

Realising potential: insights into the design and delivery of pre-vocational programmes

Wolverhampton Adult
Education Service



This case study focuses on how Wolverhampton Adult Education Service (WAES) is increasing activity to prepare learners for employment and/or vocational study through the design of more intensive courses (more hours of study over a shorter period of time), and in particular, a series of courses under the 'Steps to Employment' programme which are aimed at people with low level literacy and numeracy skills who are unable to access the extensive number of Level 1 courses available within the Wolverhampton area.

Brief description

Pre-vocational courses at WAES attract a wide participation profile. The 'First Steps to Employment' programme model was initially targeted at JCP mandated clients but, following funding changes in summer 2015, is also open to WAES learners attending vocational programmes but found by their tutors to lack the required core and employability skills – an increasing proportion of the total intake – and learner self-referral. The Service has found two general groups of pre-vocational learners: those with pre-Entry and Entry Level skills and a specific vocational interest, and those at this level who currently have no specific vocational interest but wish to progress with their learning and/or find work. All of the 'Steps to Employment' courses adopt an integrated approach to develop core skills (English, maths, ICT and language), 'soft' skills, employability and specific vocational tasters. This involves multi-disciplinary planning and delivery teams from across the Service. 'First Steps to Employment' is one of the courses on offer.

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Effective practice - the detail

Steps to Employment programmes were developed in liaison with key partners including JCP, the City Council Economic Inclusion Unit and employers. Each is defined by the occupational activity and the needs of the target group. Other WAES programmes which support those with pre-Entry and Entry Level skills, but who do not yet have a specific vocational interest, include Activities for Health (targeted at those with a diagnosed mental illness), life skills programmes for adults with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and a 'Give something, Get something' course for those seeking volunteering opportunities. For those with a defined vocational interest, the Service offers introductory courses in health and social care, caring careers, hospitality and catering, floristry, textile and dress design, childcare, and customer care. Pre-recruitment courses for local employers – where learners have a guaranteed job interview on course completion – have also been developed, together with a 'Getting Ready for Employment' course for those with a health-related ESA. Further such customised courses are currently in development, reflecting ever-closer links with the City Council Economic Inclusion Unit and designed to address local authority corporate priorities for development and regeneration.

Sue Knottenbelt, Head of Service notes that

“We have always tended to work with those furthest away from the job market, who often experience complex and multiple socio-economic disadvantage. An increasing proportion of those presenting themselves as potential learners have core skills needs, and several display other problems or have personal issues which render them not yet ready to progress into a job. Much of our work is to engage such people, to help them gain confidence, to give them the opportunity to develop their skills and attitudes and to provide them with the encouragement, the opportunities and the pathways to progress with their learning, and ultimately to play their part in the local economy or in the wider community. It's what we do as a Service – who we deal with, and how we plan and deliver.”

Entry and Level 1 programmes of study with a specific pre-vocational main qualification aim are increasing: 347 learners attended such programmes in 2014/15, while 240 participated in the first term of the 2015/16 academic year. Two cohorts of 'First Steps to Employment' were beginning their study at the time of the visit (January 2016), and more are planned. Success rates on these courses are high. Taking one of the autumn term 2015 cohorts as an example, two thirds of learners progressed to discrete courses at WAES ("something that would never have happened without the Skills to Employment programme"); 13% continued their studies; and one secured an apprenticeship with a local employer. As a further example, of those following a 'First Steps to Care' programme, 100% gained a Level 1 Award in Preparing to Work in Social Care, and 94% achieved a Level 1 qualification in Employability; over 56% of this cohort gained employment or a voluntary placement.

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When last inspected (December 2014, Grade One) OFSTED found that:

“Almost all learners across the whole provision achieve their learning goals. Particularly high numbers of those on courses leading to qualifications gain the intended award. In all subject areas, this is well above the national rate. Almost all learners complete their courses, progressing toward and achieving a high percentage of their personal aims. [...] Typically, success rates in foundation programmes have been particularly high. Learners attending programmes that do not lead to a qualification progress and achieve very well against an appropriate combination of course and personal aims relevant to their circumstances, starting points and aspirations. Learners’ work is of a very high standard and in most cases well above that expected for the level of course they are attending. [...] Learners really enjoy learning and this is reflected in their good attendance, punctuality and retention. Many learners now attend a programme of learning across a range of courses having become fully engaged with learning and developing a hunger for more.”

