

South Birmingham College Case Study Developing workshop-based and blended provision on employer premises

Background

South Birmingham College is a large general Further Education College, which has an annual enrolment of 28,000 learners. Provision is predominantly 19+ on site but with a rapidly growing proportion of 16-18 learners and of delivery through Train to Gain on employer premises. The Skills for Life division has a turnover of approximately £7 million and employs about 70 teaching staff. The bulk of the provision is ESOL, plus a small literacy and numeracy provision comprising part time evening and weekend classes. In 2008 they began to engage with employers and deliver Skills for Life Train to Gain with a target of 91 outcomes, increasing to 400, which they confidently expect to surpass by as much as 75% in 2009.

Aim

The College wanted to explore financially viable models of delivering Skills for Life in the workplace, using their work with one large local engineering company as a basis for exploring the potential for flexibility. This involved developing both on-site drop-in workshop provision and blended learning approaches using the college Moodle.

Method

Skills for Life staff ran a workshop in the training room at the company's main site and recruited 26 learners who were invited to attend the workshop at any time during the four weekly sessions. These sessions ran on three days from 10am to 3 pm, and on one day from 1pm to 8pm. The tutor saw learners on a 1:1 basis or in small groups. They had very irregular attendance patterns dependent on their workload and shift pattern. Some learners attended only for an hour or so every week or fortnight, others more frequently. On conducting diagnostic assessments, the tutor discovered that a lot of the learners were almost ready for the tests and just needed to brush up existing skills. This enabled her to provide the minimum of face-to-face tuition for them and to concentrate on those who needed more time. Learners developed individual portfolios. These were largely paper-based, but with increasing use of materials accessed from the college Moodle, such as the Basic, Key and Functional Skills Builder (BSKB) workbooks and Skillswise. The tutor found that most learners were willing to use IT for study but a number insisted they wanted to do paper-based tests. As the training room had no IT or internet facilities, the college supplied two laptops, mobile broadband access and a mobile printer/ photocopier/ scanner, as well as a range of paper-based resources. The mobile broadband was particularly useful for accessing online practice tests from Move On. Final tests were conducted largely on laptops, with tests being downloaded and uploaded at the college. Three students were brought into college to sit the paper-based tests.

Outcomes

The College experienced and learned from considerable challenges in delivery of this type. These challenges included:

- Attracting the learners
The tutor realised that there was resistance and a stigma attached to the provision amongst the workforce and that the key to attracting and keeping students was to

Skills for Life Improvement Programme

convince the line managers of the value. Confidentiality was also important. She concentrated on building up a relationship with supervisors and learners and this was very successful, although a difficulty arose when she was off sick for a period and it was hard for conventional 'cover arrangements' to be as effective.

- **Staffing**
The College needed to have a pool of tutors able to deliver very flexibly. They were lucky to recruit a very effective tutor from an agency for this contract, but found utilising more conventionally timetabled core Skills for Life staff more difficult (and expensive).
- **Management**
This type of provision was far more management-intensive than traditional provision, especially at the start. This needs to be factored into the planning process, which is difficult as this type of provision tends to arise all of a sudden and the organisation needs to respond quickly. A flexible management structure is essential, one which also needs to take into account that the delivery is year round and not just during term time.
- **Resourcing**
The provision required a lot of resources including ICT equipment, mobile broadband and paper-based resources. These needed to be available at the beginning and so must be sourced in advance.
- **Funding**
The College found that the only way they could fund the number of tutor hours for the duration of the contract was by enrolling learners onto both literacy and numeracy. However this turned out to be an overambitious target for the majority of learners. The college had to accept that the flexible model did not always meet the needs of learners requiring more substantial skills development. In these cases, it was not cost-effective unless cross-subsidised by funding for the NVQ part of the programme. This highlighted the need for very careful costing analysis and the college made considerable use of the funding spreadsheet created as part of the overall project.
- **Learner response**
The majority of learners received up to 10 hours support, made progress, had high success rates and were happy with their qualification. Rigorous initial and diagnostic assessment was essential to ensure the programme's effectiveness in terms of funding, learner satisfaction and desire for further learning.

Learning for others about workshop delivery on employer premises

- **Appropriate staffing is crucial.**
If recruiting sufficiently flexible, highly skilled staff is problematic, then one solution is to develop teacher training to 'grow your own', perhaps by training NVQ assessors. Perhaps there is also a new role to be developed, that of Skills for Life assessors who are trained to do IAG, IA, the Train to Gain paperwork and running testing.
- **Planning ahead ...the need for a slick operation**
Train to Gain delivery needs lots of pre-planning and time and resources must be found. Otherwise delays e.g. in getting tests available or access rights to college Moodles; in resourcing the sites appropriately with equipment, or ensuring health and safety checks for staff can all lead to potential loss of goodwill from the many different people involved in setting up the provision.
- **Funding**
The delivery team needs to include MIS and finance members to be able to plan what can be afforded in each contract, how if necessary it can be cross-funded, and what numbers are needed to break even. Without such careful analysis, the programmes will be loss-making. Using the spreadsheet developed as part of the overall project (see introduction) is a good way to develop this awareness.