SSCLLN BEST PRACTICE GUIDES: GUIDE FOUR

In Practice: Developing Vocational Curriculum

Author: Jenny Rice
Sector: Multi-sector

Creating opportunities for vocational learners
Lifelong Learning Networks were established across England to develop and promote opportunities for people with vocational qualifications and/or experience to progress more easily into and through higher education. The networks are made up of partnerships of educational organisations such as universities and further education colleges who are working together to streamline access to higher education, and open up routes to graduate and post graduate levels.

The Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network (SSCLLN), hosted by the University of Leicester, was established in 2006. The Network covers a sub-region of the East Midlands across Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland. The Network is funded until December 2010 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

This best practice guide is part of a series of guides produced by the SSCLLN. These guides aim to share best practice used by partner colleges and universities to enable progression for vocational learners. Other guides in the series include:

- Delivering/developing the University Certificate in Professional Development
- Bishop Grosseteste Touring Company
- In Practice: Blueprint for Curriculum Development
- Targeting vocational learners
- Constructionsite: Developing a shared resource
- Developing Progression Agreements
- Developing APET: A unique approach

If you would like any of these guides please contact us.

In Practice: Developing Vocational Curriculum

This guide is for anyone currently involved in the planning and development of vocational curriculum. The guide will highlight the methods and approach used by the Skills for Sustainable Communities Lifelong Learning Network.
The need for higher level vocational learning opportunities

When the LLN was set up in 2006, the East Midlands was ‘characterised by a combination of high employment and a predominance of jobs demanding low skills and paying low wages’[1]. The East Midlands population of men (19-64) and women (19-59) qualified to level 4 and above was a lower proportion than in the ‘nation as a whole’. [2] In order to enhance the economic performance of the region, people’s skills need to be raised, primarily through the provisions in educational institutions.

The challenge for the LLN has been to create opportunities for vocational learners to progress from level 3 qualifications to level 4 higher education qualifications. Though the region has a large number of universities and colleges that provide higher education, they are not necessarily in easy reach of all potential learners. Neither do they all offer the types of courses that vocational learners and their employers require. Therefore a critical objective of the LLN has been to increase the number of places in further education colleges and support universities and colleges to create new opportunities in the priority economic sectors.

Vocational learners require types of programmes to suit their working lifestyles. The LLN worked with partner colleges and universities to develop learning opportunities to fit with their needs. This included:

- Bridging programmes to enable learners to move from a vocational level 3 to level 4 (higher education).
- Changes to existing higher education programmes to make them more appropriate for vocational learning.
- Bite-size learning; for those who require specific learning for a work situation.
- Foundation degrees: a full qualification, particularly geared to an employment sector.

A key aspect of all these programmes is that they include work-based learning combined with work-related classroom learning.

This guide aims to provide a snapshot of some of these innovative developments and share learning and highlights of each.

Case studies featured include:

1. The development of the Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care (Palliative and Supportive Care): an employer-led qualification developed between LOROS (Leicester) and the University of Northampton.
2. The development of the Foundation Degree Performance (Acting) and Foundation Degree Performance (Dance): a professional conservatoire approach offered in Leicester College, host to the National Skills Academy.
3. Scoping studies for the Foundation Degree in Effective Maintenance and Manufacturing for the Agri-Food Industry, and the Foundation Degree in Food Manufacturing.
4. The unique development of constructionsite; an online resource repository for full qualifications and bite-sized learning courses.

1. Preparing students to be performance professionals

Foundation Degree Performance (Acting) and Foundation Degree Performance (Dance):
Leicester College and professional companies

The support of the LLN contributed to Leicester College’s success in becoming the founder college for the National Skills Academy, bringing together education and employers in the areas of technical theatre and live music events. Linked to this has been the development of two ground breaking foundation degrees with LLN funding. The Foundation Degree Performance (Acting) and Foundation Degree Performance (Dance) offer HND students a vocationally focused progression route that previously had been unavailable.

These students are not generally working full time and so the degrees are both ‘designed to mirror as closely as possible the real life experience of working in the industry and the Conservatoire Drama School model’. [1] The approach taken to achieve this is to create a work-facing curriculum. This includes simulations and master classes and placements in schools and companies. The development of the curriculum drew on advice from employer and industry consultants such as well known figures in the Arts including The London School of Contemporary Dance, Moving East, and Derby Live.

Many of the modules are delivered by staff who teach and work in the creative industries. A key factor in this development was the funding provided by the LLN so that college staff could take time out to write the programme modules. The most innovative element of this development is the acquisition of a local Arts Centre for students to perform in. The Arts Centre will provide professional/commercial experience for students to take part in front-of-house activities, technical support and performance.