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A deliberate shift to more intensive, integrated programmes

It can be argued that, other than 'leisure and recreational' courses offered under the Community Learning funding stream, all WAES programmes are essentially pre-vocational. The Service's approach has however changed significantly over recent years, with more intensive courses, and a focus on developing integrated skills in language, number and ICT.

Aziza Chaudry

Senior Manager (and OFSTED nominee) explains:

“We still offer discrete English, Maths and ESOL provision but these courses can also include integrated employability, ICT and other core skills as well as opportunities to apply and develop language and number skills in vocational and creative contexts. This has helped learners completing discrete courses with supported progression to pre-vocational areas of study. An example to illustrate this would be that learners on discrete Level 1 ESOL programmes were offered a five week taster programme in a number of creative areas as enrichment. The team plan the scheme of work and jointly identify opportunities for language development and number development, and team teach as and when appropriate. We are following a similar approach in other curriculum areas including Level 1 Childcare, Health & Social Care and Floristry. Learners on all of these courses ideally also get a programme of wrap around services such as employer links, coaching and mentoring and next steps support.”

This shift is described by senior managers as “pretty organic, but based on clear decisions”. The development is informed by such strategic factors as national FE and skills policy, increasingly close links with the City Council and a desire to demonstrate how Service activity is helping meet corporate objectives, the mandating of JCP clients, the introduction of outcome-based success measures (and the perceived likelihood of a shift in future funding arrangements to a more explicit payment-by-results methodology) and, most recently, the local area review process and an expected move to local commissioning based on outcome agreements. It also makes good educational sense, enabling WAES to focus ever more closely on ensuring its programmes lead to definable progression, whether into further study or into employment.

“The integrated approach we are increasingly adopting is a big change for the Service, but is central to our mission as a ‘first steps’ provider, offering a personalised programme which responds to our learners’ needs. It is a different way of working, it provides challenge to our tutors and our programme managers, and it is resource intensive; but ultimately it is highly rewarding and, as OFSTED found when we were last inspected, it brings really positive results. We have, for example, seen the unforeseen impact of more and more learners opting to take additional discrete core skill courses, while, by involving tutors from different departments, we have helped support lateral progress by learners who are, through their experience here, finding out what they really want to do and developing the confidence and the personal autonomy to do it. That can only help in increasing the likelihood of them succeeding with their eventual goals, even if it takes them a bit of time to get there.”

Sue Knottenbelt

Head of Service talks about:

Programme structure and content

‘First Steps to Employment’ requires 75 hours course attendance, and leads to accredited qualifications in English and in employability. English and maths are integrated through topic-based learning, and basic ICT skills are integrated into two employability units – Provide Personal Information for Employers, and Learn About Managing Money. The scheme of work contains additional elements: a Basic First Aid course and a Basic Food Hygiene course, each of 3 hours duration; a session on volunteering and how this can help with job applications and gaining experience; and a deaf awareness session. **Art work is included to help develop self-expression and gives learners the chance to build skills in communication, decision making, research and evaluation. Personal development sessions are designed to build confidence and prepare for the interview experience; and learners are also able to access vocational taster sessions** and, in cases where they have a clear occupational goal, undertake “inspirational visits” to relevant local employers.

The six weeks of course delivery are each themed to cover: getting to know you, our local community, house and home, health, travel and transport and next steps. A recent review of the course is now leading WAES to restructure ‘First Steps to Employment’ into seven weeks so that the final week can be focused towards preparing for the next steps for participants. Each week follows a similar pattern, e.g. employability (including ICT) on a Monday and Wednesday. Project work such as planning, shopping for and preparing an end-of-course celebration event – part of the managing money strand – runs throughout the programme. Specialist staff, both from within WAES and from partner agencies, visit on a Friday to deliver additional elements.

Two learner cohorts are run in parallel (morning or afternoon); these are streamed on the basis of English competence, as assessed at an initial pre-entry session and subsequent scrutiny of reading and writing diagnostic assessments by specialist tutors. In recognition of the need to provide a safe and purposeful learning environment, all Steps to Employment programmes are now capped at 12 per cohort.

Focus on progression and support

Initial assessment is extremely thorough. Learners complete a literacy and numeracy diagnostic test and, for those on ICT skills, a practical assessment with a specialist tutor prior to starting their course. Pre-enrolment sessions do not simply assess competence in core skill areas, but also begin a discussion with prospective learners on their eventual goals; they are additionally used to emphasise the integrated curriculum design and delivery approach adopted. Such sessions often result in referral to a lead tutor for fuller discussion prior to a prospective learner starting on a course to ensure appropriate placement.

