

Support for embedding Skills for Life into vocational learning: first regional network meetings

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Valuable work experience in Young Offender Institutions

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Introduction

Almost 300 organisations are taking part in the Skills for Life Improvement Programme support for embedding. Embedding is about supporting learners to develop literacy, numeracy and communication skills in the context of their vocational learning so that they can see why those skills are relevant to them and can develop and apply them in activities that are interesting and engaging because they are about solving problems in the vocational context.

Support to providers, managed by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), comprises four elements:

- In-house management consultancy
- In-house support for practitioners and staff teams working on the embedded project
- Regional or in-house training
- Regional network meetings

The first of three network meetings took place in each region in January and February and targeted managers leading the embedding projects in their organisations.

Each provider was given ‘99 seconds in the spotlight’ – an opportunity to share their plans for developing embedded approaches,

their hopes for the benefits this approach will bring to learners and staff and the challenges they are facing.

Organisations’ plans to embed

At the North West network meeting, organisations reported being at different stages on their journey to embedding and plans varied accordingly. Several had participated in the Improvement Programme last year and were building on firm foundations.

Last year, HMYOI Thorn Cross was supported to develop a whole organisation approach to Skills for Life. This year, they are focusing on improving teaching and learning through developing approaches to embedding. This is a whole organisation approach with plans to involve all nine vocational areas – in contrast to previous years when there were just isolated pockets of embedding practice.

John Platt, Head of Learning and Skills, has charted the gradual change in vocational instructors’ attitudes to embedding Skills for Life. In the light of the Leitch review, they are beginning to buy in to the importance of functional literacy and numeracy, recognising that employers demand effective communication, number and employability skills. They want to

support offenders to gain ‘real’ qualifications that will lead to valuable work experience and eventually to employment, and are beginning to accept the value of embedding in helping learners to achieve. They recognise that in order to support the embedding approach they need to develop their own skills but now feel reassured that this doesn’t mean that they have to become literacy and numeracy experts – they are part of a team that includes Skills for Life specialists.



Kris Ochedowski, curriculum manager at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, at the London embedding network meeting

‘We’re all involved in a whole organisation approach to support achievement, whether this is in Skills for Life or in achieving employment or family links.’

Kris Ochedowski, curriculum manager at HMP Wormwood Scrubs and a participant at the London network meeting, is about to embark on winning over hearts and minds to an embedded approach. During the first support visit from their Improvement Programme adviser, the team identified that one of the challenges was to successfully embed Skills for Life within the wide variety of vocational activities provided at the prison – implementing and developing already successful embedding strategies beyond the Education department. Since this will involve cooperation and interaction between Education-based teachers and HMP instructional

(vocational) officers, it was felt that joint training would be beneficial. This training will focus on raising awareness of Skills for Life and looking at the first steps to embedding and integration.

A manager from a work-based learning provider described how the embedding approach was evolving from that piloted in year 1 of the Improvement Programme. Last year, Skills for Life specialists had worked alongside vocational specialists in the classroom. Now, they are beginning to take a step back, supporting vocational teachers to plan embedded sessions rather than being actively involved in the delivery.

Bolton Community College embeds language development into five vocational areas, offering programmes for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. The college hopes that an embedded approach will improve progression rates into mainstream vocational programmes by building learners’ confidence and dispelling vocational teachers’ anxieties about being able to meet the needs of these learners.

Challenges

Challenges being faced by managers new to embedding often relate to staffing issues and to securing the buy-in of staff and learners. Several reported difficulties in recruiting practitioners and managers with the skills and experience to take forward their plans to embed. Sourcing funding to resource partnership working between vocational and Skills for Life staff is also a common challenge. Designing an embedded programme that incorporates sufficient additional time to prepare learners to achieve a Skills for Life qualification is a challenge being tackled by a manager in an FE college.

For those involved in work-based learning, a major challenge is convincing employers of the need for additional time off, on top of

the vocational training, to develop employees’ literacy and numeracy skills and prepare them to achieve a key skills qualification. TEST, a work-based learning provider in Skelmersdale, is hoping to address this challenge through their embedding project. They are hoping to be able to measure the impact on employers of the progress they have made over the past six months in embedding literacy and numeracy skills development into the work of the NVQ assessors, supported by literacy and numeracy specialists. If they are able to evidence an impact on employer performance, for example, in terms of reduced wastage, this will endorse the value of TEST’s embedded approach in the eyes of employers, learners, assessors and inspectors!

Next steps

During this first network meeting, providers identified:

- (a) an area for development where they were able to offer support to others
- (b) an area where they were looking for support from others.

In a ‘matchmaking’ activity, those offering support in a particular area were matched up with those requesting it and contact details were exchanged. Future network meetings will report on how providers have benefited from support from their peers.

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