

Organising and managing flexible delivery

Essex ACL flexible case study: Adult Community Learning Essex – a flexible learning model

Background

The Provider

Adult Community Learning is a large countywide learning provider. We currently deliver learning to over 30,000 learners. Ofsted recently judged us as ‘outstanding’ (June 2009) and we were awarded Beacon Status in 2010. We also deliver a wide range of programmes tailored to the needs of the local business community.

The Vision

Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector has recently called for all learning providers to ‘Embrace technology to enhance learning’.⁽¹⁾ This was further reinforced by the recent Ofsted survey on virtual learning environments which found that: ‘The best VLEs improved learning.’⁽²⁾

Having already seen the benefits of an effective VLE amongst learners and staff, Essex ACL has aimed to extend these benefits to hard to reach groups. Our vision is to maximise learning experiences for all, by embracing e-technology. At a time of financial constraint, this project represents the chance to offer increased value for money, without a reduction in the quality of provision.

The target area

The government has identified numeracy (in particular E3) as a priority target area. It is the threshold for functional numeracy.

What was produced/created

Essex ACL has produced interactive, supervised online courses for learners at E3 Numeracy, Level 1 Numeracy, Level 2 Numeracy, Level 1 Literacy and Level 2 Literacy. The courses are accessed via the service VLE and all successfully lead the learner to accreditation.

The courses contain between 18 and 22 easily accessed modules, which will guide the learner through the learning process from their own home, library or anywhere with available internet access, and in hours which suit them.

Each module contains a number of fact sheets, worksheets, PowerPoints, games and step-by-step videos, which learners will use, and re-use, until their knowledge is secure and confidence gained. Each module also contains links and instructions to signpost the learner to other web-based resources, extension activities and games.

All learners have a face-to-face interview and assessment. They are also shown how to log in using their email address, then how to access the course, upload completed work and submit feedback. A tutor, who also gives encouragement and guidance, marks this work. The on screen course pages also contain a forum where learners can ask questions and raise concerns arising from each module; this is also linked to the ICT technicians in case of technical difficulties. An email will alert supervising tutors so that a swift response is made to each learner's need.

The number of hours spent in online study by the learner is visible, via the VLE, to the tutor and the admin team who are tracking their progress. This visibility, completed assignments and feedback are all used to gauge when the learner is ready to gain accreditation.

What is the impact on learners, employers, tutors, and the organisation?

At a Skills for Life regional forum held in January 2010, an early form of the project was discussed amongst a range of providers. Several organisations expressed interest in the course as a more affordable, flexible and accessible form of learning for their projects/employees.

For Essex Adult Community Learning the project represents the opportunity to widen delivery, whilst significantly reducing costs.

We have been using online learning in numeracy and literacy at Level 2 as a pilot during 2009-2010. In September 2010 all levels previously mentioned will go live across the whole of the ACL Essex areas (across Essex). Learners taking part in the Level 2 pilot have achieved accreditation and learner feedback has been resoundingly positive:

'Simply put, I no longer feel I have to hide away from numbers... Comfort is the best way to describe online learning. No one is pressurising me in a classroom...I can re-watch over and over again.' (Numeracy Level 2 online learner)

Similarly, feedback from the pilot group of learners on the E3 Numeracy project has been resoundingly positive.

One teenage learner, who is on the autistic spectrum and electively mute, made rare eye contact and smiled at his tutor, upon hearing he was selected for the pilot. He has regularly submitted assignments and is attending more online hours than he ever did as a class-based learner. He and another learner in the same class, also on the pilot, have requested to be enrolled in the live version of E3 online Numeracy as soon as possible.

Within the offenders' project, feedback was positive with responses including 'easy to navigate', 'enjoyable' and 'not at all complicated'.

In time it would offer such groups the chance to have their accreditation funded, as well as offering flexible resources that can be tailored to the setting and hours available.

The overall impact has been one of genuine excitement amongst potential and existing learners and staff, at the prospect of an innovative, flexible and accessible new resource.

For Essex Adult Community Learning it has represented an exciting opportunity to lead the way in reaching hitherto unreached groups of learners and enabling them to gain functional numeracy and literacy qualifications and beyond.

What we have learnt

Technical issues

Emails – some internet providers are incompatible with virtual learning environments. As a consequence, some learners' personal email addresses cannot be used for the courses. This was remedied by helping learners to set up emails with free compatible providers.

Internet controls – some 'off college' sites using the course, had high-level internet controls for security purposes, which blocked the VLE. This was easily remedied by specifically naming the VLE site as permitted access.

Having the ICT technicians linked to the learner forum means that these and other technical issues can be resolved quickly.

Learner issues

IT skills

It has become apparent that occasional learners might not be familiar with some of the IT tasks required, e.g. underlining in a Word document. The clear solution to this was to produce an IT checklist for use at the initial interview/assessment with the learner. None of the IT tasks required by the courses are of a high difficulty level, so purely familiarisation would be required.

Readability issues

In the numeracy courses we did not want learners' literacy levels adversely affecting their progress. Therefore we worked hard to keep the readability level of the text as low as possible, without compromising the numerical accuracy of the course content. A strict SMOG calculation of the text would reveal a higher level than would be considered ideal, due to mathematical language.

However, every effort has been made to make the online pages readable and user friendly in their use of language. A literacy tutor was employed to review the numeracy courses from a literacy viewpoint.

Next steps

Building on the success of the Level 2 online courses the E3 (numeracy only) and Level 1 courses (in both numeracy & literacy) we will be going live across county in September 2010.

We will continue to evaluate the success of the online courses. Currently online Level 2 learners have a 100% accreditation pass rate, but regular analysis of feedback and pass rates will be carried out to assist with strategic planning for the future.

Internally as an organisation Essex ACL will be demonstrating the course at our Managers' Development day in July 2010. Externally we also demonstrated the course and disseminated its knowledge at the Skills for Life Regional Network Forum in June 2010.

We will welcome the opportunity to share with other providers and stakeholders the lessons learned and benefits gained from this project.

List of attached product(s) for dissemination to the sector

There is an accompanying [PowerPoint presentation](#) .

Go to <http://www.essexacl.ac.uk?excellencephp> to view ten of the units developed. Username: ex1 / Password: excellence

Scroll down to; My Courses E3 Online Research Project

(1) Christine Gilbert HMCI *Talisman* - Ofsted publications pg 3

(2) Ofsted Survey *Virtual Learning environments: an evaluation of their development in educational settings*.