



Skills for Life Quality Initiative

Knowsley Community College: Excellence in Leadership and Skills for Life

Context

The November 2003 inspection of Knowsley Community College found literacy and numeracy provision, and the leadership and management of the college to be outstanding. Nine other areas of learning were good or outstanding and the Inspection Report highlights the 'very challenging environment' in which the college operates.¹ School leaver attainment and adult qualification to Level 3 are significantly below the national average.² So how has the college's approach to *Skills for Life* contributed to this success?



Sir George Sweeney - Principal

Knowsley Community College has about 12,000 learners following a wide vocational and academic offer. Sixty per cent of learners are studying at Entry Level or Level 1, and almost 80 per cent are adults. During 2002/03 the college underwent a restructure to become three colleges in one: the Sixth Form College, the Adult and Community College and the Skills and Enterprise College.³ Recent innovations in 14-16 work-related learning and Entry to Employment (E2E) have put the college at the forefront of national

developments. The growth of the *Skills for Life* offer was also early for the sector and the college has continued to be a frontrunner for initiatives within the national *Skills for Life* Strategy – the Family Literacy programme, for example, is recognised as exemplary.⁴

Strategy and ethos

The inspection highlighted shared values as a key college strength and the college's mission – to serve the learning needs of individuals and the community – is straightforward and memorable. Four strategic aims flow from this vision. They frame the strategic objectives, which are updated annually and summarised for staff on a pocket card,⁵ and the **focus on local learning** need clearly sets the organisational tone. There is significant investment in making sure that needs are recognised and met and the college has a well-established partner network that operates across more than 150 local outreach venues. An outreach team of 12 works alongside local people and agencies to find out what and how they want to learn, with a mobile *Skills for Life* 'hit squad' seeking out unrecognised need. The significant *Skills for Life* needs,⁶ highlighted through these processes, shape delivery across the college offer.

College values and strategic plans are reinforced through twice-yearly staff meetings and regular staff bulletins and the **leadership team models responsiveness** by being unusually accessible to staff and making regular informal opportunities to hear from teachers and learners. There is a genuine open door policy at the highest level with staff at all levels sharing a belief that the college can, and does, make a real difference. Responsiveness is combined with high ambitions for learners and a high staff responsibility for realising those ambitions.

1 Inspection Report extract: Information about the College

2 Strategic Plan extract: Context for College Aims

3 Organisation Chart and Notes on Curriculum Management

4 Knowsley LEA summary report

5 Aims and Objectives 2003-2006

6 Knowsley Learning Partnership *Skills for Life* Strategy extract: Assessment of Need

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This generates a **strong culture of delegation** where people have the authority to get on with the job, but targets are stretching and scrutiny of outcomes is rigorous.

The **focus on learning** in the college mission is strongly reflected in the **management structure** – every member of the senior management team is a former teacher and curriculum manager. The Finance and Personnel departments are led strategically through this senior management team but the Director of Finance, for example, is not a member. Senior management team meetings are designed to focus on issues of strategic importance, including learners and learning, and the college prides itself on a 'can do' approach with finance and funding seen as enabling, rather than driving, the decision-making. Managers clearly value the specialist skills of their colleagues and also recognise the potential to transfer skills and develop new responsibilities – the Assistant Principal, for example, has risen from a *Skills for Life* background to lead the Adult College and leads on information systems, and the former section head for *Skills for Life* is currently seconded to the Learning and Skills Council to lead its response to the area inspection. *Skills for Life* is seen as both a critical area of work and as a seedbed of wider leadership.



Lyn Eaton - Director of Adult & Community Education

This focus on **developing colleagues to meet future organisational needs** is reflected at every level within the college. Despite the unusual stability of the leadership team, there are clear succession plans for every tier of management, from the Principal onwards. The college prides itself on 'growing its own' and aims for this process to start with learners. The *Skills for Life*

Section Head is a former numeracy learner who, having left school with no qualifications, worked up to an Access course, left for higher education, rejoined the college as an outreach worker, and went on to teach. Several members of her team have taken the same route and are able to model the opportunities open to *Skills for Life* learners.