The completion and use of individual learning plans (ILPs) is highly developed. ILPs record initial and ongoing assessment, and have clearly set and challenging targets. **In-class review of progress by tutors is continuous, with specific areas for development noted in the course file so that others in the multi-disciplinary teaching team can tailor their lesson plans to address specific needs.** This, according to Craig Watkiss who teaches embedded English on a number of courses in the Steps to Employment programme, means he can “react to what’s going on in the lesson, and give a quick ten minutes on the relevant learning point”. Regular and planned reviews after each session assist learners to reflect on their achievements, and to understand what they are required to do to improve their progress.

In discrete Functional Skills courses, early assessments inform learners’ starting points well. The setting of targets takes place after an extended period of induction to determine abilities and skills before fully starting their course. Regular progress reviews provide learners with clear and helpful feedback on their performance, and consequently this helps with the careful planning of the next steps in learning.

Reviews take place regularly and clearly focus on learners’ progress towards the completion of their courses. Feedback provided by staff encourages learners to improve their performance.

The integrated nature of an increasing number of courses ensures assessment and development of core skills, ‘soft’ skills and employability, with regular and ongoing information, advice and guidance, which is effective in supporting learners to identify appropriate qualifications and meet their career aspirations.

WAES specialist staff provide individual guidance and learners are helped to prepare for employment effectively by completing application forms correctly and building appropriate curriculum vitae at one of the Service's learning development centres. Access to the internet also provides helpful links to information on employment; the Service has a computer loan scheme in place. Learners keep a diary as a record of their activities and use these to track progress.

Staff provide timely advice to learners so that they gain in confidence to take on new challenges. Learners appreciate and make good and regular use of the well-resourced learning development centres, where they receive specialist help on a range of personal and academic matters.

Learners benefit from excellent in-class and individual additional learning support which ensures that they succeed. Information, advice and guidance are very good. Learners have a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities and have access to extra support and self- study opportunities. These support their progress outside the classroom to achieve their learning outcomes, as well as helping them gain in confidence.

The Service readily acknowledges it “can't do everything for everybody”, and has developed and refined its partnership working to resource elements of provision. WAES for example draws on the expertise of the Beacon Centre which specialises in support for the visually impaired. External links are also used to help those learners seeking to set up their own business, including help with marketing, and local networking.

The Service's partnership with TalentMatch has enabled learners experiencing extreme disadvantage to complete these courses supported by the charity's mentors. **Talent Match** is targeting young people who are furthest from the jobs market, including those who are completely outside of the benefits, work and training system and facing severe barriers to gaining the skills they need to get into work. In some cases, these learners have taken up a European work experience opportunity supported by the Service's Erasmus+ European funded programme.

Although the significant majority of WAES pre-vocational learners progress internally, constructive links are being developed with other providers in the city, especially the FE college and the university, and a clearer delineation of the programme offer across the city. **Plans are in place for Service Programme Managers to meet with their college counterparts on a regular basis in order to develop a keen awareness of what each provider offers, and for forward planning intentions. There is cross-referral between the two providers, and they jointly diary open days in the City Learning Quarter.**

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Staffing

WAES seek to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of the community and of learners very well, with a wide range of courses to meet the needs of local employers. The ESOL programme supports the large local immigrant community well to prepare them for vocational study or employment, while the range of arts courses includes an emphasis on commercial application. Managers also design courses to meet the needs of learners with respect to timing of the provision and geographical location, and they respond well to learners' requests to adapt courses to suit their needs. The shift towards a more integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to programme design and delivery both responds to and facilitates this.

This requires a carefully thought-through approach to staffing. Senior managers have developed an effective structure whereby a team of five programme managers, each with responsibility covering a number of related subject areas, also have cross-Service responsibility for a particular strand of development.

This ensures that the sharing of good practice across WAES, and within and between subject areas, is very strong.

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Sam Thomas, Development Lead for the 'First Steps to Employment' course said:

“Course leads are essential in the delivery of these courses, acting as a conduit, ensuring it all joins up. We are frequently dealing with learners who have issues, and part of the job is to gain and retain their interest. That means that, as a team, we have to be flexible and open to change. The delivery has to be structured in a way that has relevance for each learner. That’s why we do something different every day, and why each day there is clearly something to do. Some of our learners have been long term unemployed, others have been out of formal education for a long time. We have to take a gentle but purposeful approach – friendly and relaxed, but always with an eye to progress. We select staff for the Steps to Employment programmes on the basis of their experience, knowledge and inter-personal skills; they need to be good at listening to learners, and prepared to shift focus within the course, as well as to help in an evaluative review at the end of it. Some of the stories of personal achievement presented by learners at the end-of-course celebration events are incredibly moving.”

