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The exam logistics conundrum in FE and WBL

The summer term is soon upon us and minds turn towards exams and testing. In colleges and PTPs, this is a challenging logistical problem for a sector not used to the number of learners taking exams. In one college, for example, this was the main route of questioning at interview for their new Head of Exams, and it is a problem without an easy solution.

So how do we solve a problem like exam logistics?

There are many ideas out there that colleges have employed, and this is just a collection of those ideas without any endorsement.

With the numbers resitting maths and English GCSEs in FE and WBL increasing exponentially, the question of where to do these tests arises. Colleges have bought into the idea of modern computer based exam suites, but these do not really help with you have over 1000 learners doing the same exam at the same time. So what are colleges doing?

Full curriculum shutdown

Many colleges and PTPs have decided the best option is to close for the day, allowing their teaching spaces and staff to be utilised for exams. Exam considerations mean lots of space is required as are readers, scribes and invigilators.

Renting out space

Other colleges and PTPs are renting out space in the local area for their exams. Although costly, it ensures that the college could potentially continue working as normal. Ensuring learners get to the correct location can be troublesome, especially as one of my own members of staff got lost on the way to an off-site location last year. Some colleges and PTPs have resorted to providing transport to ensure learners (and staff!) get to the right location.

This brings on to the other elephant in the room when discussing exam logistics, how to get the learners there in the first place.

In the middle of summer 2016, I was sitting at my desk in the college I worked at. A steady stream of learners turned up to tell me that they didn't attend their GCSE exam that morning, and could they resit the next week. As my heart started to sink, there was a dawning realisation of the advantages schools have over colleges: their learners are always meant to be there! So on exam day, they can be marched into the room and they could do the exam, even if they had forgotten why they had been studying over the previous two years.

Colleges and PTPs especially do not always have this option, so here are some tried and tested ideas for you to consider.



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Texting

One college has resorted to texting learners one week, one day and one hour before their exams to ensure their attendance. It helps that they have a software solution for this. This means keeping records up to date, as young people (and old) are wanting to change their numbers on a regular basis, and their college is not high on their list of people to inform.

Anecdotally, one college realised one minor issue with this, when a member of staff forgot to email a group of learners about their Functional Skills exam that was taking place in lesson time. They found that more learners turned up. Their texting system was not just informing learners of exams, it was warning them too!

Posters

One college has adopted the approach of having countdown posters showing the date and time of the exam and a weeks to go calendar. It would be useful to encourage them to take a picture on their phone too.

Letters to learners (and a responsible adult)

Sending letters home, regularly.

A whole college approach

All the tutors responsible for that learner are responsible for reminding them. Overkill, possibly, but it might just sink in.

Breakfast (and lunch) club

Colleges are starting to offer a free breakfast or lunch to learners on the day of their exam to entice them in in time for the scheduled start.

Loyalty cards

Some colleges use loyalty cards to encourage learners to attend revision sessions and tutorials which are then transferred into money to spend in the college on trips, in the salon or in the shops and cafeteria. This money is released to the learners after they have turned up to the exam.

This is just a collection of ideas, tried and tested by colleges across the country. So what is your college planning to do to solve this tricky conundrum?