

Skills for Life Quality Initiative

Newcastle College: Excellence in Leadership and Skills for Life

Context

Newcastle is a large college with over 40,000 learners studying at all levels, including 2,000 full time students on higher education courses. It is based in the most disadvantaged area of the city and has a wide vocational and academic offer¹. This case study looks at how the college's approach to *Skills for Life* has contributed to its success.

After a poor inspection report in 1999, Newcastle College debted £1.5 million: it can now claim to be the largest and most successful general FE college. In 2004, an inspection found almost all provision to be outstanding or good. Six areas of learning were awarded grade one, including two for the *Skills for Life* programmes. Leadership and management were also judged outstanding.

Strategy and ethos

College leadership is resolute and outcome focused. Following the 2004 inspection, the Chair of Governors said: "We want to be **world class**, this is the starting point for us to fly even higher because we are very ambitious for the college and the region. We want to make sure we've got the best facilities and the best staff for the north east."



Jackie Fisher - Principal

Effective *Skills for Life* is seen to underpin the realisation of these ambitions for local people. Newcastle College has a **performance-driven culture**: there is an unwavering focus on standards and outcomes.

"I would not describe myself as a tolerant person," said the Principal, "...I like things to be done to a very high standard."² Every member of staff who receives a teaching and learning observation grade of less than three has an improvement action plan and this focus has paid off. At 75 per cent, learner success is over ten per cent higher than the national benchmark.

The inspection report highlighted the clarity of strategic direction reflecting the college's mission and values³ – there is a very well developed system of **business planning** to meet annual objectives. These focus on market, learner, business and innovation success and the contribution of *Skills for Life* is clear in each of these areas. The realisation of college objectives is supported by the strong links between strategic planning, financial control and performance monitoring. Resources committed to each area of learning are consistent with the income that it plans to generate and curriculum managers work to clear financial targets. The college is concerned with 'embedding a culture of responsibility and accountability, where people relish identifying and solving problems'.

Each school within the college agrees an annual business plan⁴ that sets out objectives and targets, as well as the resources with which these are to be delivered. The business plans include *Skills for Life* targets, for which heads of school are accountable. There is a **high level of delegation** for managing delivery of all school targets – heads of school have discretion about the ways in which planned outcome are met, but they are expected to deliver. Quarterly performance review meetings with the Executive scrutinise progress against the plan and there is a substantial investment of management time in this

¹ September 04 Inspection Report: Information about the College and College Data

² 'I don't do Cuddling' by Joe Clancy, FE Focus, TES online, 15.10.04

³ Operational Plan 2005

⁴ Access to Learning Business Development Plan 04/05 extract

Skills for Life Quality Initiative

process: key school managers sit down with the full Executive and spend a couple of hours analysing and addressing performance.

The college will not persevere with systems that fail to deliver; it **finds a model that works**. This is illustrated by the measures taken to tackle poor assessment of key skills. External moderation of key skills had found the college unsatisfactory and reported huge consistency problems. Intensive training of vocational school-based assessors resulted in some improvements, but progress was slow. A team of external moderators were contracted as consultants to moderate 100 per cent of key skill assignments – and their fees charged to the vocational schools. This made a difference and paved the way for a shake-up in the delivery and quality systems that frame key skills. Now, the college has moved from two per cent key skill achievement to nearly 70 per cent. Staff have reason to credit the senior commitment to change. When a new model is put in place it is well resourced and given clear targets – the current model to improve key skills results included 40 new appointments and dedicated centres in each school.

Delivering Skills for Life

Newcastle College's recent success is underpinned by a culture of **scrupulous self-criticism**. An evaluation of *Skills for Life*⁵ in early 2003 reported poor teaching by unqualified staff, who were unclear about their roles. Learner participation and achievement were low and learning processes such as initial assessment, ILPs, portfolio development and summative assessment, were not working well. Although there were stronger areas and signs of improvement, quality was patchy. The report detailed the substantial changes in prospect for FE delivery of *Skills for Life* and proposed a radical new model of delivery.

