:

There is a clear need for high quality information, advice and guidance. Learners stated that they need help in planning their work load (especially HE students) and they need information about their course structure and organization, thereby gaining an overview of the course. They need to be disciplined in keeping to the plans they make to complete their course of study.

Students also stated they need encouragement at the start of their course and they need their confidence boosted. Some stated that this support can come from other course members, but this means they have to get to know their peers very quickly at the start of the course.

Part-time students stated they have many demands made on their time and they sometimes have to prioritise these demands. Their course may not always be their first priority. Students stated they need tutors and teachers to recognize these other demands (for example, family commitments). Work-based learners referred to the need to recognise that college assessors can be an intrusion in the workplace.

Other students stated they had particular needs, such as dyslexia support, study skills support and help with academic writing. Some commented that they need tutors who are accessible and who provide one-to-one support.

This suggests the need for flexibility in the provision of learner support. Provision that is available as and when the needs arise, together with high quality and efficient provision.

3. How students' needs for learner support are met

Summary issues:

Induction, initial assessment and review – although not always felt to be a positive experience – are most helpful when used regularly. They are most effective when a combination of methods is used, such as interviews, specialised support, tutorials, handbooks and ice breakers. These were all mentioned as positives.

Part-time learners recognize that effective teaching and tutorials help them learn. They find taught sessions are most effective when they can apply what they learn to their workplace and vice versa, thereby emphasizing the importance of ensuring the relevance of learning to the workplace. Where the quality of teaching is low, so is the quality of their learning and their interest and motivation is low. They also recognize that prompt and positive feedback on their assessed work can be helpful in maintaining their motivation.

Course tutors are their main source of support and they need to be accessible to them both before and after classes. However, peers can also be a powerful means of support. 'In a good group, peers motivate one another', one learner commented.

These findings suggest the need for high quality teaching and regular reviews. Peer support should be facilitated. The ways in which learners receive information about their course may need to include opportunities to reflect on and review the information they have received, how they have used it and if there are still things they need to know about their college and course.

4. The barriers and negative experiences that some part-time learners experience

Summary issues:

Compared with full-time learners, part-timers have less access to facilities and support. The services are often not available at the times or locations that part-timers need them. For example, guidance and information services, or the canteen, are shut, or there are no drop-in facilities. Services are not always proactive in promoting what they offer to part-time learners. Furthermore, students are not always confident enough to ask for help when they have a problem.

Life-work balance issues are often a concern for part-time learners. The pressures of work, money and family-life can result in a lack of time for study. This can result in stress. Assignments and deadlines can increase this stress.

There were examples of part-time learners receiving poor quality information about their course. Where the content or level of a course is inappropriate for learners, the effectiveness of their learning can be reduced.

Again, this suggests the need for high quality information and flexible provision of support services.

5. Being part-time

Summary issues:

Being a part-time learner can present some particular issues for learners. Isolation was mentioned as significant for some, as they do not get to know each other as well as full-timers. They have less participation in Student Union and college activities. E-mail and conferencing facilities can reduce this isolation.

The pressure of work and family demands means that part-time learners cannot always "give all" to their study. In contrast, one student suggested that part-time study is not the sole aspect of a part-time learner's life, so it can be less pressured.

One student commented: "It was much better when I came here as a full-time student."

This suggests the need to ensure that part-time students get to know each other and set up their own support and social networks. Teacher expectations of part-time students need to recognise that although part-time students have many demands on their time, students may react differently to these pressures.

6. Implications for key stakeholders

Summary issues:

Learner support services need to be timely and appropriate to the needs of part-time learners. The services need to be planned to include part-time learners, and not just full-timers.

Services need to be promoted to part-timers at an early stage in their programmes.

There needs to be greater consistency in the quality of learner support facilities within and between organizations.