Unlike many performance degrees these foundation degrees include a University Certificate in Professional Development (UCPD) embedded in the programme designed to develop leadership, management and enterprise skills. All of which will be put into practice, particularly in the production of live performance, and enables students to build up a personal professional portfolio of work based learning.

The creation of such an individual approach to developing professional performers was facilitated by the LLNs commitment and support of its suite of UCPDs, developed by De Montfort University that have been customized for a range of programmes at regional colleges.

These foundation degrees recruited their first cohort of students in September 2009 with 14 full time students on each one. Student feedback has been positive.

[1] Leicester College website

2. The ‘constructionsite’ repository

On-line resources for full qualifications and bite-size learning

The original business plans of SSCLLN and Leap Ahead (LLN covering Derby and Nottinghamshire) included a focus on the construction industry. The Directors chose to work together on this across the East Midlands and formed a steering group to explore the creation of a new regional foundation degree for workers in the construction industry. The group included LLN partners, the Collaborative Higher Education Alliance (CHEA) and fdf.

At the same time Nottingham Trent University and Lincoln College were considering developing similar qualifications. The LLNs helped form a partnership between the two institutions which brought together the University’s skills in curriculum development and the college’s knowledge of pre-level 4 construction qualifications. This initial relationship confirmed that there was scope for a regional foundation degree that may remove some of the obstacles to learner progression. However after consultation with representatives from Nottingham Trent University, University of Derby and University of Northampton, it was found that there may be considerable challenges for quality management. Having decided against a shared foundation degree, the LLNs developed an open access regional repository of educational and training materials which include various sectors of construction.[1] These materials were developed by staff working in a number of East Midlands universities and colleges. The modules were coordinated and quality controlled by a specialist in the field. The content can be used to support the delivery of foundation degrees and has been created with employers’ needs in mind.

The repository is now called constructionsite and is available for all partners in the East Midlands. It provides a range of learning materials to support the 14-19 C&BE Diploma, HND/C, Foundation Degree, Honours Degree and Post-Graduate qualifications and can be accessed at www.constructionsite.org.uk. It also provides valuable materials for continuous professional development in the sector.

[1] Construction Management
Civil Engineering
Building Services Engineering
Heritage in the Built Environment
Housing and Property Facilities Management
Surveying and CAD
Architecture
3. The employer-led qualification

**Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care (Palliative and Supportive Care): LOROS and the University of Northampton**

LOROS provides hospice care in Leicestershire and Rutland. Its Education Department provides courses for staff who work in a range of occupations that have an interest in palliative care. As an innovative organisation it saw the potential of foundation degrees to give work-based learners the opportunity to access higher education qualifications in a bespoke programme. With the support of fdf, a foundation degree was planned.

The University of Northampton had an existing Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care and was therefore an ideal partner for LOROS to develop a specialist pathway in Palliative Care. Both fdf and the University representatives became members of the Steering Group. The LLN provided an opportunity to access further funding and work with supportive and helpful university staff to develop the structure and context of the curriculum, provide advice on learning outcomes and quality assurance. Specialist content was developed using expertise in LOROS and members of the Steering Group who represented a wide range of disease specific groups and care settings.

The success of this initiative was recognised by other hospices and LOROS saw the possibility of rolling out the programme nationally and making appropriate amendments to the programme to meet regional requirements.

Help the Hospices has helped in promoting the programme and has provided access for students to Professional Development Grants. Students may do an HE Certificate or Foundation Degree, and the modules are also offered as stand alone units of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Demand for the course has exceeded all expectations, applications for the programme now exceed places.

The Head of Education believes that the benefits to LOROS include being recognised as a provider of high quality education in end of life care and recognition of the importance of the support worker in end of life care with appropriate skills and knowledge.

A five year report research project is currently underway which aims to explore the impact of the foundation degree. A report at the end of its first year of operation, which provides insight into the emerging themes, has found that managers recognise the importance of education and training, ‘Our most precious commodity is our staff and therefore you have to invest in staff to maintain their skill and competence and to give them job satisfaction. And part of that is ...providing them with education and development opportunities.’ It concludes the short term outcomes of the degree have been ‘highly positive’ for, ‘all those who participated in the focus groups, whether students, mentor, managers, patients, or family members’.

