**Outstanding teaching, learning and assessment: case study on operational project led by City and Islington College**

# Introduction

The project, led by City & Islington College and supported by UCL Institute of Education (UCL IOE), was a collaborative cross-London project which has 16 other college members comprised of, among others: College of Haringey, Enfield & North East London; Barnet and Southgate College; Lewisham Southwark College; Westminster Kingsway College; John Ruskin College; Newham College; Barking & Dagenham College; Sir George Monoux College; and Lambeth College.

City and Islington College, like all the other colleges involved in the project, has and will continue to have a large cohort of full-time learners aged 16 to 18-years-old engaged in the new study programmes. All of these learners will be expected to either gain the appropriate qualification in English (Functional Skills or GCSE) or if they already have A\*-C grades, continue to improve their English skills. At the moment, 25% of the learners at City and Islington College fall into the first category and 75% to the latter.

Because the colleges involved in this project are based all over London – South, East, West and North - the learners who attend also reflect that diversity in terms of prior attainment, experience, gender & ethnicity.

The aim of the project was to develop a pan-London community of practitioners who would be willing to identify and share resources and practices to support all learners participating in study programmes. In identifying and working towards outstanding teaching, learning and assessment of English, the longer term aim was to increase the level of achievement in English as well as the continued development of relevant skills within the study programme. It also planned to identify practitioners who could continue to support this development through action research.

The project embraced the ethos of equality and diversity by reducing barriers for learners most disadvantaged because of their low English skills.

# Approach

At the inaugural meeting the group identified the three most pressing areas in teaching, learning and assessment.

The areas agreed on by the group were:

* Higher achievement through improved assessment and induction models
* Differentiation by skills
* Embedding English in the vocational curriculum

It was agreed that each of the above strands could make a significant contribution to potentially developing outstanding teaching, learning and assessment across all partners and improve the individual needs of every learner.

Members were encouraged to join the group where they felt they would be most productive. Each group was to identify, by engaging with practitioners, learners and other stakeholders, current practices and areas of concern around the given themes and possible support and resources that could be provided.

The project embraced equality and diversity by encouraging diversity in sample and response. Each participant worked with stakeholders across different curriculum areas in their own colleges. Data was collected using a variety of methods such as questionnaires, direct interviews and focus groups. At least 40 practitioners and 700 learners were involved in all three strands. Questions used were agreed upon and standardised to ensure consistency and fairness across board.

The scope of the project meant that a diverse group of tutors and learners, including learners whose first language is not English, were involved in the project.

Apart from the general modus operandi used by all the groups, the assessment, induction and placement model used by one of the colleges was reviewed as a possible model of outstanding practice. Also, 57 lesson observations were carried out to assess how English was being embedded in vocational areas.

The group demonstrated a strong sense of collaboration, without which the project would have failed. Time constraints meant they could not have regular meetings, but each member of the group had an assigned task and fed back to the team lead. There was a whole group event where each team reported back on how they were doing. A diary which captured planning and progress was also kept by the lead person.

# Outcomes and impact

All three groups were able to identify areas of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment that could be developed to become outstanding practice and areas that needed to improve.

Some of the outcomes that have come out of the project include:

* Training sessions organised to continue to support practitioners to develop their ‘differentiation, stretching & challenging’ skills
* Opportunities for practitioners to :
  + engage in continuing professional development (CPD) modules linked to the project with UCL IOE
  + continue to build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and to share ideas and resources
  + develop skills that will enable them to use fair methods of assessment and provide constructive feedback that will allow for effective support & learner progression
* Increased confidence to share and develop resources that will ensure outstanding teaching, learning and assessment.

As a result of this, human and teaching, learning and assessment resources are being shared by practitioners. These resources are being shared and made available to practitioners on a social media network: Yammer.

The key impact, given the large number of partners involved in the project, has been the outstanding level of collaboration and the willingness to share ideas and resources and to ask for support from those who are not part of the original group. Some of the colleges are already looking at how to adapt resources for their own use. Barking & Dagenham College plans to bring in the expert trainer to work with their tutors in the new academic session because, according to a senior manager:

*“If we are going to be outstanding in our delivery, we need to invest in our staff, give them confidence to develop strategies that will help them identify areas in their curriculum where maths and English naturally occur and then help learners appreciate, identify, develop and apply these naturally occurring skills within the context of their vocation and real life – I know these training sessions will do that!”*

It is anticipated that learner retention and achievement will improve across all partner colleges as staff involved continue working towards a shared understanding of outstanding teaching and learning.