The college recognises the critical impact of literacy, language and numeracy skills on learner success across the offer, and has appointed a senior manager to lead on key skills, basic skills and additional learning support. The Director of Access to Learning sits on the Executive and leads the range of *Skills for Life* activities across the college: discrete and outreach literacy and numeracy, ESOL, supported learning, Additional



Colin Booth -
Director of Access to Learning

Learning Support (ALS) and key skills.⁶ This **clear overview of all Skills for Life programmes** is considered essential to drive up quality. The college decided to pull together these responsibilities at every level, so specialist teams were set up in each school to deliver key skills, literacy and

numeracy learning support and – where they were offered – discrete literacy and numeracy programmes and GCSE English and maths. Each team leader⁷ took responsibility for:

- initial and diagnostic assessment
- ILPs for key or basic skills and ALS
- delivery of underpinning key skills, literacy and numeracy adult ALS, basic skills, GCSE English and maths and some dyslexia support
- developing and maintaining a bank of learning resources
- checking or writing key skill assignments
- helping to assess key skill work and supporting portfolio development
- preparing learners for key, literacy or numeracy tests
- internal moderation and quality control.

These team leaders are responsible for the **specialist teams in vocational schools**. They are managed within each school but co-ordinated centrally by the Key Skills Manager,⁸ who works very closely with the manager responsible for literacy and numeracy. The Key Skills Manager and the ESOL Manager, report to the Director of Access to Learning. Although some members of school teams have a vocational specialism, there was an early decision that they should not have mixed job descriptions or teaching responsibilities. All of their work is concerned with *Skills for Life*, whether delivered as key skills, ALS, literacy, numeracy or GCSE English or maths.

⁵ SMT report on Basic and Key Skills 03/04 extract

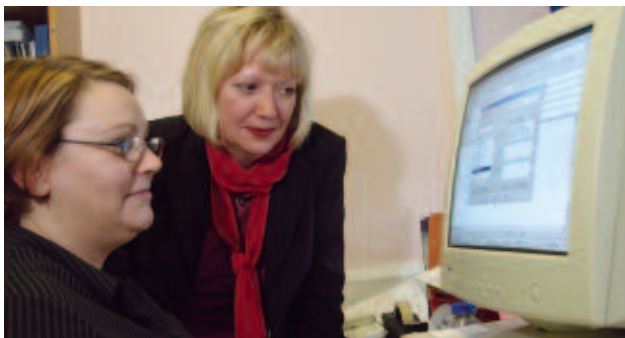
⁶ School Structure diagram

⁷ Specialist Team Leader Job Description

⁸ College Key Skill manager JD

Skills for Life Quality Initiative

There is a specialist *Skills for Life* team in each of the eight vocational schools, with its own team leader. The staffing budget for each school team is ring fenced and agreed through the annual business planning process. It is calculated to take account of the relevant income streams for literacy, numeracy and key skills, as well as the delivery model agreed for the school. Although members of the team work to standard job descriptions, they are line managed within the schools and the school has discretion about the shape of the team – such as the balance of lecturers to learning support officers – within the agreed resource. Each school has a key skills resource centre to support contextualised delivery.



Janice Heyworth - Cross College Key Skills Manager

Team leaders meet every week with the College Key Skills Manager,⁹ and are usually joined by the Literacy and Numeracy Manager and the Director of Access to Learning. Although the specialist teams belong to their host schools, this group co-ordinates practice and unifies standards across the eight schools. There is also a regular termly meeting for vocational school managers to review *Skills for Life* progress across their schools¹⁰ and each school has clear **targets for Skills for Life achievement**.¹¹

In common with most providers, the college is unable to recruit qualified and experienced *Skills for Life* teachers in the numbers that it needs. However, introduction of the new model of *Skills for Life* delivery meant a £1 million investment, in 40 new staff. The college advertised in the 'courses' section of the local paper to attract people looking for a career change, who were prepared to retrain to teach *Skills for Life* and had 1,500 applications. While the new recruits came with clear development needs, they also brought the kinds of experience that supported the contextualisation of *Skills for Life* and employability

initiatives. The college continues to **grow its own** *Skills for Life* professionals with high numbers gaining specialist teaching qualifications at Levels 3 and 4.

