QIA Pastoral Support

The National Learner Panel met on 17th July 2007 to discuss the meaning of the term ‘pastoral support’ from the learner perspective, and take a view as to whether or not this term is the best way to describe the types of support provided for learners in FE.

1. Introduction
The Quality Improvement Agency is funding an action research and development project which involves working with 19 organisations (pilot sites) across the FE system to map and establish effective practice in the area of pastoral support. This project is aiming to answer two major questions:

- What do we mean by pastoral support?
- What works for different learner groups and in different learner settings?

The field-work started in March 2007 and will be completed by October 2007. It will lead to the development of an online resource or ‘tool-kit’ which providers can use to develop and improve their pastoral support.

As a part of the ongoing development of this project, the QIA asked the National Learner Panel for its views on the following key questions:

- What does ‘pastoral support’ mean to learners?
- Is the term ‘pastoral support’ the best way to describe the support offered to learners as described in the latest QIA definition? If not, what other term could be used?

2. Panel Response
*What does ‘pastoral support’ mean to learners?*
Initially, each of us spoke in turn about what we understand by the term ‘pastoral support’. Our individual responses were very varied and have been recorded below:

- It should include anything a student has a need for that is not dealt with in the classroom, such as: information, help in communicating with a teacher, dealing with real life problems, academic problems, and social problems.
- Above all, it is about ‘pinpointing problems’, the things the student is worried about, and then responding to them.
- It provides students with leadership and guidance when they need it most.
• It is any support that the student gets. It can come from tutors and peers, as well as outside college, especially with something like counselling.

• Listening is the most important thing. Sometimes having someone to talk to is more important than getting an actual solution as such.

• It is a ‘helping hand’. It should be integrated, although often it is not.

• It is different depending on where you are. When you do get it, it is often not joined up with your educational experience.

• It depends on the people who are responsible for giving the support. There is a contrast between people who care on an individual basis and those who would prefer to make the problem look as if it has gone away so that the institution looks good.

• I had never heard the term before, but I had a vague idea that it was about everybody helping each other.

• I have no idea what ‘pastoral’ means. But I think it allows everyone to be different, despite being in the same boat.

• I had no idea what the word meant, but there is a sense in which the support is precarious and it might be taken away.

Is the term ‘pastoral support’ the best way to describe the support offered to learners as described in the latest QIA definition?

Some of us did not have any idea what the word ‘pastoral’ meant. Those people who did know the meaning of the word felt strongly that the word ‘pastoral’ had connotations that were not helpful or appropriate in this context. Some people pointed out that a ‘pastor’ is associated with religion, forgiveness and judgement. We felt that this association could be off-putting or excluding for some learners.

We are also concerned that there is a tension between the QIA definition of ‘pastoral support’ and the meaning of the word ‘pastoral’. We believe that pastoral support is supposed to empower students to help themselves, whereas the term ‘pastoral’ implies that students are shepherded and shown the right way. Some of us feel that this is particularly inappropriate for adult learners.

What other term could be used instead of pastoral support?

We suggest that the terms ‘learner support’ or ‘student support’ could be adopted instead of pastoral support. Above all, we believe that the term adopted should be accessible to learners and easily understood by them. We feel that the term ‘pastoral support’ is too hard for learners to understand. We would like to emphasise that all types of learners need to know about the support and what it could do for them.

Some of us have pointed out that the accessibility of the language is particularly important for people who are unsure about entering further education and who will be easily put off by words
they perceive as ‘posh’ or ‘academic’. We suggest that pastoral support should reach out to potential learners in the community, as well as those who are already enrolled in a course.

3. Summary of feedback for QIA
Our discussions indicate that the terminology used to describe support is important from the learner perspective. We recommend that the term ‘Pastoral support’ is replaced, because it does not feel relevant to many learners, it is not accessible enough, and it presents tensions with the definition the QIA is seeking to promote.

Our alternative suggestions are ‘learner support’ or ‘student support’. Above all, we urge the QIA to keep the terminology simple and easy for learners to understand. We suggest that the QIA gives particular consideration to those people who are not yet engaged in learning but could also benefit from this support.