



THE PENCOL DIVAS

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1 Introduction

Pengwern College is a specialist, residential college situated in North Wales and part of the Mencap national college network. Mencap is the largest representative voluntary organisation working with people with a learning disability in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The college caters for students with learning disabilities and profound and multiple learning disabilities. This means that many of the students have more than one disability, the most significant of which is a profound learning disability. People who have profound and multiple learning disabilities can have difficulty communicating and many will have additional sensory or physical disabilities and complex health needs. The students of Pengwern College are aged between 16 and 25 and come from various parts of United Kingdom.



Students are encouraged and supported to be independent. Skills for life are developed through a curriculum that embeds literacy and numeracy, including use of signs and symbols where appropriate. Developing life and social skills is at the heart of the College ethos, in that the main aim is to prepare students for the next stage of their lives.

During the week and at weekends, students are encouraged to take part in extra curricular activities. These activities include visiting local leisure centres to participate in team sports, taking part in art and drama sessions, and socialising either in each others residencies or at local venues including pool halls, public houses and karaoke bars.

Philip Atherton, a third year student, Elizabeth Sumner, Jamie Redfern and John Buckley, all second year students, were invited to join together to consider a research project. They have been involved in group work as a

team before and expressed an interest in working together again. They chose the group name of 'The Pencol Divas' and felt that it was important to look at issues they, the students in a residential college, were interested in. Katie Owen Gant was primary support worker for the project.

So, after much discussion, the topic of socialising and what opportunities are available to meet and mix with other young people at Pengwern College, was agreed upon. The research would also look at exploring the possibility of a youth night once week at the college. The group decided they would meet once a week on Tuesday after college to plan how they would research the project, what tools they would use and how they would ensure that all the students would be able to contribute to the research.

2. The research aims

The aim of the Pencol Divas was to assess and improve the social opportunities for students at Pengwern College. The group decided that the research would focus on interviewing the students to find answers to the following questions.

- To find out if there was interest in a weekly on campus, youth club.
- What is the student perception of the options to socialise within Pengwern College?

3. Methodology


The research design

As the research project involved students with profound and multiple learning difficulties both as group members and subjects who were asked questions, the group had to ensure that they communicated in a meaningful way and were able to work with a diverse range of needs. The group discussed the value of having differing opinions or suggestions and felt that they needed to ensure that the interviewees were able to communicate and have their views listened to. To ensure this could happen, the group looked at the various 'communication' support packages available.


The definition of communication within the Colleges Communication policy is defined as 'the process of attempting to suggest information from a sender to a receiver with the use of medium'. For example, asking an individual if they would like a drink of tea or a drink of juice by showing the image of each and allowing the individual to respond, either verbally, by use of sign language, gesture or by use of the image. Louisa Roberts, Head of Function in Communication, supported the group to create questionnaires that would meet the needs of all the students and offer a 'total communications' approach.

The group understood that they would have to use systems that were specific to the individual abilities and that they would need to adjust the question to meet the needs of the individual. They used a range of communication tools, such as, symbols, photographic material and Makaton to ensure all students could access the questionnaire.


Here are some examples of how the group used pictorial symbols within the questionnaire as a means of communication.




What activities would you



like to do in the evening?



What choices are there for you



to meet after college?

Both these questions were supported by an answer sheet illustrating various options / activities, this enabled students who had no verbal communication to make choices. Please see appendix 1.

Once the research tool of a questionnaire was decided upon, the group had to look at when they would talk to the students, for example the group felt that using break time would be difficult as the students would be too busy spending time with their friends, playing football, having coffee and relaxing. The group decided that they would speak to the tutors to ask if they could spend time in their sessions interviewing students. They also decided to look at how they were going to conduct themselves within the sessions and what role each of the group would take. Some of the group had no concerns about speaking to a large group of students, while others felt uncomfortable about this and it was agreed that they would support the speaker by handing out the questionnaires etc.

The research participants

Prior to approaching the students, the group wrote to the Principal and the Assistant Principal. The group asked if they could meet with them to discuss the research topic and to ask them some specific questions about how they felt the college provided social opportunities for the students.

The group led the meeting and asked:

- Do you think that the students are provided with opportunities to socialise?
- Would the college support and provide resources if the research found that students did want to organise a youth club?

Both the Principal and Assistant Principal were in support of the research topic and advised the group that once they had completed the research, they would like to meet again with the group to discuss the findings and to look at the implications for the college and Mencap.

