



Enhancement of Learning Support

**The training and development needs of learning
support assistants**

The views of learners

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**Flexibility and Innovation
funding**

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

“The Views of Learners” reports on one part of a larger project, the Enhancement of Learning Support, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, LSIS and undertaken by the Association of National Specialist Colleges, (Natspec). The overall aim of this project was to explore the training needs of learning support assistants and those who manage them across the sector, scope existing work and expertise and use the resulting information to make recommendations for future training and development activities.

The project was conducted by a team of seven researchers and a project administrator (Annex 4) who have worked closely together to share information and discuss implications for future work. The methodology used adopted a mixed methods approach including desk research, an online survey, semi structured telephone and face to face interviews, visits and focus groups. Data was gathered across a limited period (January – March 2010), timescales were tight and we recognise that the resulting information could not be comprehensive. It is clear there is a good deal more to find out. Although small in scale, we believe this is nonetheless an important piece of research, as it expands our understanding of a significant and valuable part of the workforce which we know from the literature review has been hugely under researched until now.

The Enhancement of Learning Support project initially used the term “**learning support practitioner**” to reflect the terminology present in the National Occupational Standards (NOS) currently being developed by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) for this group of staff. However, both field research and the on line survey undertaken as part of this project have clearly revealed that this is not a term which is widely used or indeed recognised by many of those working in the sector. Accordingly, throughout this report we use the term “**learning support assistant**” (LSA) to refer to those staff who have direct and regular contact with the learner (or group of learners) and whose role is to facilitate their access to identified support, within the learning process. These staff are not on a teaching or training contract; rather they work under the direction of the person(s) leading the learning. We recognise that providers use a wide variety of titles for staff supporting learning, which may include; learning support assistant, teaching assistant, learning support worker, learning support practitioners, learning facilitators, educational support worker and enablers and other terms not listed here.

It is perhaps helpful to make the distinction between “learning support” and “learner support”. “Learning support” is essentially about enabling the learner to engage with the learning programme and providing personalised, identified support that will allow learners to maximise their independence as a learner, to achieve and to progress. This project focuses on learning support and the role of the learning support

assistant as defined above. It does not cover learner support, which is about enabling the learner to participate by overcoming potential barriers. Learner support provides funding (e.g. for childcare, transport) and services (e.g. Guidance, benefits information, counselling) which enable the learner to access the appropriate learning environment. The project does not therefore cover the staff who support these functions, nor those such as librarians and technicians whose work does not focus on providing this support to individual learners.

This report contributes to the Enhancement of Learning Support Project by gathering the views of a range of learners about their experiences and expectations of learning support and to identify the key characteristics of successful support.



Background and Aims

The focus of this report is to gather the views of a range of learners about their experiences and expectations of learning support and to identify the key

characteristics of successful support. The research team considered the views and experiences of learners to be of critical importance to any recommendations around the enhancement of learning support. Consequently, a series of focus groups took place in March 2010 to seek the views of learners from a wide range of providers. This report will show that learners have very clear views about what constitutes effective support, and about how they would like to be supported. It is disappointing to note, however, that the views of learners are grossly under-represented in the literature around learning support in the lifelong learning sector, and indeed more widely. We are profoundly grateful to the learners who contributed their views to this report with such enthusiasm and eloquence and hope that this report, and the activities that informed it, will go some way to address this.



Scope and Methodology

The scope of this report is learning provider organisations in the lifelong learning sector, specifically: Further Education Colleges (FE), Adult and Community Learning (ACL), and Independent Specialist Colleges (ISCs). Although Work Based learning is not specifically represented, the sample does include adults in adult learning, many of whom reflect within this report on their experiences of being supported within the work force. Over 40 individuals, ranging in age from 15 to 50+, participated in the focus groups and interviews. The sample included people with a range of disabilities, including generalised learning difficulties, complex needs, and visual, hearing and physical impairments. As well as listening to their experiences of learning support, **we learnt about their views on:**

- the qualities they associated with effective support,
- the type of support they would like to be available for them
- the importance they attached to being involved in determining their support arrangements.

