



Supporting disabled tertiary learners in an online environment, learning webinar

Held on 24 July 2020, 12:00pm – 1:00pm

A complete set of questions and answers from the webinar.

Question	Open Polytechnic's answer
Do the academic supporters get any training, either from Open Polytech or Vitae in how to best support with disabled learners?	<p>At this stage there's no formal training for our academic supporters. They are usually interested people. Often people that may have done a little bit of support before. They get some support from the Vitae staff member that contacts them. And they often, depending on the situation, there will be times when they will be working with me to get advice about how to manage a situation. So that would certainly be something that we could think of doing. We do send out some written information to the new supporters. But I would sort of see that as some - an area of development. As I say, nothing formal at this stage.</p>
Are any other providers aside from Vitae that people might be able to use? And why did Open Polytech pick Vitae to support their disabled learners?	<p>At the time we were looking for, to put the support in place, we had a relationship with Vitae. You may know that Vitae are a provider of employee assistance programs. And so Open Polytech already had a relationship with Vitae in that they are the supplier of our EAP program. And we actually just got in touch with Vitae to see if this work was something that they would be able to pick up. So we started off just by having quite informal conversations with Vitae staff to see if it was something that they would be interested in doing.</p> <p>We felt that it was quite a good fit with the skills that they already had. Because they have a lot of trained counsellors on their staff. So it was actually something that was new for Vitae staff as well. So we worked quite closely with them while we set up the arrangement. So Vitae, from their side, they put together a team of four staff that we work with. So Steph is in quite close contact with those staff. And if there's any issues, they know to contact us and we know who to contact at their end. That works quite well.</p> <p>We have a small team of their staff that we work with. And they are the ones who do a lot of work to find academic support people for us. So, yeah, the relationship really came about through us just approaching Vitae in the first instance and then working with them to set it up.</p>

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<p>On the support workers, we've also been asked whether they receive ongoing mentoring. And if they do, how often and from whom?</p>	<p>I would say perhaps it's not so much mentoring that we're providing. There's a lot of communication, I think, that happens between the different parties. So the academic support people, if they have any issues, we encourage them to get in touch. And we just work through those issues as they arise. So the key, I think, is to keep the communication going between all the parties.</p> <p>To make sure that the academic support person, you know, knows that they can contact us and we will help them resolve any issues that come up. And also if Vitae are in that loop, that Vitae are speaking with us and speaking with the academic support person as appropriate. I think we find most of the academic support people are really great in raising issues and going, "This is what's happening for the student." This is what's happening in their life and how they're struggling. That enables us to get in and go, "This is how we can help support that student.</p> <p>The important thing to emphasise is just the diverse range of support that's required. So with our students, they seem - there are such a wide range of needs. That to provide any sort of mentoring on a group basis would be very difficult. The needs and the problems really are quite individual. And I would say just about every day there's something different that comes up that we need to think about. So, yeah, there are a couple of supporters that do have a number of students that they work with. And those supporters I have quite a close contact with. Some of them have sort of quite high need students and need quite a bit of advice.</p>
<p>During lockdown were there any additional supports you found needed to be provided over and above what you already provided?</p>	<p>So lockdown was a bit challenging because obviously the face-to-face work with the students couldn't go on. We did it did give us an opportunity to use Zoom. So some of our tutors were able to take on sorry, our academic supporters were able to see a number of students via Zoom.</p> <p>We also had quite a number of our academic supporters have young children. In fact, one of them has four children. And so she was unable to - she didn't have any capacity to be supporting students during that time. So it was very interesting, it did provide the opportunity for us to use the technology so that students could still get a bit of support. Yeah, that was kind of the main way we sort of carried on, other than ongoing just phone conversations with them. Vitae were still working so they were still doing regular check ins.</p>
<p>Is there a team responsible in Open Polytech for checking the accessibility of your courses overall prior to their publication? And what support is available, within Open Polytech to</p>	<p>Our courses are on the iQualify platform. So it's iQualify's responsibility that team 2 make sure courses are accessible. My understanding is that they do - that they do regular testing and they access different software. So to make sure that the courses work to a satisfactory level. So, you know, I think that the aim is that they follow the web content accessibility guidelines. And so that guides their practice. You know, I think probably things aren't absolutely perfect. There's always room for improvement.</p> <p>They're very responsive when there has been feedback saying, "Look, this bit isn't working for this student", and they are very keen to find out. Especially the student I was talking to you about who is blind and deaf, this has sort of been quite an interesting time</p>

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ensure that the courses are accessible?	<p>for all of us just to overcome the issues that have come up. So, yeah, I don't know if that sort of quite answers the question.</p> <p>It's obviously not something we are directly involved in. This happens in a whole different department. And I'm really happy to get if there are more specific questions, I can answer those - contact that team and get some more answers.</p>
How is support offered for learners who might be studying in the corrections setting?	<p>I would say a number of the - there are prison tutors. So I would imagine certainly for people with learning disabilities that they would be getting some support in that way.</p>
What kind of academic support do the Vitae workers provide in comparison, say, to a learning adviser?	<p>Vitae don't provide academic support. They are really the sort of contact point for finding academic supporters out there. So if an academic - if one of our academic supporters needs help supporting the student. They would be more likely to come to me or to contact the course tutor. So they can get sort of an understanding of the course content. But Vitae don't involve themselves in that way at all. They would be more likely to get involved if, perhaps, there's a student that someone is particularly worried about. Or they're having, you know, some sort of difficulty with communicating with them. But they don't really sort of enter into the academic side of things at all.</p>
Do your team provide training within Open Polytech for academics and other staff and how they can best support and engage with and enable disabled learners in the Poly?	<p>I've been involved in a staff training video which is for new staff members here at Open Polytech. And it's training them in a number of things but part of it is talking about, you know, how to support students with disabilities. I'm also part of a community of practice where we - there's a large group of people from the Polytechnic attend that.</p> <p>And coming up this year there will be - I will be carrying out a session on supporting students with disabilities. I must say, I have a lot of contact with the tutors. As, you know, it's a privilege of being in this position, actually, is just that I've got to know a lot of people here. Because I sometimes need to find out more - with all the courses that are offered, I need to find out more about the courses.</p> <p>And how best to support students. So as I said before, that collaborative approach is really helpful because we all have - we're all privy to different bits of information that can be helpful for the student. No one of us is an expert in all the areas.</p>



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