

## **NAEGA Millennium Research Bursary**

At the end of 2000, NAEGA announced a Bursary scheme to assist members to undertake research into any aspect of guidance. One of the recipients was Joy Boyle who requested help to complete an MSc. The Degree was awarded to Joy in September 2002 and the paper below reports on the main findings of her research. Joy writes: "I was very pleased to receive a bursary of £250 from NAEGA. The bursary helped with items such as buying text books and research papers, travel to the University of Strathclyde and also to pay for some clerical assistance. Thank you."

**NAEGA is pleased to be able to publish Joy's paper.**

# What Impact Does Pre-Entry Guidance have on Student Success?

By Joy Boyle

## **Main Aims of the Study**

The main aims of the study were to:

- ▶ Identify the users of the pre-entry guidance service at Fife College
- ▶ Evaluate the impact of the pre-entry guidance service on the client group.

## **Introduction**

The FE sector has a serious problem over the retention and achievement of students and there has been a great deal of research into the reasons for drop-out and non-achievement. In contrast my aim was to evaluate the impact that good quality pre-entry guidance could have on the expectations of the learner before they enrolled on a course and how this ultimately impacted on retention and achievement of students within Kingdom College\*. I believe pre-entry guidance has not been investigated before as a priority issue in retention and achievement. Unfortunately guidance is seen as a 'soft indicator'

which is not taken into account for Student Unit of Measurement (SUMS) in FE, therefore it is vital that research informs FE on the link between quality guidance and student retention and achievement.

The aim of this study was to track a cohort of students in Kingdom College, who were given pre-entry guidance, to see if this guidance impacted on their choices and ultimate success.

## **Methodology**

The study lent itself to being an evaluative study, based on pre-entry guidance records (752) compiled over a four-year period (secondary data). Questionnaires (318) were sent to all students who were given pre-entry guidance during this period and who had enrolled on a course. Questionnaires (98) were also sent to clients who received pre-entry guidance in year 1999/2000 but who did not enrol on a course. These questionnaires were followed up with focus group sessions and telephone interviews.

## **Secondary Data Findings**

### **General**

The actual number of clients seeking pre-entry guidance rose significantly over the four year period (62%).

### **Characteristics of Client Group**

#### **Ages**

All age groups seeking pre-entry guidance increased over the four-year period apart from the 46+ age group.

#### **Gender**

More females (59.5%) than males (40.5%) are seeking pre-entry guidance.

#### **Marital Status**

The majority of clients are single, representing 70% of the clients seen. Married clients account for between 18 and 20%.

#### **Dependent Children**

The majority of clients do not have any dependent children (67%). Those with dependent children tend to have

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one or two children (32%). Only 1% of clients have three or more children.

### Qualifications

The majority of clients seen for pre-entry guidance (75%) already had some qualifications ranging from standard grades/modules to a degree or equivalent.

## Primary Data Findings

### Enrolled Clients

Feedback from respondents:

- ▶ 45% were unemployed when they sought pre-entry guidance
- ▶ Clients sought pre-entry guidance to help them select the most appropriate course for them
- ▶ They believed that the pre-entry guidance provided comprehensive information on different courses and progression routes which helped them to decide on the most appropriate course for them (80%)
- ▶ Just under a third had withdrawn from their course. However, those who had withdrawn from courses still had a fairly positive impression of Kingdom College and stated that they might seek to enrol on a course in the future, once the climate/circumstances is right for them
- ▶ 39% completed the course and progressed into further or higher education.

### Non-enrolled Clients

Feedback from respondents:

- ▶ 75% do intend to enrol on a course at Kingdom College in the future.

### Focus Group and Telephone Sessions

Clients were asked ten questions, three of which are listed below with the main responses:

1. What was the main benefit of receiving pre-entry guidance?
  - ▶ Good advice made me choose this course.
  - ▶ Helped you choose the right course for you.
2. Do you think that pre-entry guidance should be advertised more? Why?
  - ▶ Yes, because students can go on the wrong courses.
  - ▶ Yes, because people do not know of the services.
3. What do you feel are the barriers to receiving guidance?
  - ▶ Need more outreach guidance in local communities.
  - ▶ Lack of communication and advertising.
  - ▶ People not owning up to needing help.
  - ▶ Need approachable people in guidance.