We were keen to ensure that the approaches for gathering views were as interactive and accessible as possible and adopted a multi modal approach to capturing this, using video and audio recording as well as written comment. Seeing and hearing

learners talking about their experience and views is very powerful, and so, in addition to this report, we have produced a short DVD of learner voice, based on video and audio recordings taken through-out the focus group meetings. In arranging the focus groups, we endeavoured to secure a range of learners from different providers in order to minimise the impact of provider specific comments. To better support this, the facilitators running the groups have travelled to individual locations in order to reach a representative group. Given the relatively short timescales and the logistics of distance and travel, this was only partially achieved. It was clear, however, in analysing the findings overall, that clear themes emerged which were common across all groups.

A programme of interactive activities was designed to facilitate learners in expressing their views, in a range of different ways, including discussion, video and/or audio, both in groups and individually (see annex 5.) Sessions started with group discussions to ascertain learners' perceptions of and experiences of good and bad support. Thoughts were then recorded onto a flip chart. Learners were also asked to reflect on their views about the skills and qualities required of learning support workers, based on their experiences. These too were recorded on a flip chart. Learners were then divided into smaller teams to work on particular activities, which are outlined on the session plan in annex 5. These thoughts were recorded as audio and video files. To facilitate an open expression of opinions a diary room was also set up, to allow learners to record views privately away from the main group. A small number of learners used this facility.

Findings

The main role of learning support assistants

It is perhaps not surprising that when asked about the role of learning support that a central response was around “helping you to learn”. The value of this was clearly linked to achievements judged to be of value to the learner, such as in a work context, and also in terms of accessing community and social activities. This is clearly linked to raising aspirations and improving confidence –“showing me that no obstacle should be in my way”. Learners also noted however the importance of LSAs being able to “know what learners don’t know” and “being aware of different disabilities.” The importance of employment featured as a key theme, with learners identifying the role of LSAs in “advising on jobs” This was, not surprisingly, particularly prevalent in discussion with adults being supported in work. Learners also pointed to specific aspects of support which were perceived to be of value, including behaviour management and community access, as well as identifying specific contexts where support could be useful, such as sports activities.

Learners thought that learning, and by association, learning support, should be enjoyable. They saw it as being chiefly associated with “enabling” – enabling activities to take place, enabling choice “allowing you to make decisions”, promoting active participation and providing individualised support. These themes of enabling choice and control have clear relevance for delivering a personalised learning experience. An understanding of what is motivating for individuals also supports both learning and enjoyment –“they provide activities for me that I want to do” The role of support in transition was also identified as important. Practical support with literacy, and checking on understanding was also highlighted. ‘You can ask TA’s (teaching assistants) how to spell and it is important that the support is there to check your work as you do it.’ Another noted the value of “support in using the computer, support for knowing what to do and being reminded.’



Personal Qualities

It was clear in talking to learners that personal qualities were key in determining the effectiveness of support. When asked about their views of effective support, learners typically talked in terms of personal characteristics, citing for example, the need to “be friendly, understanding”, “enthusiastic” “caring” “relaxed” and “patient and calm”. The importance of punctuality was also referenced.

Implicit in these comments is something around the underpinning value of respect. As one learner with a hearing impairment put it, it is vital that LSAs “have respect – ask learners to repeat rather than pretend to understand what they are saying.” A learner with a hearing loss wryly commented “Someone who is deaf is no different and should not be treated as such, same eyes, same mouth, and same brain.”

In identifying experience of less effective support, learners referenced the detrimental impact of “negative attitudes” and failure to “emphasise (my) capabilities”. They also acknowledged the value of skills around LSAs being able to promote learners self esteem, provide encouragement and enable choice. They talked about the need for empathy and understanding, as well as acknowledging the role of “care” in the wider emotional sense, as opposed to the provision of (personal) care.

One group produced a list of the key qualities they felt the ideal support worker would possess.

- Patience to sit down and work things through in a timely manner
- A good listener
- Help you improve your confidence
- Knows the balance of your ability
- Let me do things for myself and allow me to find out about myself
- They care about you and work to your agenda
- Give you freedom to learn and do not restrict you
- Promote opportunities to be independent
- They adapt to your feeling and circumstances – Flexible response

It is, perhaps, significant that the majority of these relate to personal qualities.