Because the schools operate in different ways, the task of making *Skills for Life* practice and quality cohesive across Newcastle College is a challenge. This is partly a result of the size of the college, the diversity of the offer and the history and location of some curriculum specialisms. It is also a product of the college ethos, which stresses outcome rather than process. There is a high level of management discretion as long as performance targets – particularly around learner success – are met. This means that the key and basic skills team are working with different vocational or academic ILPs in each of the schools and with **different school models** of key skills delivery. The processes that the team leaders have developed together have to be compatible with the various systems and cultures of the schools to which they belong. This is a very supportive team: there is a detailed understanding of the issues faced by individual members and a strong ownership of their shared task and processes.¹²

Each team leader manages a school-based team of between three and nine people, which is made up of a combination of lecturers and learning support officers. Both roles are responsible for key skills, ALS and LLN skills. Members of the specialist team are jointly appointed – by the school, and managers with cross-college responsibility. Each new team member joins a week-long induction programme that covers the core literacy and numeracy curricula, all six key skills, adult learner support, and the use of initial assessment and ILPs.¹³ There are currently over 50 people line managed through the specialist teams.

Ongoing development opportunities are offered regularly through the central team, which also shares innovative and effective methods. All key and basic skills lecturers, and those learning support officers with teaching qualifications, are also expected to gain Level 4 qualifications over the next three years. Vocational lecturers who are not in the specialist teams will all be expected to complete Level 3 programmes. The college offers specialist qualifications at Levels 2 to 4.

⁹ Team Leader meeting minutes 2.2.05

¹⁰ *Skills for Life* Managers meeting minutes 3.11.04

¹¹ School *Skills for Life* target

¹² ILP extract setting out core *Skills for Life* process

¹³ Specialist team induction and core training programme

Skills for Life Quality Initiative

Quality improvement

At the heart of the process is quality improvement. Specialist teams are not directly responsible for all key skills delivery, as some schools use an embedded model delivered by vocational staff, but they are responsible for the quality of the assignments used, the feedback given and the development of underpinning skills. They must support staff delivering embedded key skills, check assignment briefs, and internally moderate and monitor progress. Systematic **lesson observation** supports quality improvement. Every teacher expects to be observed, and to receive feedback, several times a year through a substantial programme of graded lesson observation reinforced by peer and mentor observations. The target is at least 80 per cent of graded lessons to be good or better.

The focus on quality is rigorous. All key skills, ALS or LLN ILPs are quality audited by cross-college managers at least twice a year.¹⁴ This feeds into wider mid-year **quality audits**, which allow performance concerns to be identified and addressed in-year.¹⁵ There is a similarly robust testing of the initial assessment process, which allows for flexibility of local school systems. As with the college as a whole, standardisation is not built into the design of the process but into the evaluation of outcomes. Each school is accountable to the Executive for both *Skills for Life* outcomes and the effectiveness of *Skills for Life* processes at quarterly Quality Review meetings.

Learner success is the sharpest test of quality improvement. Newcastle College sets **challenging targets** and has thorough and **testing processes for performance measurement**. The trends in learner achievement clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of the whole-college approach. Key skills achievement, in particular, has been radically improved but in the future, the critical college target for *Skills for Life* will not be tied to key skills, LLN or GCSE – the target will be about *Skills for Life* achievement, however this is accredited. It recognises the different routes that learners may take to a common Level 2 goal and provides a simple measurement of college effectiveness in enabling that achievement.

Future focus

Skills for Life supports other strands of college innovation. **Workforce development** is a growth area within the *Skills for Life* offer and takes in Small Medium Enterprises, public sector employers, manufacturing firms and cultural industries. Initial assessment of staff and courses can be delivered at short notice on weekdays, evenings or weekends and flexible delivery is supported by the assessment centre, which will open six-days-a-week to offer nationally accredited tests on demand. The college has no history of workplace basic skills but has restructured to deliver and is now on course to meet a £150,000 income target by July 2006.

For more information, please call the Hotline Number on **0118 902 1914** or email: sflqi@cfbt.com

www.sflqi.org.uk

¹⁴ Key Skills ILP Audit Feedback Sheet, ALS Record Book Audit sheet

¹⁵ Key Skills Quality Audit 1.03 extract