

research findings

Regent Arcade House
19–25 Argyll Street
London W1F 7LS
Tel 020 7297 9000
Fax 020 7297 9001
www.LSDA.org.uk

Learner guidance and support: the models used and how staff view their effects on retention

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Project leader: Philip Barker

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Summary

In September 2001, the West Country Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) began a project that aimed to identify the models of learner guidance and support used in colleges, and to identify staff views on how far this provision affects retention rates.

The research drew a number of conclusions. Staff views on learner guidance and support are a relatively unexplored area of research. There are variations in the models of learner guidance and support both between and within learning providers. There is wide belief amongst staff that learner guidance and support has a positive impact on retention, although there is little evidence to substantiate this. Further research is needed which describes the models of support and tests out the effectiveness of specific strategies to supporting students.

Key findings

- Staff at all levels have a strong commitment to learner guidance and support and express the importance of being student centred in its provision.
- Staff frequently experience a tension between being student centred and achieving retention targets. Staff are aware of the potential conflict between tutoring to achieve retention targets and the right of choice of individual students.
- Staff awareness of college policies relating to learner guidance and support varies according to their position within their organisation, with senior managers being most aware.
- With the exception of senior managers, there was little awareness amongst staff of specific targets for retention
- Staff see the needs of 16 – 19 year old students and adult students as being different. There appears to be less support for adults. Staff refer to a fine balance between "proactive" support and "interference" in the context of supporting adult learners.
- The provision guidance and support for students is not universal. Part-time students and adults often receive less than full-time students.

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Chief Executive **Chris Hughes**

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- Some organisations have set up specific administrative units to address retention. These have a “monitoring role” rather than a “supporting role”, although they may refer students on to guidance and support services.
- Some organisations target support at specific groups of students or programmes in order to increase their retention rates.
- Staff consider their own development is an important issue in the context of learner support. Staff find that informal networks and communication are an important source of support for their own work.
- Part-time staff receive less support in their role as tutors than full-time staff. They experience barriers to support that include lack of payment for attending support sessions as well as inconvenient hours.

Key recommendations

- There is a need for further research that describes the different models of learner support.
- Further research is needed to explore the relationship between learner support and retention.
- Access to learner support for part-time learners and some adults should be increased to the equivalent provided for full-time students.
- Part-time staff should receive greater access to the support available to full-time staff by removing the barriers they experience.
- In providing support for staff, use should be made of existing informal networks and communications that are already in operation.

Methodology

The research took place in five general colleges of further education and one University. A project leader was identified in each organisations, and they then formed a project planning group. A literature review summarised the findings of existing work concerned with different models of learner guidance and support, staff views on support, the relationship between retention and support, and the relationship between achievement and support.

Each project leader prepared a short description of the model of learner guidance and support that operated in their own organisation. This, and the findings of the literature review, then informed the construction of a semi-structured interview proforma for use with staff in each of the organisations. The interview proforma included the following themes: Policy for learner support, Targets, Monitoring of targets and learner progress, Staff support, and Models of support.

The staff interviewed included at least one senior manager, one middle manager, and one lecturer or teacher in each organisation. 23 staff were interviewed across all organisations. Interviews were conducted by members of the project planning group or their colleagues. None of them interviewed staff in their own organisation.

Following the completion of the interviews the project planning group met twice to conduct a content analysis and draw up the findings and recommendations of the project.

Background information

The West Country LSRN (formerly West of England LSRN) is an active group of researchers supported by the LSDA. The researchers come from organisations who provide or support learning and training in Gloucestershire, South Gloucestershire, the City of Bristol, Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset, Somerset and Wiltshire. The group meets every four months and holds an annual conference in the region together with the South West LSRN.

This project was set up following a consultation process with network members and their organisations in order to identify a research topic which was of common concern and which supported local and national priorities. The project also had the aim of supporting network members in the development of their own research skills.

Full Report

A full report of this project may be obtained from the LSDA website at <http://www.lsda.org.uk/files/pdf/1437.pdf>. Please contact Pam Melling at the LSDA (pmelling@LSDA.org.uk) for a hard copy of the report.

Researchers

West Country LSRN

Janet Brewer – City of Bristol College
Marion Cartwright – Open University
Jim Crawley – Bath Spa University College
Peter Davies – LSDA
Neil Gaskin – Somerset College of Arts & Technology
Caroline Harvey – Norton Radstock College
Ann-Marie Warrender – LSDA
Vincent Williams – Yeovil College

Contact details

Ann-Marie Warrender
Regional Director, South West
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Bishops Hull House
Bishops Hull Road
Taunton
Somerset TA1 5EP
Tel 01823 345950
Fax 01823 254414
amwarrender@LSDA.org.uk

Philip Barker
Regional Convenor
West Country LSRN
City of Bristol College
The Create Centre
Smeaton Road
Bristol BS1 6XN
Tel 0117 927 9483
Fax 0117 927 3912
philip.barker@cityofbristol.ac.uk