



Support for Tutoring in Challenging Times: FETN online discussion 22/04/20

Tutors across the UK are working steadfastly to ensure learners are safe, supported and continue to engage in their learning. You might very well say that this is not unusual but the circumstances in which they are working most definitely are. It is at times like these that we realise how valuable it is to engage in and support community whether it is family, friends or colleagues at work.

FETN has a key role in bringing together and supporting colleagues from the tutoring community across the UK Further Education and Training sector. FETN members have regular opportunities to meet online and share good practice however, in these particularly challenging times, I feel it is only right to reach beyond the membership to support all those who are working to provide the best for their learners.

Tutors and tutor managers are invited to meet online every Wednesday from 1:00pm to 2:30pm to discuss tutorial issues and to support each other in finding workable solutions. Below is a snapshot of yesterday's conversation which featured student engagement, motivation and progression planning.

Engagement and motivation

One motivational challenge to date has been keeping learners engaged and motivated to complete course work whilst distanced from College. Many tutors are saying that mixed messages are, in some instances, leading to low motivation. One example given is the perceived disparity in treatment between vocational students and other students. In a letter from Ofqual to GCSE, AS and A levels students they were advised that *"Your school or college is not required to set additional mock exams or homework for your centre assessment grade, and you won't be disadvantaged if you were not set, or were unable to complete, any work given out after schools were closed"*. Some vocational students are questioning the fairness of having to continue with their studies and complete coursework, in some cases in difficult circumstances, whilst believing that those on other courses do not.

It has also been found that some students are struggling from the lack of structure that is normally provided by attending college, and that they are finding it difficult to 'self-start'. Where students do engage there is an emerging pattern of them starting later in the day and working into the evening. Interestingly, one college reported that many 'high anxiety students' are coping really well working from home, citing a sense of safety working in their own space and having control over how they spend their time as key reasons. Other participants noted that many hard to reach learners are keen to engage online to discuss their emotional health and wellbeing, which they may not have been willing to discuss face-to-face, but their overall motivation for their studies is low.

In addition there is an indication that some students are facing difficulties created by the assumption that they have both the IT facilities available to engage online and to continue with their coursework, and that they have an appropriate space within their home to concentrate and work effectively. The flip side to this is that where the space and technology is available some learners are being encouraged to develop their IT skills and that both staff and students are exploring new ways of working. That said it is important to recognise that some students are feeling overwhelmed with the number of emails they receive, therefore a joined up approach to contacting learners should be used to ease this situation. In the main students really welcome



phone calls from tutors however tutors should bear in mind that if they do not possess a work phone they should make sure their personal number is not shown when making the call.

It is clear from yesterday's conversation that tutors are constantly seeking to develop innovative ways of encouraging motivation and engagement at a distance and here are just a few of their suggestions:

- Create online enrichment programmes
- Provide online 'coffee and chat' or 'chat and chill' sessions with tutors in groups or 1-1
- Celebrate successes for example where students have volunteered to help the NHS or engage in local community support it has been highlighted in the principal's email to students, parents and staff
- Student body representatives running society meetings online
- Competitions are used in various forms to encourage learners to complete coursework and engage in online teaching sessions
- Providing rewards and incentives for progression students to encourage them to do work now e.g. to secure their first choice work experience placement
- Creating opportunities for online collaborative learning
- Helping learners to improve their sense of wellbeing by encouraging them to use positive language, examples shared included:
 - *"I'm stuck at home" to "I'm safe at home"*
 - *"Everything is closed, what will I do?" to "I can still get all the things I NEED like food and medicines"*
 - *"College is closed, what about my course?" to "The College building is closed but my learning is continuing at a distance and my tutors are there to help"*.

Some colleagues spoke about creating a database to track the various activities that learners were engaging in. We also discussed the potential for mapping levels of individual engagement with college RAG rating systems to help identify emerging patterns that might inform our understanding of the impact of current circumstances on learners' individual needs.

Progression Planning

The main concern relating to progression planning appears to be the lack of certainty. Students want to know how they will be awarded their qualifications and what impact the disruption will have on their final grades. Tutors are anxious about having progression conversations with students because they do not have answers to these questions and the guidance they receive is not always clear.

Tutors are also concerned about the range of progression opportunities that will be open to students once the world returns to some form of 'normality' and indeed what that normality will look like. In the meantime they are turning their attention to:

- Encouraging learners to write about 'What I did during lockdown' and to reflect on skills they used to cope, manage their time and stay committed to their studies. This can then be used to help with progression planning, university applications and applications for work. Employers won't want to hear '*played loads of COD on PS4 and didn't do much work*' so this may also help with motivation.
- Increasing employer engagement by inviting them as virtual guest speakers so that students can 'ask the expert' about the vocation they wish to pursue



- Utilising external support tools for learners progressing to university such as <https://unibuddy.com/> and <https://www.ukuniversitysearch.com/>
- Encouraging students to undertake extended project qualifications
- Providing UCAS and personal statement webinars
- Engaging learners in 1-1 progression planning discussions in order to help them consider and prepare for a range of eventualities
- Creating transition resources to help students moving forward, both into and beyond further education

If you have found this article of interest and would like to participate in any of the forthcoming online discussions please email me at info@fetn.org.uk and I will add you to the mailing list and send you a link to join the meetings. The topics for next week are 'Supporting transition back into life and learning' and 'The emergence of a new tutorial curriculum'.