The ability to listen was a central theme, cited by numerous learners. It is clear that learners are sensitive to the approach with which LSAs responded to providing support, with value being attached to LSAs “being committed”, appearing to “enjoy the job” and being “happy to help”. As one learner succinctly put it “Have a good heart, enjoy the working relationship.” A non judgmental approach was valued “they support anyone, regardless of their disability.”

In addition to these personal skills and qualities, learners also highlighted the importance of knowledge.

Knowledge and understanding related to their role

It is clear that in order to provide effective support, LSAs need a high degree of knowledge. A significant number of learners identified the importance of understanding and knowledge in relation to the impact of a disability not only on learning but in relation to the individual. This ranges from understanding the medication regimes of individuals, to specialist understanding of assistive resources and technology. This involved more than just reading a file, it was also around consultation. Learners wanted LSAs to ask them about their support needs rather than making assumptions based on what they knew in general terms about a disability. Learners with visual impairment, for example, commented that it was often assumed that because a learner had a visual loss, they would know how to use Braille, be able to touch type and have mobility strategies in place, where in fact it was these very skills that an individual might need support to learn. There was also, amongst these learners a consensus that LSAs needed to know about specific eye conditions and the impact of these on learning.

Whilst it was clear that knowledge was an issue, the requirement for this to be subject specific featured much less highly in learners' priorities. Indeed, one group had quite a protracted and interesting debate around this. Some felt that too much subject knowledge led the support worker to over direct, thereby undermining the learning being achieved by the learner. They felt that ideally the subject worker should be learning alongside the learner. Others identified that sometimes poor teachers are over supported by knowledgeable support workers, and where this happens it is difficult for learners to define who the teacher is.

The capacity to empathise was identified by many learners, irrespective of disability. It is however interesting to note that a significant number of those learners with a visual impairment felt that an appreciation of what it was like to experience being visually impaired was important. Many commented positively about the quality of support provided to them by LSAs who themselves had a visual loss, because they were able to identify with the difficulties faced by those they support. Having experience of using assistive technology for their personal benefit meant they may have particular skills around how to use key software, like Supernova and were therefore able to make significant contribution in setting it up and providing helpful advice and guidance, borne of personal experience. A further advantage identified was that where difficulties occur, sighted LSAs inevitably apply "sighted" solutions, but these are not open to the learner with visual impairment, and hence not easily acquired or applied.

Although the learners did not use the term learning style, it was clear that they felt effective support required understanding and knowledge about the way in which individual learners like to learn. Learners with moderate and complex learning difficulties for example, wanted to be involved in practical based activities and thought support workers needed to understand this. They preferred pictorial resources to convey information rather than verbal instructions and written text. Sometimes these learners found making choices difficult and therefore those supporting them needed to know something about individual learner's likes and dislikes in order to support choices and avoid frustration by giving and expecting too much autonomy.

In addition, learners said that they would like support workers to have some knowledge of their personal support history and also their contextual and social background. These factors impacted on the way support is delivered and more importantly received. They noted that differences between the ways family and friends support and the support provided by those supporting learning sometimes creates conflicts in terms of delivery, learner's expectations and behaviours.

Training needs of LSAs

It is interesting to note that when asked about training needs, learners identified some of those elements we would typically associate with compliance, such as health and safety, first aid and medication. Despite the vast range of skills, personal qualities, knowledge and understanding they identified were needed by LSAs, learners did not typically link this to training.

There were some clear training needs associated in supporting learners with specific disabilities. Learners with visual impairment for example identified that LSAs needed to learn the skills to be able to guide someone (mobility) in a new environment. They noted how important it is for visually impaired learners to get to know the space they are working in and how exploring this is critical not only to moving through the space without guided support, but in building confidence and creating a feeling of safety as well as independence. Learners with hearing impairment noted the importance of LSAs having a minimum level of signing at BSL level 2 or above. "LSAs need to learn how to sign clearly and be able to translate and explain. Support workers need outstanding communication to be able to do more than just interpret". This was echoed by another learner who commented "I do car mechanics and sometimes they have to communicate effectively, they have to know about what I need to understand. It can be difficult to communicate with someone who does not use BSL. It is about understanding rather than translating and supporting me with this understanding"

Training and/ or qualifications are not however, the only factor. Learners with hearing impairment also cited the need for personal qualities such as having patience, in

order to apply these effectively in practice – LSAs supporting learners with hearing impairment need to maintain focus on what the teacher is doing if they are to be able to reinforce it through sign with the learner. This is critical to avoid misinterpretation.