The project has opened up opportunities for three participants to undertake CPD modules with the UCL IOE, a move that is in line with the encouragement in the Professional Standards to *“update knowledge of educational research to develop evidence-based practice & apply theoretical understanding of effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment drawing on research and other evidence”.*

One of these participants was given the opportunity to work as the associate peer adviser for the project. This was a strategy that should ensure sustainability as recommendations and continued impact of the project will be implemented, measured and analysed as part of the module.

All through the life of the project, and hopefully beyond, there has been evidence of practitioners demonstrating their commitment to the Professional Standards. As well as the example given earlier, practitioners have had the opportunity to reflect on their practices and values and have encouraged colleagues to do so through the questions used in the questionnaires and focus groups. They have built strong collaborative relationships especially with their colleagues from other colleges.

Some of the practitioners have commented on the impact participating in the project has had on them:

*“The project has been effective in focusing our minds on the need to look at how we deliver English and maths going forward, particularly with the need to look at students’ skills gaps/deficits using intelligence from exam board results and Initial assessments, moving away from the traditional model of re-teaching the whole syllabus to entire cohorts.”*

*“The visit to John Ruskin College to see their Initial and diagnostic assessment process was quite thought provoking. We have taken certain ideas from the visit to our information, advice and guidance team.”*

*“Our scheme(s) of work will be revamped for next academic session and the way we induct students onto level 1 and 2 English courses will be reviewed.”*

Participants presented their findings and recommendations, sharing ideas and resources at the conference ‘*Post-16 English and mathematics: Where are we now?*’ organised by the UCL IOE on 17 June 2015. This was part of the strategy to further encourage collaboration and professional knowledge and understanding that will ensure outstanding teaching, learning and assessment practices.

The three strands of the project have, directly or otherwise, looked at how best to identify learners’ needs & enable them develop strategies to help them overcome their barriers to developing their English skills.

**Lessons learned**

Initially, it was very difficult keeping in touch with the groups and keeping them active as members were scattered all around London. However, with lots of encouragement from the lead, responses began to filter in and practitioners began to manage their time better.

Collaboration between project members, informal networks and support were unexpected benefits realised as a result of the project. So was the opportunity to discuss and consider new ideas that were not in the original brief – flexibility was key. The project has enabled colleges to expand their knowledge, try new ideas, train a large number of staff, and enable new research.

Next time, the project would define and agree strategy from the beginning, not try to do too much! The project became bigger than originally planned, which was good for collaboration and sustainability.

Advice for others includes:

* Pre-plan meetings so that they are in diaries early in the project.
* Develop templates for project management.
* Lead needs to be strong, collaborative and proactive and be able to give a considerable amount of time to the work.
* Be clear about deadlines and be prepared to chase participants. Keep focused on outcomes.
* Use some of the money from the bid to secure some admin support
* Introduce a ‘get-away’ period to allow practitioners to get out of their busy schedule and have quality thinking time.

# Sustainability and transferability

The areas covered by the project were areas that all colleges are either developing or improving, especially with the government policy that expects all learners on the study programmes to be progressing towards a C grade in GCSE if they have not already achieved it or improving on their skills if they have. As a result, practitioners are keen to ensure the sustainability of this project and some of the plans to do so include:

* Continuing to develop collaborative professional relationships by sharing information, ideas and resources through joint training sessions and conferences, blogs and social network. This is how one of the practitioners plans to do this:

*“Even though I’m leaving Lewisham Southwark College at the end of June, I hope to bring one of our English improvement practitioners and the Head of English to the events on 17 June and 30 June to ensure links between Lewisham Southwark College and those involved in the pan-London project are maintained.”*

* Identifying opportunities for CPD such as that offered by the UCL IOE.
* Involving other colleges and colleagues who were not directly part of the project by allowing shared ideas and resources e.g. Barking & Dagenham College sharing the assessment tool even though it was not a direct resource from this project.
* Encouraging those who are undertaking the CPD modules to look at the issues raised from this project in greater depths and continue to act as link persons to the project participants, flagging up opportunities for collaboration.
* Continuing to monitor impact and report findings on social network e.g. trial the new assessment tool and induction model in September and share learners’ and practitioners’ views on these.
* Developing or adapting resources and sharing these so other colleges can have access to them.
* Encouraging learner feedback and participation especially about the long term impact of implementing recommendations from the project.
* In terms of transferability, having a relatively large and diverse cohort will work positively for the project. The impact will be felt initially in at least 10 colleges in London but with an average of at least 60 members of staff acting as ‘ambassadors’, there is a great possibility that developing and sharing ideas and resources will continue on a larger scale. The willingness by participants to test out the resources and ideas will guarantee positive learner experience as teaching, learning and assessment become outstanding.

**Case study written by Tinyan Akin-Omoyajowo, Peer Advisor, supported by Gillian Gibson, City and Islington College**