



Personalisation

The DfES outlined its strategy for personalising FE in the Personalising FE: Developing a Vision. On 16th February 2007, a sub-group of the National Learner Panel met as part of the official consultation process to provide the learner perspective on this strategy and the main points of discussion are summarised below.

Broadly, we agree with the principles that underpin the vision – many of us have had past experiences that could be classified as the positive outcome of a personalised approach. We very much see the strategy as a way of trying to achieve the targets set out in the Leitch report – and believe that getting this right could be the key to delivering everything that the economy needs in terms of skills.

At best, and if properly implemented, personalisation could create the conditions that will result in a more positive outcome for the learner, helping to improve self-esteem and confidence.

However, at worst it could simply create another layer of bureaucracy that detracts from the essential business of putting the learner at the centre of education. We have outlined below some of the areas that we believe the DfES will need to consider in order to address this risk.

Definition of personalisation

We are broadly happy with the definition of personalisation in the document. As learners, personalisation also suggests to us:

- an approach that goes hand in hand with the new emphasis on a demand-led system
- a new emphasis on pastoral care – the idea that there will be a mentor who has a personal care for you
- a means of helping learners to know where they are going, to help them discover a sense of direction
- the development of people's aspirations

Benefits of personalisation

We believe that one of the benefits of personalisation could be a more streamlined system that provides a seamless journey for the learner through differing stages of learning – and across different types of learning. In addition, it should mean that learners are more confident about what their individual journey looks like – where it begins, and where it can take them in future.

It could help to place more emphasis on positioning the move from compulsory education to further education as a rite of passage, to make it a more attractive proposition and encourage people to stay on in FE – or return at a later stage in life.

Personalisation could encourage better links between Quality Assurance directorates and student services within colleges, as there will be a need to ensure that students requiring help can be signposted to somewhere that is unbiased and independent.

Ideally, it should help to create a system in which *everyone* gets rewarded and in which each learner has goals that directly relate to him/her as an individual, and which s/he feels are achievable.

Implications of personalisation for assessment

The benefit of a personalised approach to assessment is that learners will feel more ownership of the process. However, we are not immediately clear about how this will work. How much ownership of assessment will the learner have – and will this vary for different forms of assessment? How does learner-owned assessment (which is necessarily subjective) sit alongside the need for the clear, objective standard that is required if qualifications are to be portable? Obviously there is a risk that if assessment is completely owned by the learner, rather than the assessor, this might tip the balance and could impact upon the external perception of the value of a given qualification or standard. We need to be clear about which aspects and types of assessment we own, which we co-own and which will be externally measured.

At the moment, learners don't always prioritise individual tutorials because they don't know why they are being asked to attend them – or what to expect when they get there. If personalisation is going to call for more one-to-ones, learners will need to be clear about the purpose of a tutorial and view it as a valuable learning opportunity in itself.

Personalised Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

There is real potential for a more personalised approach to IAG to become a form of life coaching that supports learners in setting and achieving realistic but aspirational goals. IAG needs to follow learners throughout their educational journey.

Information is often too vague to be of much practical use to a learner – especially a work-based learner. For example, much could be done to better communication between businesses and jobs centres or career services to provide a commercial perspective on the advice.

A more personalised approach should ensure that IAG opportunities provide ongoing pastoral care and empower the learner – and also inspire the potential learner who has dropped out of education. We need to start with ambition – and wrap advice and guidance around that.

However, despite the fact that we recognise these potential benefits, we are aware that they can only be realised if the strategy is well implemented – and we have several real anxieties on this front.

Risks and concerns

First, if the strategy is to work, it is essential that it has the support of the sector. It **must be correctly positioned** or it risks provoking a negative reaction from the sector (e.g. “not *another* government initiative!”). However, we don’t think that personalisation should be seen as something new: It is something that all really good teachers instinctively understand and do to some extent automatically – and this is how it should be sold both to the teaching profession and to individual learners. It should be seen as celebrating the good work that is already being undertaken by the best in the sector.

Next, there is a risk that in implementing the strategy we might be adding another layer of bureaucracy that ironically diverts an already-stretched workforce from being able to focus fully on the real business of enabling learning. **How achievable is this given the resources available on the ground to deliver it?** How will it work in practice? Will colleges really have the capacity to “look into individual learners’ lives”?

Finally, we think that **learner advocates** have a key role to play in delivering the vision for personalisation – they are a powerful mechanism for encouraging hard-to-reach learners to participate again. However, our understanding is that funding for such initiatives is being cut. How will this vision be achieved without the necessary financial resources to support it?