They also identified associated requirements around being aware of deaf culture, using eye contact, touch, being observant of surroundings and being generally aware that physical contact is part of the culture. The importance of touch in deaf culture is perhaps counter-intuitive to staff in these settings, the vast majority of whom of whom will have undergone training in either child protection and or Protection of Vulnerable Adults. This indicates the importance of contextualised training and understanding for staff working with deaf learners, and indeed also those with responsibility for delivering personal care with dignity. Practical skills such as the effective use of gestures and other means, such as lights, to communicate and attract attention support effective practice. Clearly some training would be required to support LSAs in developing the knowledge implicit in the development and application of such strategies and approaches.



Promotion of Independence and personal autonomy.

In listening to learners, a central theme emerged around the importance of LSAs respecting learners’ personal space. It was clear that learners did not want to be “followed around all day”. It is interesting to note that as learners talked about their experiences of support over time, they did acknowledge that this was more a feature of school than of further education, which suggests that learners’ experience of further education is more in keeping with their adult status. A number of learners recounted their experience of support in a school context, when they had found support to be overbearing, and felt it had restricted their freedom to express themselves. The perceived “stigma” of having a learning support worker working too closely with them was also identified. This was not just about the provision of support, per se, but the way it was provided, with learners valuing the skills involved in providing unobtrusive support, and the capacity this had to reduce the stigma of being supported amongst their peer group. Some learners with visual impairment noted that the strategy applied to support the impact of their disability, of sitting at the front, in practice only served to increase this stigma. A degree of social stigma appeared to be seen as inevitable, with any kind of support, but against this learners also recognised the contribution appropriate support has in “making me feel safe”. Another learner commented “having someone always there is reassuring” It is

interesting to note, that while the views of learners are widely underrepresented in the literature, the comments they make chime very effectively with the finding around effective practice, as the extract below from the literature review produced in support of this project amply demonstrates:

“In a review of evidence on the impact of support staff, Howes (2003)¹ concluded that the way in which support was provided led to either inclusion or exclusion. Where support was provided for a group and for an individual in the context of the group, promoting interaction between disabled and non-disabled learners, it led to inclusion. In contrast, where support was provided in isolation to an individual, where a TA was ‘attached’ to a single learner, described as the ‘velcro’ model (Gershel 2005),² it could lead to dependency, exclusion and stigmatisation. Although support staff were appointed to support learners, they could paradoxically inhibit their social relationships. Ainscow (2000)³ suggested that although the presence of a one-to-one teaching assistant may often appear ‘socially reassuring’ to both the learner and the teacher, unless carefully managed it could actually create a barrier between the learner and the rest of the class. By providing individual support, attention was drawn to the learner’s inability to cope without support and may have an adverse effect upon the learner’s self esteem and ability to work independently.” Faraday, S 2010.

Where LSAs were effective at providing appropriate support as discreetly as possible this was not only valued, but recognised as being a significant skill by those they support.

There was a clear sense that learners value being supported in a way which **promotes**, rather than just **supports** independence; learning to do things on their own with guidance when required, as opposed to being constantly directed or told what to do. One learner said “they let me improve my independence” and another commented “support workers should promote independence”.

¹ Howes, A. (2003). Teaching reforms and the impact of paid adult support on participation and learning in mainstream schools. In *Support for Learning • Volume 18 • Number 4 • 2003* pp147-153

² Gershel, L. (2005). The special educational needs coordinator’s role in managing teaching assistants: the Greenwich perspective. In *Support for Learning • Volume 20 • Number 2 • 2005* pp 69-70

³ Ainscow, M. (2000) The next step for special education supporting the development of inclusive practices. In *British Journal of Special Education*, 27 (2) 76-80.



A role in defining own support

Perhaps the most significant finding relates to the importance of learners playing a key role in defining, contributing to and owning their own support packages. The relationship between an LSP and a learner was powerfully described by one contributor as being “a partnership arrangement and not a one way process”.

