

References

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Providing Further Education in the Community

Around 30% of learndirect scotland branded learning centres are within the further education college sector. This article focuses on the provision of community-based learning, identifying reasons for its success, potential issues around progress and ways to help learners overcome them.



The provision of community based learning opportunities by further education (FE) colleges is increasingly recognised as being of importance in providing opportunities for adult learners to return to education. Many of these adult returners have had earlier educational experiences which have undermined their confidence as learners, and their motivation to learn. Community learning centres linked to the FE colleges can provide valuable ways back into learning for many of these learners. Working with the learners in these centres can pose particular challenges for the staff involved which are, in important ways, different from those experienced by campus based staff. However the community based centres are often peripheral to the work of the college in both a geographical and structural sense. It is important that the issues faced by staff in these centres are recognised, and appropriate support is provided for them.

Many learners who return to study in community based learning centres can be seen as being 'uncertain' or 'fragile' learners. This is often associated with earlier rather negative learning experiences. These learners can require considerable levels of support if they are to overcome this uncertainty.

For many of the 'uncertain' learners who attend these community learning centres the motivation to engage in learning, and develop 'learning careers', is something which only emerges gradually. Their initial reasons for attending classes in community learning centres may reflect factors other than a strong motivation to return to study.

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Some issues for college managers to consider:

- the role of the tutor in providing support and encouragement for 'uncertain' or 'fragile' learners emerges as a key aspect of their role within community learning centres. While the subject specific aspect of their role is important, this emerges as being less central, and the wider supportive role is emphasised.
- many learners are initially wary of assessments. While assessments continue to be important, and learners often say that they value the formal recognition provided by certificates, it appears that it is often useful to down-play the place of assessment at least in the first instance.
- tutors often have to work with a wide range of learners, who may bring with them a range of health and emotional problems, and it is important that tutors are prepared for the range of problems they may encounter.



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Providing attractive taster courses in a range of subjects can be an important way of bringing potential learners into the centres

- traditional methods of advertising courses and attracting learners are of little value with many potential learners. It appears that relatively few use college prospectuses or telephone helplines. Informal local networks are important means of communication.
- providing attractive taster courses in a range of subjects can be an important way of bringing potential learners into the centres.
- facilities which are not directly associated with learning, such as childcare for young mothers, can be significant in encouraging potential learners to take part in activities in the community learning centres.

The ambience of community learning centres can be of crucial importance in supporting adult learners. Many learners attend such centres not just because they are geographically convenient, but also because they provide a supportive cultural context. The wider pattern of social relationships is often of considerable importance in shaping the learning experiences of learners in community learning centres.

Some more issues for college managers to consider:

- the role of the support staff - centre managers, administrators, janitors etc. - is often crucial in providing a supportive environment for learners in community learning centres. These are the people who are there permanently in the context of a changing population of part-time tutors, who come and go for their classes, and learners who come and go in the same way. They have a key role in creating the ethos within the centre, and the context in which people work and study. It is important that the roles of these staff are recognised and properly supported.
- creating supportive environments within community learning centres, which recognise the role of peer support as well as the role of staff, is of considerable importance.
- it can be of significant value to recognise the role of family relationships with children, parents, sibling and partners in motivating adult learners and supporting them in their studies. These relationships can be complex and, for example, the role of partners may not always be supportive.
- informal local networks involving friends and neighbours can be of importance, both in encouraging initial engagement with study, and in supporting continued involvement and progression.

Issues can arise associated with progression from community learning centres and transition to other types of study. While the community learning centres are often very successful in recruiting learners from non-traditional backgrounds, and in supporting many of them in their studies, there may be a danger that the community learning centres become 'comfort zones' for some learners for whom it would be good to progress to other study or work.

To guard against this, colleges should ensure that:

- learners have access to appropriate information about the opportunities for progression to further study, work or training which may take them beyond the community learning centres.
- learners have access to appropriate guidance to assist them in making informed choices.
- initiatives are in place to assist with transition. These may include visits to the main college campus to introduce them to a new learning environment which may initially appear threatening. Mentoring schemes involving learners who have already made the transition can also prove useful.
- in cases where the college campus is located at some distance, appropriate arrangements are in place to assist with travel.

There is now clear evidence of the success of community learning centres in providing routes back into study for many adult learners who would otherwise be unlikely to re-engage with study (Gallacher et al, 2000). However it is also clear that if these learners are to be successful in their studies, and are to progress to further study, training or work, their needs must be recognised. There is evidence that the staff within community learning centres are very supportive of the learners with whom they work, and that this is recognised by these learners. However there is also evidence that the staff who work in these centres have particular needs for support, and that these needs should also be recognised and met (Duncan et al, 2004).

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