### Evaluation of the current pre-entry guidance service

This information is important as it confirms that pre-entry guidance can encourage the client to feel better about themselves and help to dismantle barriers to learning. From a 'soft' indicator viewpoint it is encouraging that more than 50% of clients receiving pre-entry guidance actually enrolled on a course and that

the number of clients enrolling on a course and successfully completing has increased year on year.

### Referral to Kingdom College

The largest cluster of clients (95 from a total of 220 in 1999/2000) are referred from within from the College.

### Options Interviews

Options interviews helped 24 (63%) of 38 clients taking up an interview to enrol on an alternative course which they successfully completed.

## Summary

From the research it is clear that the majority of people would welcome the offer of a pre-entry guidance interview prior to being interviewed for a particular course. It is also evident that people would prefer a one-to-one guidance interview where they can confront their fears and expectations in a 'safe' environment.

### Client Centred Approach

The message to FE seems to be to ensure that a client-centred environment is created where people can access a friendly, professional and impartial guidance service when they want it. In this way clients will be more inclined to come back for advice and guidance even if they have, in the past, withdrawn from a course.

I have also been able to identify that clients are seeking more than information and advice when looking for a course of study. This is why a one-to-one pre-entry guidance interview is essential, to enable the guidance advisor to gain the



confidence of the client so that a number of issues can be addressed prior to developing an action plan for the future.

### Qualifications

The people who should be targeted are those without any qualifications who possibly have a negative view of education from school days and could be termed the 'socially excluded', these people are in the minority. However, they probably have a variety of 'life skills' which they tend to under-estimate. Women, in particular, appear to dismiss their skills in home management, child-rearing and their own experiences of 'growing-up' and working.

Therefore it is very important that strategies are devised to encourage more people into learning and especially men, possibly with the guarantee of employment on successful completion of a course.

### Referrals

The source of referral to Kingdom College is very useful information for marketing purposes to ascertain where potential students are obtaining information about college services. Most people are looking for the opportunity of a one-to-one guidance interview to explore various learning opportunities and to assess how these will impact on their personal life.

### Options Interviews

Options interviews were introduced a few years ago, due to the number of students who were unsuccessful in gaining admission to their course of first choice (often courses such as hairdressing, beauty, construction skills,

theatre arts). These prospective students were sent a letter telling them they had been unsuccessful for that particular course but offering them an options interview to discuss alternative courses. These have proved particularly successful.

### Marketing of Guidance Services

The survey indicates that the marketing of guidance services within the FE sector needs to be urgently addressed. It is not enough to advertise a variety of courses that, in many cases, have no meaning to the people reading the advertisements. The advertising of guidance could be targeted at each group individually stressing the importance of having the right information to be able to choose a course, suitable in terms of level and subject.

It is also clear that people's perceptions about the role and purpose of FE lags behind what is actually happening in FE today. While many colleges have changed and view adult returners as a key target group, this has not become clear to many people within the community.

### The Future

Research suggests (Martinez and Munday, 1998) that it is important that individual FE colleges carry out their own research into guidance and it's relation to retention and achievement.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, going back to my original question – What impact, if any, does pre-entry guidance have on student success?

I believe that my research is evidence that pre-entry guidance does have a positive impact on the expectations of the client prior to enrolment on a course and assists them to be confident enough to take responsibility for their own decisions. This could be termed successful in itself.

Almost 70% of the pre-entry clients who enrolled on a course have successfully completed it. This would indicate that pre-entry guidance is beneficial and does in fact have a positive impact on student success. This coupled with the fact that a number of non-enrolling clients have stated their intention to enrol on a course some time in the future, when the time is right for them, suggests that to dismiss pre-entry guidance in relation to student success is foolhardy.

The management of FE colleges appears to be either unwilling or unable to justify expenditure on a quality pre-entry guidance service where the results are not tangible or immediate. However, further research within the FE sector could use this study as a framework for future developments in guidance.

\*Kingdom College is not the real name, this has not been disclosed for reasons of anonymity.

### Reference

Martinez, P. and Munday, F. (1998) *9,000 voices: student persistence and drop-out in further education*. FEDA.