In looking at what learners have said about the role, personal qualities, training needs, skills and experiences of both effective and ineffective practice, it is clear that they are skilled in understanding their own support needs and what that means for those who support them. The majority of those spoken to could identify what they personally found difficult, and what support they required. Whilst learners with more complex communication difficulties found it more difficult to articulate, they were, for example, able to clearly state they did not want to be followed around, with an LSA attached to them at the hip. They also noted that they were often assigned support without consultation.

The importance of placing learners at the centre of initial and indeed all types of assessment was noted, particularly with regard to assistive technology and resources.

The overwhelming consensus was that learners wanted to be, and felt they should be, consulted about the way in which support is conducted. They also felt that LSAs could usefully learn from learners’ reflections on their experience in order to better match the support provided to the needs of the individual. It is interesting to note that a number of the learners with visual impairment commented positively about how the LSAs they worked with adopted this approach in their practice, in particular, asking the learner to describe his or her eye condition, sitting down and chatting in order to find out about this before starting to provide support. Learning the contextual background to learners was recognised as being particularly important, since some had been born without sight whilst others had only recently lost their sight. A learner with a hearing loss commented “there is a difference between hearing impaired and deaf – support staff should ask what level of support is required rather than trying to second guess –it’s nice to be asked.”



Practice and skills associated with effective support

Learners in one group worked to collectively to identify the qualities of good support and produced the following list:

- Helping students to work by themselves
- Respecting each other (student and support worker)
- Providing help to understand things
- Support and guidance for health and safety
- Work as a team
- Knowing when to help
- Being able to maintain focus in class – in order to effectively communicate
- Good positive and enthusiastic attitude
- Have a good heart, enjoy the working relationship
- Give space to learn independence, explain task and stand back

An analysis of the various comments and observations made by both groups and individuals suggests that there are common themes about the factors which are important to learners in ensuring that experiences of support are positive. These are:

Time management

A central theme associated with effective practice was the management of time. As already noted punctuality was identified as a requisite personal skill, but the management of time was identified more broadly. Learners referenced for example, the importance of LSAs explaining things properly and at “a manageable pace”. They felt LSAs needed to learn how to **give time** to learners to undertake tasks, make responses, make choices and to develop and put in practice what they have learnt. Many learners say they feel rushed and that often learning support workers do things for them because they have not got time, compromising both their independence and the development of skills, and minimising time for learners to practice a task or make a response. This was particularly evident with learners with complex disabilities, for whom the whole pace of learning is different. It was felt that many support staff do not appreciate or understand this. In some cases learners also said time factors and external pressures on support staff meant they did not get the attention they felt they needed.

Getting the level of challenge right

Effective support clearly requires an understanding of each individual's ability, as learners pointed to the importance of providing the appropriate level of challenge, ensuring that learning tasks were not beyond the individual's capability. The importance of taking needs into account was clear in ensuring that work set was at an appropriate level. The demoralising impact of getting this wrong was noted, along with comments around how learners felt this highlighted their "incapability". The role of effective LSAs in pushing learners to meet their potential was also seen as important. "Support workers should know what I am capable of and push me further, they should boost confidence"

Providing learning in an appropriate context

Linked to this perhaps is the issue of the context for learning, in that a significant proportion of learners noted the value of activity based learning in supporting understanding, as opposed to information being provided in purely verbal or written format. The role of LSAs in enabling choice has already been noted. Learners clearly appreciate that making decisions is hard, and that this was best achieved when LSAs were able to use their knowledge of the learner to guide the nature and extent of choice, so that learners did not feel frustrated or confused.

Communication skills

The ability to explain tasks and expectation clearly and in appropriate chunks was identified as an important skill. Where this was achieved it reduced levels of anxiety as well as supporting understanding. The importance of communication skills was identified not only in relation to LSAs communicating effectively with learners, but in having the skills to support learners to communicate effectively with others, particularly in the work place. Clearly the ability to use alternative communication approaches such as BSL was particularly important for deaf and hearing impaired learners. This required not only practical skills in BSL but the capacity to differentiate between levels and types of support from verbal to different levels of BSL. It was also deemed necessary to know each teacher and way they taught in order to be able to effectively relay to learners the detail and understanding of the delivery – this is particularly difficult in foreign language classes.