Liz Hannah - Head of Sector Skills for Life

Delivering Skills for Life

In staffing an expanded *Skills for Life* offer, the college has faced the same challenges as the rest of the sector. **Creative recruitment strategies** have demonstrated that the community can generate both the *Skills for Life* needs, and the means to meet them. When a successful bid meant that hundreds of carworkers were to arrive for intensive upskilling, the college recruited, trained and accredited⁷ a new cohort of recent graduates, just in time to meet the busloads of new learners. The college continues to recruit graduates who start out as learning assistants but train as *Skills for Life* lecturers in post and vocational lecturers are offered training to support career change or enhancement. Internal promotion is strong, and staff development means that there are genuine opportunities to progress.

Although the college is now organised into three sub-colleges which focus on different parts of the *Skills for Life* offer (discrete and embedded literacy and numeracy in the Adult College⁸, key skills in the Sixth Form College and embedded skills in the Skills and Enterprise College) these are managed through **shared planning, delivery and evaluation systems** which inform all new developments. Thirty per cent of the *Skills for Life* offer now takes place on employers' premises⁹ and all 14-16 learners receive *Skills for Life* diagnosis and support. The college aims to make the *Skills for Life* learning offer seamless through discrete provision, key skills and additional learning support being brought together under the umbrella of 'Curriculum Support'. This support is seen as critical to the college's ambitions for all its learners.

⁷ NOCN specification

⁸ Website extract: ACE *Skills for Life* courses

⁹ Website extract: Workforce Development and *Skills for Life*

¹⁰ Curriculum Support process diagram

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The process of **curriculum support**¹⁰ is basically the same across the three sub-colleges. During induction, learners complete a diagnostic assessment and, in discussion with *Skills for Life* specialists, section heads use the outcomes to look at course placement. A common ILP¹¹ is used for literacy, numeracy, key skills, Additional Learning Support (ALS) and E2E. At the beginning of their second term, learners review their progress and complete a **Curriculum Entitlement Agreement**¹² that sets out their target *Skills for Life* qualifications. This agreement is negotiated with their English, number and ICT teachers, and their personal tutor, with target accreditation of either literacy, numeracy or key skills matched to individual learners. All learners are working towards qualifications and staff believe that the low qualification level in the local community makes this an urgent task. As one member of the senior management team made very clear: "We don't do non-accredited." The college not only accredits all learners but hits achievement levels well above benchmark.¹³ It also uses a well-developed **value-added** system that tracks soft, as well as hard, learning gain for each individual.¹⁴



Liz Hannah - Head of Sector Skills for Life and Tom Rowbottom - Deputy Director Student Services

There are **strong ties to vocational and academic delivery**. Each college centre is represented on the Curriculum Support Management Committee¹⁵ by the director or deputy and a very detailed **Curriculum Support Implementation Plan**¹⁶ is agreed annually, with each section head, by the Deputy Director Student Services and signed off by the Deputy Principal. The approach to curriculum support may vary

to fit with particular curriculum needs, but all sections are expected to meet the agreed standards and reach high levels of learner achievement. Much *Skills for Life* learning, for example, is now delivered in specialist learning centres attached to vocational sections and resourced to deliver relevant and embedded skills. Use of centres will vary to fit particular curriculum needs – the balance of taught to drop in key skills, for example, is high in construction but low in the Sixth Form Centre.

Each section has a *Skills for Life* Champion and a Key Skills Contact, who are part of the central specialist team. They meet regularly¹⁷ and their work is co-ordinated with colleagues delivering the pre-entry curriculum and E2E. The key skill team is mentored by *Skills for Life* champions to enable the effective delivery of underpinning skills and, similarly, key skills practitioners share their expertise in embedding language and number skills in vocational areas. After September 2005 there will no longer be clear boundaries between these teams with *Skills for Life* champions delivering key skills and key skills teachers offering *Skills for Life* qualifications to those learners not yet ready for Level 1.