The current programme is delivered primarily at LOROS by established trained and approved teachers who have specialist palliative and supportive care experience, with Northampton staff participating in the delivery of core modules. Currently the Graduate Skills module is studied at the University. The design of the programme is focused on the needs of the working students who often live at some distance from LOROS or Northampton, and the employer requirements for students to gain practical experience. Modules delivered in class are all work-related and assessments use methods that relate to practical situations such as portfolios, case studies and poster presentations.

There are also work-based learning modules that provide the opportunity for students to carry out in-depth research into their work practice and they have a workplace mentor.
4. Scoping studies in food and drink manufacturing

Scoping Studies for the:
- Foundation Degree in Food Manufacturing
- Foundation Degree in Effective Maintenance and Manufacturing for the Agri-Food Industry

The University of Lincoln is situated in an area with the UK’s largest cluster of food manufacturing companies, with 1 in 4 people employed in the sector.[1] It plays a major role in providing training for the sector, particularly through its National Centre for Food Manufacturing at Holbeach Campus. Developing new programmes focused on such market-led developments can be risky. A provider needs to know that there will be take-up of such courses and that they can meet the needs of employers, learners and the academic requirements for higher education. Resources to carry out such market research are not necessarily available in an institution.

The LLN provided opportunities for course developers to ‘test theories about the market needs which might not necessarily lead to a profitable course’ and this included being able to ‘contract specialist investigations to prove or disprove the strength of the proposal.’[2]

As a result LLN funding has provided the opportunity to investigate the potential for two new foundation degrees aimed at companies in various parts of the food industry.

The first scoping study explored the Foundation Degree in Food Manufacturing; tailored to suit the needs of particular companies and their key suppliers in the sector within the East Midlands. This study proposed to examine the training needs of super companies with extensive turnovers and large numbers of employees, often as a result of mergers and acquisitions. They tend to specialise in particular markets and rely on a considerable supply chain. Their focus and size points to a possible need for training to relate to both the company and its suppliers.

The Scoping Study set out to investigate the requirements for such a programme and to remodel existing programmes to better fit the needs of these companies. Interviews were conducted with 11 companies. This was followed by a number of focus groups to interview students from these companies and their supply chain companies. As a result of the information gathered from the interviews and focus groups a follow-up questionnaire was sent to large food manufacturers and further interviews are currently being conducted with managers and graduate trainee managers. At the end of the Scoping Study a decision will be made as to whether it is viable to create a new foundation degree for this area of work.

The Scoping Study for the Foundation Degree in Effective Maintenance and Manufacturing for the Agri-Food Industry, was designed to enhance the opportunities for higher level skills needs in the industry, in particular to provide work-based pathways and apprenticeships.

The degree aimed at the Agri-food industry was proposed as a result of collaboration between the University and the UK’s national trade association for suppliers of processing, packaging and process machinery (PPMA/BARA) to address the lack of qualified people able to maintain and use advance automated systems in the manufacturing processes. The course will utilise and interface with units in the existing Foundation Degree Food Manufacture and units offered in Computing Science, Business and Engineering. The Scoping Study could also identify further additional units.

In order to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of employers, a number of key stakeholders[3] were consulted through focus groups, meetings, discussions, seminars and questionnaires.

The study is currently on-going but it is already providing valuable information that will inform the preparation for an approval by the University of this new foundation degree, and to recruit students in September 2010/11.

[2] Quotes from course managers, University of Lincoln.
[3] REFRESH (Regular Employer Forum, Raising Engineering Standards@Holbeach), FMEG (Food Manufacturing and Engineering Group), CanFIRA (Centre for Food Robotics and Automation) SMTA (Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing) Improve (Sector Skills Council for Food and Drink Manufacturing and Associated Supply Chains) NSA (National Skills Academy) and PPMA/BARA
Key Messages and Recommendations

All four case studies demonstrate that vocational curriculum can be developed by addressing the needs of employers, educational institutions and students. The examples represent different ways of developing vocational curriculum. However they are all dependant on partnerships that can be initiated by employers, universities, colleges or consortia. In all cases it is crucial that everyone’s needs are considered and all partners are sympathetic to each other’s working practices. Key observations include:

- There needs to be equal relationships and a team approach.
- Sometimes a steering group is a useful mechanism for managing a diverse development, and is especially important in managing quality.
- The inclusion of professional advisers in the process gives an external viewpoint. Staff who actually create the new curriculum need time and motivation.
- Delivering programmes in a workplace benefits both students and work staff who may teach and or mentor.
- Scoping studies that explore demand for new programmes is a worthwhile exercise but it needs to be done with a careful and considered approach, and early pilot studies and a narrow focus helps to streamline the process.