Given what learners are saying about their desire, and right to be involved in determining their own support needs, this too has implications for communication skills. Learners felt that negotiation techniques were required by LSAs in order to involve learners in assessing and agreeing the ways they wish to be supported. It was felt this might mean learning specific coaching and mentoring skills, rather than just 'helping' a person. The capacity to listen has been identified as important

elsewhere, and learners also pointed to the value of having skills in reflective questioning.

Supporting behaviour

A number of learners referenced the role learning support assistants had in supporting them with their behaviour, noting how important the build up of trust between staff and learners was in facilitating this. Where this worked well, learners spoke about LSAs sitting down with them to work through behavioural and social difficulties, displaying sensitivity and understanding. While one group was clear it did not see support workers as role models, others did feel it was important that LSAs “set an example in terms of behaviours, respect and ways of working”. All those who felt they needed support to manage their own behaviour reported they were happy to be guided by them about behaviour.

Developing and using resources

It was clear in talking to learners that the use of appropriate resources was a key factor in supporting their learning. This ranged from the use of specialist and assistive technology, to more practical resources to support learning. Learners in specialist colleges for example commented favourably on the provision of specialist resources relating to health and safety, such as visual fire alarms. A number of learners with learning difficulties identified the value of pictorial resources as an aid to learning. Others noted how these could also be effective in helping them to understand challenging concepts such as emotions. Learners with visual impairment welcomed the use of assistive resources which enabled a more discreet, low key approach, and indeed, felt that often what they needed, rather than support from an LSA, was access to appropriate resources to enable them to work out alternative ways of doing things. For many, irrespective of disability, the right resources were seen as being key. It was stressed, however, that the development of these must be undertaken in partnership with the learner, without assumptions. As illustrated elsewhere in this report, to use such resources effectively requires high levels of knowledge and skills. There were many instances cited of support staff fumbling around trying to resolve equipment issues without knowing what they were doing.

about LSAs showing a lack of commitment - "can't be bothered" and also LSAs "thinking they know it all, and making assumptions about us".

They also identified being over supported as an issue, both in terms of limited opportunity to do things for themselves, and in terms of support being excessively and needlessly intrusive. "I had one to one support which followed me around, and made me feel self conscious. In the end, I left". Learners were clear that effective support was not about telling learners what to do. Some individuals cited personal experience of ineffective support, whereby an LSA had failed to take account of the impact of a recent medical condition, an issue which was only resolved when her parent contacted a senior manager. Another commented "They think they know what I want without asking." Another frustration experienced by many learners was the lack of knowledge to work with specific equipment or software, particularly in using IT access equipment, communication aids, or specific software like Supernova.

One of the groups produced the following list to illustrate their collective view about ineffective support:

- Not being challenged
- Lack of specialist knowledge (particularly associated with VI)
- Lack of interest in the work of the learner
- Support worker has own agenda – too self centred
- Support gives too much help
- Too patronising
- Too overbearing –not enough space to do things for yourself
- Lack of communication or poor communicator
- Lack of praise
- Lack of care
- Lack of respect
- Underestimation of learners' abilities
- Think they know how you feel
- Make you feel bad about yourself
- Give unachievable tasks beyond learners' ability

It is interesting, and not surprising, to see that it is effectively the antithesis of the things that have previously been identified as being characteristic of effective practice.

Conclusions

Implications for Practice

The groups were asked to summarise what it was they thought LSAs should know, understand and do. The list below summarised the thoughts of all the groups:

Support workers should;

- learn the impacts on learning of different disabilities
- review the support history of learners they are supporting and identify any differences between different types of support to alleviate conflicts
- involve learners in assessment and support allocation
- learn coaching and mentoring skills as part of a qualification
- learn time management with respect to differencing support requirements
- learn the technical aspects of equipment/software learners are using
- work with learners to develop skills for independence, not just support it
- develop resources to negate the need for physical support and promote independence
- ask learners their views, and act on them
- differentiate support according to different teachers and teaching delivery (know the teacher's style) – particularly when working with deaf learners
- develop strategies to use with deaf learners of how to communicate with hearing people particularly in work place settings
- be aware of deaf culture – if in doubt ask the learner

It is clear that learners value the support that is provided to them but also that they are very clear about what and how it should be provided. The list of personal qualities, skills, knowledge and understanding required, as identified above is testimony to both the complexity, and the responsibility, associated with this role. Whilst this has clear implications for training, there is a sense that it is more than that. As one learner put it, "Most of all it's about learning and earning trust – disclosing barriers that prevent learning and acting on these with learners to instil this trust while promoting independence."