The provision of learner support services for part-timers affects the work of teachers and tutors, since they are the main providers of this support. The work appears to be highly demanding on these staff. Communication between staff and students, and between staff themselves, is particularly important. There is a need to avoid conflicting messages.

The importance of initial assessment and induction has been emphasized by part-time learners. They need to have a clear purpose and outcome, as well as use a variety of methods.

Lastly, peer support can make a major contribution to supporting part-time learners. Peers can include those in the workplace, and it appears that learner support in this context can be particularly beneficial.

Conclusions

Throughout the findings of this project some key themes have emerged which appear to have an impact on the experiences of part-time learners. These are discussed in this section.

- Importance of induction, initial assessment and being confident that learners are on an appropriate course. Part-time learners need clear and accessible information, backed up by action from their teachers and tutors and, at times, staff from other services.
- They need to be able to access "mainstream" services, which are taken for granted by full-time learners. These services include access to learning resources and equipment (such as libraries and computers), as well as more specialist services (such as careers information, or counselling).
- Many part-time learners are unclear about what they are entitled to receive and hence do not know what to request if they have a problem. Some work-based learners would like access to support in their workplace.
- Many part-time learners have commented on the need for high-quality teaching. This has a positive effect upon their motivation, and given the many demands placed upon them from other aspects of their lives, this may be particularly important.
- Peer support has frequently been mentioned by learners as important in providing support and maintaining motivation. The students in the project have also noted that ensuring this takes place is more difficult when studying part-time. Work-based learners have noted that peer support can take place.
- The importance of peer support in learning, and by implication the use of group processes to create support for students, may be in conflict with the current trend towards individualised and personalised learning.
- There is a wide range of different models and approaches to Learner Support. These do not necessarily relate to each other and may be specific to particular organisations.

Recommendations

- Teachers and tutors should use strategies that enable peer support to develop. This might be accomplished by setting up activities and approaches to learning that encourage learners to get to know each other and share information about themselves.
- When the provision of learner support is planned by organisations, there should be an effort to include part-time students as important recipients of these services. The impact of their inclusion (and potential exclusion) should be considered.
- Clear information should be provided for part-time learners about their course and college, the facilities available to them and what they can expect from these facilities.
- The information provided to students should be reviewed with them regularly to ensure that they understand it and that they do not have gaps in their knowledge of the course they are studying or their college.
- Those staff who support part-time learners should recognise that they have many other demands on their time, apart from the course they are studying. However, it is important not to generalise about students' needs as each may react in a different way to these pressures.
- Part-time learners need high quality teaching. Many students in this project have commented on how this increases their motivation.

Appendix

Key Messages from the literature

The literature review identified a number of issues which are pertinent to the provision of learner support for part-time learners. These have been grouped into the following categories:

- issues to do with part-time study
- models of learner support
- learner motivation
- staffing and staff development
- issues to do with infrastructure.

Issues specific to Part Time Study

There is evidence that part-time students fare worse than full-time students on a number of fronts. Among those students who drop out, the most persistent characteristic is that they are part-time (Brawer 1996). Part-time university students feel they receive less pre-entry advice and support when compared with full-time students, and full-time students found it easier to seek advice and guidance (Dodgson and Bolam 2002). There is also evidence that part-time students have less tutor time allocated to them than full-time students (WCLSRN 2002). Part-timers are more likely to experience funding difficulties to support their learning than full-time students (Audit Commission 2002).

Models of Learner Support

The literature reviewed suggests there are two basic models of learner support:

- models which are concerned with the active involvement of students
- models which focus on interventions with students by, for example, teachers, youth workers, or support workers.

i. Models which are concerned with the active involvement of students

Andres and Carpenter (1997) conducted research with the non-traditional student population including older adult learners, commuters, **part-time students**, graduate students, women, students with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. They found that student retention models which focus on the active involvement of students in their programmes are the most popular model in colleges. These programmes focus on encouraging students' commitment to their course, but they note that competing demands of parents, friends, romantic partners, employers and others, as well as financial and health problems, can influence students' coping abilities and life decisions.

