



Dentdale: a capital opportunity to improve transitions and the local offer for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities through flexible and personalised curriculum design

Summary

This case study summarises how Askham Bryan College redesigned its curriculum for students with learning difficulties and or disabilities aged 16 -24 in order to improve the local learning offer. The principle driver for change in the curriculum was the construction of a (£600k) new building (Dentdale) to enhance facilities that would provide greater opportunities for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities including experience and exploration of independent living, supported / simulated employment and enterprise at the college.

The redesign is taking place at a time of significant change bringing both challenges and opportunities. Key drivers include the move to 'study programme' funding, the Wolfe report, changing needs and demographics, the need for enhanced post-school transitions for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities and reducing use of out-of-area specialist provision where appropriate.

The college and its York cluster partners worked closely together to develop a curriculum that would:

- Utilise the new specialist facilities to maximise the local offer for independent living and supported employment.
- Expand the content and extend the learner base that the curriculum offer could support by developing flexible access to support non-traditional student attendance and transitions from other providers.
- Develop a range of accessible, relevant and purposeful supported 'employment' opportunities again with flexible access.
- Include Enterprise activities that make the best use of the unique college environment.

Key lessons learned

- Clarity of market, defining the learners for which the provision was appropriate.
- Designing curriculum with an "individual learner need" focus: Moving from 'dish of the day' to 'a la carte' programmes.
- The value of working as a member of a cluster group of providers / commissioners to add new cross institution opportunities to the local offer.
- The need for joint well planned and earlier integrated transitions for learners from one stage of their education to the next.

Introduction

About Askham Bryan College

Askham Bryan College is the leading land-based college in the North of England. The main campus is set in over 200 acres just outside York, a major sister campus is sited near Penrith and there are a number of smaller centres throughout the North from Bradford to Newcastle. Whilst the college leads in Agriculture, Horticulture, Animal Management and Equine studies, it also has a long history in provision for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities and has specific provision for these learners at York, Guisborough and Penrith. In November 12 the college, in a joint bid with City of York Council, received substantial capital funding for the development of Dendale House a new specialist facility for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities.

About the York Cluster

This project cluster of partners is based in the City of York with delivery to learners into several neighbouring Local Authorities (LA) and in the case of Askham Bryan College, across the North of England.

The project partners include a large GFE college (York College), a Specialist Land Based College (Askham Bryan College), Training Provider (York Learning, York Training Centre), 11-19 Special School (Applefields), Specialist Provider for Emotional and Social Disorders (Danesgate Community), Supported Employment Organisation (Blueberry Academy) and the LA 14-19 Team as lead partner.

As such the cluster included all main providers in the York area working in partnership to meet the needs of students aged 16 – 24 with learning difficulties and or disabilities.

What we wanted to achieve

Our aim was to increase opportunities in the local offer for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities aged 16-24. This was driven by the York City 'meeting needs locally first' 16 – 24 learning difficulties and or disabilities strategy. A key element of the strategy was to ensure local providers and commissioners worked fully in partnership to meet learner needs.

The intended outcomes were modest in terms of initial learner numbers, but it was imperative to provide effective transitions from the school to college environment. To achieve this, the college needed the support of the cluster to develop the systems and design the learning experience for the new cohort of high needs learners. Some of these learners would previously have had to attend out of area specialist colleges to meet their needs.

Targets set:

- Completion of Dendale building ready for use in September 2013.
- Delivery of new curriculum including supported employment from September 2013.
- Recruitment of 4 cohorts of learners (1 with High Needs, 1 at Entry Level 2, 2 at Entry Level 3).
- In addition to the above cohorts, around 20 learners seeking transition to the college accessing the curriculum on a part-time basis by October 2013 (generally through agreement with their existing local providers, but some on York Personal Learning and Work Experience Package (PLWEPs) NB : A separate case study is available on York PLWEPs.
- Taster cohorts from other institutions using the facilities regularly or for short periods by December 2013.

Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts

Achievements so far

A new curriculum has been designed with a strong emphasis on flexibility of access. In doing so the college replaced its existing full and part time provision for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities with a single range of menu options allowing learners to select the elements of provision most appropriate to their needs. A brochure aimed at those advising learners has been produced and a number of briefing events for careers advisors and other professionals have been held.

- A key learning point here has been to provide flexibility to respond to the needs of a broad range of learners. Some learners are in other institutions but wish to transition towards work, hence it was important that the supported work element was accessible on multiple days at multiple levels meaning attendance was an option for all. It was equally important to allow learners on full time programmes to access the elements that were right for them – hence some learners need Independent living skills whilst others were better served by the work option. In essence rather than an approach of offering ‘dish of the day’, a set menu for all learners, our learners now order ‘a la carte’.

The Dentedale building consists of an independent living teaching area, an enterprise area, 10 bedrooms and a warden flat. Specification was developed in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders through a steering group facilitated by the cluster. The Specification was developed in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders through a steering group facilitated by the cluster.

- A key learning point here has been to be very clear about the target learner group for the building and to ensure that the building services those learners. Essential from the outset was to consult with a broad range of local partners on the target group for whom the facility would be appropriate. This directly informed the design and fitting out of Dentedale and importantly sent clear messages about for whom the new facility would be appropriate.

Supported work placement activities have been designed. Due to the nature of the college these tend to have a land-based orientation. Great care is being taken however to work with partners to develop other opportunities for learners where land-based is either inaccessible or lacking relevance to specific learners.

- A key learning point here has been to make effective use of the skills and experience of the cluster and the broader relationships (out of area) the college enjoys. This has led to a number of work experience opportunities being developed in the following areas:
 - Amenity Horticulture and Grounds Maintenance.
 - Recycling, up-cycling, repurposing and reuse.
 - Domestic and commercial cleaning.
 - Catering.

What is still to come

In partnership with the cluster the college will seek to evaluate its curriculum offer on a rolling basis and will respond to opportunities as they present.

The college will seek to further add to the range work placement activities as further understanding of relevance and accessibility for the learners develops.

The college is continuing to seek partners to develop 'short break' residential educational packages based from the Dentedale facility. We would hope to pilot such provision within the 2013-2014 academic year.

What advice we would give to others

We can't satisfy local need for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities alone; the only way is to work in partnership where each organisation concentrates on their strengths and specialism.

In developing any new provision for learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities, especially those with high needs, be very clear about the range of needs that can be accommodated to ensure a quality learning experience is delivered.

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