Discussion with tutors deployed on the Steps to Employment programmes confirms this, one indicating that “to watch the learners grow is really motivating” and another indicating “it’s all about opportunity, taking the fear out of things – and that makes me feel good”. Other comments from the programme team point to the professional rewards to be gained from adopting an integrated approach:

“I feel that I am strengthening my own skills”

“I find I am problem-solving with the other tutors, we are finding the answer between us”

“Close working with other tutors is good for standardisation of quality”

“Working with this group of learners has made me recognise they support each other, their personalities work very well together: this isn’t like school, and I’m not typecast as ‘teacher’”.

“Working on this programme really promotes and encourages self-review, I am a more reflective practitioner nowadays”

Benefits for the college, for staff and for learners

Staff apply thorough initial assessment consistently and accurately to identify learners' starting points and development needs, with the result that learners have individual targets and, to a large extent, follow a personalised curriculum which they find relevant and meaningful.

Tutors have challenging and high expectations, so learners feel motivated and purposive.

Learners benefit from particularly good support from tutors, which is very effective in improving their confidence, resilience and commitment to learning.

Learning sessions are structured so that learners quickly understand, apply and extend their understanding and knowledge. The integrated nature of the programme means sessions are mutually supportive and learning is accelerated.

Learners' personal, social and employability skills develop markedly through participation in integrated learning programmes. They make friends and develop social networks among other learners. They also gain in confidence and develop a variety of skills applicable to the workplace such as improved communication and computer skills, punctuality, and working to timescales.

Learners are helped to make choices on their future with tutors and support staff giving advice and guidance.

As indicated by OFSTED:

“Learners progress laterally by exploring new subject areas and, increasingly, by following a programme of learning to meet their learning needs across several subject areas. They are aware and take advantage of progression routes within the Service between non-accredited and accredited programmes. Progression to further and higher education is very good.”
information, advice and guidance provided by college staff. ”

Provider background

Wolverhampton City Council's maintained Adult Education Service (WAES) offers programmes from pre-Entry Level up to Level 5, but by far the largest area of the provision is in preparation for life and work, of which over half is in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). It has an annual funding allocation of some £3.35m from SFA, and caters to the needs of approximately 4,000 learners a year; programmes funded via the Adult Skills Budget have grown considerably in recent years, and now comprise over 50% of total provision. The Service focuses its work in the Wolverhampton area, but is beginning to work more closely with other similar services in the West Midlands region in response to the area review initiative. It delivers in over 50 venues across the city, including its own three main centres.

Of those learners registered on Entry and Level 1 programmes in Autumn Term 2015, two thirds were female, and all were adult: 11.5% were aged 19-24, 51.5% aged 25-44 and 37% aged 45 or over. This is a slightly older age profile than in the previous year, when 20% of learners (including 2.4% aged 16-18) were under 25 years of age. 62.5% classified themselves as having a White background, suggesting a growing ethnic diversity: 33.5% of 2014/15 learners classified themselves as BME. Significantly, 64% of programme participants (63% in 2014/15) previously held no or entry level qualifications; about a quarter were placed on Level 1 programmes following initial assessment. 52% were unemployed and looking for work, with 36% unemployed but not seeking direct employment.

Locality

Wolverhampton is an area of extreme and multiple deprivations, and is in the 6% most deprived authorities in the country. The city is ethnically diverse, with around two thirds of the population white British, 18% Asian or Asian British and 7% from Black African/Caribbean or Black British groups. An influx of other ethnic groups, particularly from Eastern Europe, has taken place since the last census. Unemployment is high, with male unemployment at 15% and female unemployment at 11%. The percentage of adults with no qualifications is high at 23%.

Background to the Project

This case study forms part of a suite of six which were developed between January and March 2016. They provide insights and illustrations which will be of benefit to leaders, managers and practitioners when they are:

- Developing and delivering their pre-vocational offer;
- Considering the implications for the professional development support needs of staff involved in prevocational design and delivery.

The Foundation would like to thank all six case study providers; for their time, commitment and help with the development and final production of the case study material.

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Annex 1

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