Professional development enables all staff to meet their shared responsibilities around *Skills for Life*. All teaching staff receive literacy and numeracy awareness training and have completed unit 1 of the Level 2 *Skills for Life* qualification. In the longer term, every member of staff is working towards a Level 2, and all teaching staff will be expected to complete Level 3. There is also an ongoing audit of teachers' own literacy and numeracy skills and strong encouragement – and support – for everyone to be qualified at Level 2. All specialist staff are working towards Level 4 qualifications and, despite the low proportion of bilingual learners (less than two per cent of the local community are Black Minority Enterprises), there is also a Level 4 accredited ESOL specialist on the team.

Quality improvement

Rigorous performance evaluation is central to the way the college works. At incorporation, the Deputy Principal was tasked to develop a quality system of which the college could be proud – and that staff could own. As the Principal says: "If we're going to

11 *Skills for Life* ILP

12 Curriculum Entitlement Agreement

13 Inspection Report extract: College Data

14 ILP extract

15 Curriculum Support Management Committee membership and remit

16 Exemplar Curriculum Support Implementation Plan

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develop a QA system, we have to persuade people not that the Principal wants it, but that they want it.” The upshot is a very high performance culture and, as another senior manager puts it: “...no hiding place.” There is a clear framework of quality standards¹⁸ and a full QA calendar¹⁹ to review performance against these standards.

The **self-assessment** process²⁰ is at the heart of the quality systems and involves rigorous interrogation at every level. Each course produces a self-assessment report that is graded by their deputy director – both for the reported performance and for the quality of the evaluative process. Each sections’ self-assessment is verified by the Deputy Principal and Quality Manager, as well as the relevant curriculum managers. Development planning is similarly thorough and involvement with the full process,²¹ from individual self-assessment on, is seen to develop planning and evaluative skills for all staff.

The **quality processes reflects the centrality of Skills for Life**. The generic processes, such as lecturer self-assessment,²² teaching and learning observation²³ and learner feedback,²⁴ each address language and number development and reinforce college messages about the contribution of *Skills for Life* to effective learning. All *Skills for Life* provision is evaluated against the same high standards – the way in which delivery is managed is tailored to the context, but every learner must be seen to flourish and progress. The college believes that its broader ambitions for the people of east Liverpool cannot be met without effective *Skills for Life* learning and corporate systems demonstrate the practical consequences of that belief.

Future focus

The future development of *Skills for Life* will focus on **workforce development** and **embedded delivery**. Three *Skills for Life* workforce development co-ordinators work alongside the established employer training wing of the college to negotiate with employers and identify need. The flexible offer ranges

from three-hour stocktaking or report writing courses, to longer programmes preparing employees for NVQ training or national tests in literacy or numeracy.²⁵ Partnership with TUC Learning Services, and established brokerage expertise, have also supported successful employer engagement. The college has provided workplace basic skills for health and local authority services, private service providers, manufacturing firms, retail companies and SMEs and the growth in contextualised delivery is mirrored by developments in on-site programmes. Every vocational area has nominated a lecturer who works with a *Skills for Life* specialist to design lesson plans and learning materials. The college recognises the challenges, as well as the potential, of embedded delivery and is concerned to develop tested models of effective practice as a basis for future growth.

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

www.sflqi.org.uk

17 Curriculum Support diary

18 Quality Standards Framework

19 Quality Assurance Calendar

20 Self Assessment Report 2004 extract: the Self Assessment Process

21 Intranet extract: Self Assessment and Development Planning 2005

22 Lecturer Self Assessment guidance

23 Observation Report

24 Additional Support Questionnaire, Literacy and Numeracy Questionnaire

25 Business and Workforce Development brochure extract: *Skills for Life*