DVD

Much audio and video testimony was produced undertaking these focus groups. A report such as this cannot begin to exemplify the powerful nature of the comments learners made about the support they receive and their aspirations for future support.

The project team therefore has created a short DVD of learner views, in order that the written recommendations in this report can be contextualised with the learners' actual comments.

Annex 1 - Steering Group

Alison Boulton: Natspec (Chair)

Viv Berkeley: Niace

Andrew Chiffers: Farleigh FE College, Frome

Mark Dale: Portland College

Graham Jowett: Treloars College

Joy Mercer: AoC

Anne Price: David Lewis College

Ann Ruthven: LSIS

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Caroline Smale, Henshaws College

Haydn Thomas: West of England College

Ruth Thomas: Derwen College

Barbara Waters: Skill

Annex 2 - Contributors

The project would like to thank the learners in the following colleges and organisations for their time, enthusiasm and commitment in making this series of focus groups possible.

Artshape, Gloucester

Exeter Deaf Academy, Exeter

Gloucestershire College, Gloucester

Gloucestershire County Council (Supernova adult learning class), Gloucester

National Star College, Cheltenham

New College Worcester

Royal National College for the Blind, Hereford

This report has also drawn on the literature review produced by Sally Faraday as part of the Enhancement of Learning Support Project.

Annex 3 - Project reports

Enhancement of learning support: the training and development needs of learning support assistants

Findings and recommendations

The views of learning support assistants and their managers

Training and Development Opportunities

The views of learners

What learners think (easy read version)

Literature review

Resource bank

Annex 4 - Project Team

Project managers:

Alison O'Brien

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Project team:

Richard Amos

Sally Faraday

David Finch

John Gush

Brian Simpson

Project Administrator:

Maria Coulson

Annex 5 – Session plan

Sessions range according to the circumstances of each group. No session was less than an hour long with some sessions at 2 1/2 hours long

Ice Breaker – 10 mins

Warm up 'speed dating' activity. Learners are asked to move around the group and think of a different thing to say to each member of the group about themselves. They must move to another person after 10 seconds when the whistle is sounded.

Learners to be asked about their courses and whether they have come from a specialist school or through mainstream education. Learners to be asked how much support they are currently receiving.

Defining Learner Support – 15 mins

What is Learner support – group to formulate definition together – write key words then construct definition – 10 mins – flip chart

Using the key words make a statement about what learner support might be.

Focus on support – 60 mins

3 groups of 4 or 5 learners – each group does 20 minutes per workshop rotating through all three

Workshop1. – Making a drama out of support

Plan a story or short piece of drama – 5 minutes maximum on **what learning support means to you**. You can make this anyway you choose – serious, funny. You could make it positive (good support) or show the negative (bad support). This will be filmed through the flip camera.

Workshop 2 – Creative support

As a group write a poem or a song or draw a poster which captures the **group's feelings** about learning support – Try to think about the key words you would use – you may want to think back to the first exercise in defining support.

Workshop 3 – Radiohead

As a group of learners you have been asked to appear on the radio – You will be interviewed about what learning support means to you. This will be recorded.

The questions will be;

- How does learner support help you with your learning?
- What is good about having a support person with you in your classes?
- What could be done better?
- What would your advice be to a support worker?

Activity 2 – Expectations – 30 mins

Split into 3 groups of 5 or less to discuss – one theme per group

1. Attitudes – spider gram
2. Approach – spider gram
3. How support is delivered – spidergram – 20 mins - flipchart

Share thoughts gaining general consensus from each theme – 10 min - flipchart

Activity 3 – Values – 25min

Diary room – Plan and record

1. What things you feel are important about teaching support
2. How would you like to give your views in the future