Other models which are concerned with the active involvement of students include different approaches to learning; for example, therapeutic approaches, or instrumental approaches. Brawer (1996) found that different models may have an impact on how part-timer students take-up learner support. Crowder and Pupynin (1993) found that effective learner support encourages learners to self-assess their abilities and performance.

ii. Models which focus on interventions with students by, for example, teachers, youth workers, or support workers

The models of interventions with students include orientation programs, mentoring, and multiple strategy approaches. These are widely used and evidence the greatest impact. Since different students may require different approaches, colleges are beginning to take a more holistic approach toward retention by implementing multiple intervention strategies. Brawer (1996) suggests that because dropping out often has negative implications for colleges, it is to their advantage to use one or more intervention strategy in order to raise retention rates while simultaneously lowering attrition rates.

iii. Learner Motivation

Part-time learners are strongly motivated to study (Nashashbi 2002). WCLSRN (2002) found that they study for a variety of reasons. These are sometimes seen as internal to the individual learner (such as an intrinsic interest or desire to learn) or external (such as studying to learn new skills for a job).

Teacher/student relationships are also significant in determining the motivation of learners. Bloomer and Hodkinson found that the strength of student-tutor relationship affects the level of student satisfaction and James found that learner motivation is affected by the amount of "quality" contact time with teacher and level of teacher commitment. Other factors are also important in determining student motivation, and these apply to both full and part-time students. Martinez and Maynard identified the following as important:

- teaching-related issues
- course-related issues
- assessment
- individualised support and guidance
- student-related issues.

There are both positive and negative aspects to each of these factors.

iv. Staffing and Staff Development

The WCLSRN project (2002) identified the following factors that can impact on the learning of part-time students and the support they receive:

- The take-up of learner support can be affected by the "mind set" of different teachers, how the group is organised and the relationships between students, the college, and their employers. The same programme, taught by different staff, can have different take-up of learner support, despite all students having similar needs.
- Part-time staff receive a low level of support themselves and may not know the availability of facilities for students.
- Some staff have development needs to ensure
 - visibility/accessibility/location of services are clear to students
 - staff and students are aware of different "journeys" to Learner Support
 - induction information at the start of a course need for reinforces the availability of learner support services.

v. Infrastructure

Policy foci over the last decade have emphasised factors which can be controlled with the intent to enhance retention and achievement. There is some evidence that the effects of management strategies which aim to improve the efficiency, effectiveness and quality of post-16 provision actually have a negative effect on the quality and efficiency of this provision. James (2002) argues that the effects of focussing on targets and measures of quality reduce the feeling of teacher autonomy and the capacity to meet individual learner needs. Lloyd (2004) and WCLSRN (2002) also find that balancing the interests of the learner, the institution and funding sources produces "inevitable strains within colleges".

This suggests the need for a move from simple cause and effect/problem and resolution/structural changes and effect correlations to an emphasis on developing overall organisational capacity to respond to those issues which they can have some control over.

Funding is a key factor which affects provision and the take up of learner support. Assumptions have been made that there is a direct relationship between learner support and achievement, and this has been reflected in the allocation of funding. However, funding can have a number of effects through the amount available and how it is used:

- the amount of funding, which can affect how the provision is managed
- the targeting of funding (eg direct targeting, as in for level 2 provision, or indirect through, for example, OFSTED influences)
- as an individual motivator to support learners (eg EMAs) and the context – HE, FE, ACL (Fletcher 2001).

Although the distinction in funding terms between full-time and part-time learners is blurred (Fletcher 2001), Sadler argues that funding provision, together with competition from other providers, forces the post-16 sector to focus on full-time provision, rather than part-time, as this earns providers more resources. Fletcher suggests there is evidence that learner support funding should depend on the characteristics of the learner and her/his proposed programme of study.

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