Research ethics

Working with vulnerable young people meant that the group had to follow certain guidelines. This entailed making sure that any opinions, feelings or ideas the students communicated to the research group would not put the young person in danger or mean that they were subject to discrimination because of their views.

The group had access to tutor support throughout the project but this was only used to enable them to explore the topic and process the responses. The support remained objective and did not take on the role of pre-empting

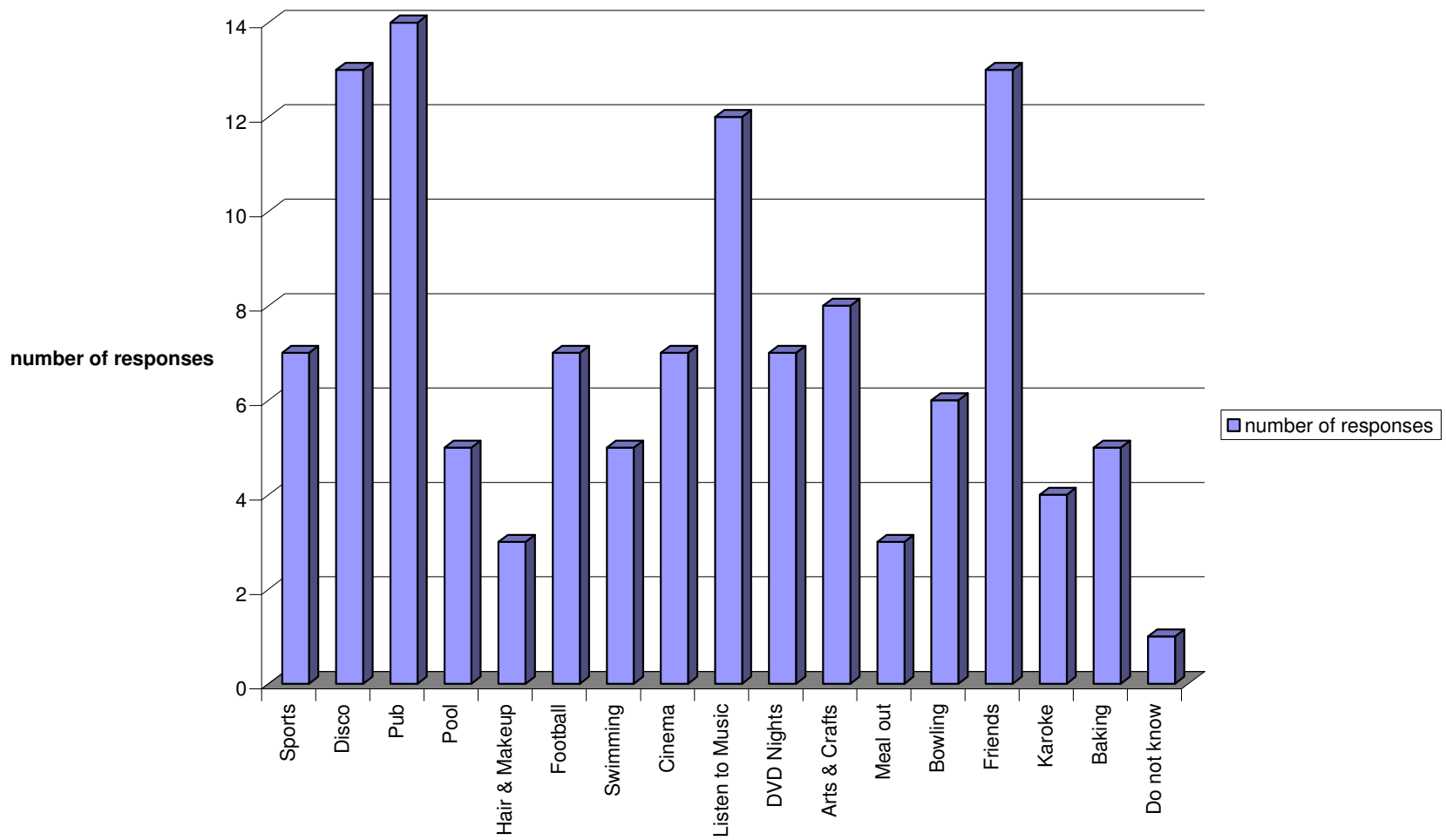
questions or answers. At times, some members of the group struggled to retain information but support provided, enabled the group to process and analyse the research carried out.

The research procedure

Initially the group arranged with tutors to go into sessions to ask the research questions. After a few sessions, the group decided to look at another approach as tutors were asked to give feedback and some felt that students found the interview procedure disruptive and found it difficult to go back to their work once it was over. Some members of the group also found it nerve racking to stand up in front of their peers and struggled with communicating verbally in a formal setting. They then decided to try speaking to students during lunch time. They felt that while students were eating lunch, the setting was informal and the group would feel more comfortable, as if they were talking to friends. This approach helped the group to generate responses as they found that the students were more willing to talk to them as peers having lunch rather than as peers in the classroom. So over soup, sandwiches, baked potatoes and coffee, the group spoke to 36 students and this is what they found.

- 10 students feel they have no choices
- 7 students feel they did have choices but they were limited and they would like to choose where they go and with who, rather than the people they live with.
- 17 students felt they have choices
- 2 students put unknown.

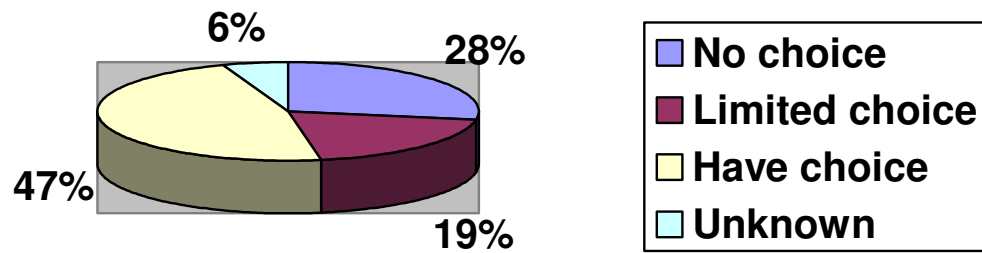
The group also asked the students what activities they would like to do and spent time with the students exploring various options. The following chart shows the main areas of interest.



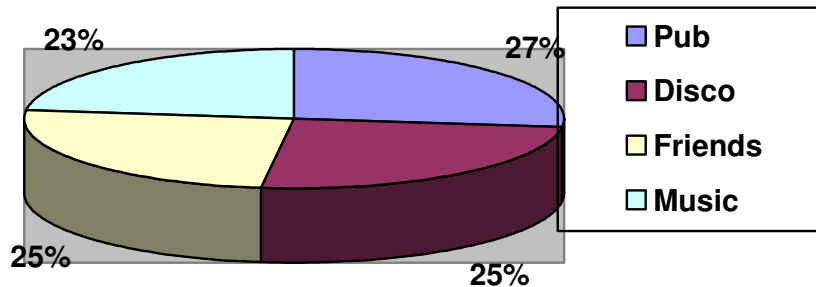
4. Analysis

By interviewing 36 students, the group had managed to talk to and spend time with over half of the 69 students currently attending the college.

By creating a pie chart, the research group noticed that although almost half of those interviewed, 47% felt that they had choice, those who felt that they had limited or no choice also accounted for 47%.



From exploring what activities the students are interested in, the group found that the top four areas of interest are: The pub (14 votes), Disco (13 votes), Friends (13 votes) and Music (12 votes).



5. Research findings and conclusions

With the information collated and compiled, the group started to look at what the information they had gathered, actually told them in relation to their original area of research.

‘What is the student perception of options to socialise within Pengwern College and is there interest a weekly youth club?’

The group recognised that the data collected both showed that students wanted to take part in activities, but did not appear to feel that they had a choice in this.

By looking at the top two areas of interest, the pub and disco, the group could see that students appeared to be interested in meeting off campus and that further research would be needed to clarify if ‘friends and music’ were considered a campus or community based activity. This information would be needed to determine part of the original area of research, ‘is there interest in a weekly youth club?’ The group agree that currently there is simply not enough information to answer that question.

An area of interest that the group did notice however, was that only 47% of the students interviewed felt that they had choice in the leisure activities they took part in. With the other 47% feeling that they had limited or no choice.

The findings have been presented to the Principal and Vice Principal and the group is now considering how to take forward its findings and whether to explore the issues around choice or if there is a need for targeted leisure activity and what form that would take.

The conclusions and views of the Pencol Diva’s may not reflect the views of the National Youth Agency.