Reinvigorating Curriculum Design
Case Study

Project title: **TechCity Connect: Bridging the gap between qualifications and employer needs for vocational IT qualifications**

ELATT is a not-for-profit training organisation that provides a variety of free training courses that lead to nationally recognised qualifications. Through the project, ELATT aimed to reinvigorate their curriculum design by researching the skills and attributes that employers valued and to incorporate these into their curriculum design.

Worth reading if you are interested in:
- Improving learners employability potential
- Employer responsive provision
- Embedding employability skills within vocational qualifications
- Providing challenging and authentic learning experiences

Contact information

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Participating organisation:
ELATT (East London Advanced Technology Training)

What the project set out to do and why

The project set out to review and revitalise ELATT's IT curriculum offer to ensure that learners are equipped with the skills that local IT businesses need and that they are, therefore, well placed to take up new work opportunities emerging in Tech City UK, a major Government-led initiative to bring private sector growth into East London as part of the 2012 Olympics legacy.

The project consisted of research with local IT businesses to identify their skills needs for a range of IT-related job roles, reviewing these against the courses ELATT currently offer, investigating appropriate QCF units and funding regulations and developing a pilot course to bring all of these elements together.

What the project has achieved so far

Research phase

The project team conducted semi-structured interviews with seven local IT businesses to identify their requirements for employees in IT-related job roles and any skills gaps they perceived in applicants applying for jobs with their organisation.

At the same time, the team conducted desk research to explore the variety of QCF unit options that could be used to expand current provision; with a focus on units that will move learners on from web design to web development and units that will complement existing provision by developing learners' soft skills such as interpersonal skills, employability and project management. Funding options and restrictions for these units were also investigated to ensure that the revised curriculum offer will be viable.

Design phase

The data from the employer interviews, together with details of potential units was brought together in a new curriculum offer that incorporates skills that employers value; 'soft skills' such as customer service skills, self-motivation, the ability to manage change, organisational and prioritisation skills. A curriculum road map has been developed that is mapped to industry roles and identifying different career paths and potential progression routes.

Opportunities to embed literacy, numeracy and employability skills within the qualifications are being developed and a key aspect of the redesign is to try to build in opportunities that develop learners' wider capability, for example, activities that support the development of reasoning skills essential to web and software development. Possible delivery models were explored and assessment requirements considered. Sample course outlines and schemes of work have been prepared and resources to support these are being developed.

Pilot phase

A pilot of the new qualification began in March 2012 with 10 learners. Early indications are that the new approaches and different teaching strategies provide learning experiences that more accurately reflect real world scenarios as well as a level of challenge that is stimulating and enjoyable for learners.

> *"The class was interesting and motivating, but very challenging.*
> *I really enjoyed it, but need more practice. The session helped me to*
> *understand the broader aspects of programming and how MYSQL*
> *works with it."*
>
> *(Learner feedback, March 2012)*

The pilot will run until July 2012 when it will be reviewed and refined for full roll-out in September 2012.

The course takes place on two days a week over a twelve-week period. A modular approach to delivery is being trialled with one tutor per module, providing a flexible delivery model that exposes the learners to different tutors and more accurately reflects real life. It also means that learners can benefit from the specific expertise offered by individual tutors.

The Individual Learning Plan (ILP) has been redesigned to support the embedding of soft skills and to emphasise their importance to learners. Learners are encouraged to be more reflective and to review their learning achievements by completing a weekly learning diary.

In addition, the project has helped to establish closer links with local employers. Two employers have already delivered workshops to prepare learners for interviews and reinforce the importance of punctuality, appearance and presentation. Some employers are willing to offer work placements to learners from ELATT.

What the project still needs to do

Although opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills are embedded within the scheme of work, it is felt that this aspect could be strengthened and enhanced by embedding assessment of these skills within the model.

ELATT will be planning and addressing staff development needs beyond the pilot by identifying current skills and expertise, mapping this to the revised curriculum offer, identifying gaps and then addressing any training needs on an individual basis. This is an efficient and more cost-effective approach than training all staff in all disciplines.

Work on these areas is progressing throughout the pilot phase. A comprehensive review of the pilot will be conducted throughout July and August 2012 to inform delivery in September. Full resource lists for each qualification will be produced after the review and then marketing activities will commence in earnest.

In addition, ELATT would like to explore opportunities to showcase learners work to potential employers using online systems.

ELATT will share the outcomes of this project with other providers through their engagement in the London Voluntary Sector Training Consortium and the Third Sector National Learning Alliance.

What the project wants to share with other schools, colleges and training providers

The following resources are available in a zipped resource folder accompanying this case study:

- The employer questionnaire used to support the semi-structured interviews with employer representatives together with a summary of responses and analysis of findings.

- The curriculum road map identifying potential pathways and progression routes.

- Staff CPD requirements.

- Sample course outlines:

  - IT Practitioner (Level 1);

  - IT User (Level 1);

  - IT Web Design (Level 1).

- Sample schemes of work:

  - IT Technician (Level 1);

  - IT Web Design (Level 1).

- Sample activities for:

  - a tutorial;

  - Level 1 Web Design;

  - Advanced Web Design.

Key learning points

- Although the sample size is small, there is commonality and consistency in the feedback from employers on the employability skills they wanted and valued. Encouragingly, employers were willing to work with ELATT to embed these elements into the curriculum design.

- Measurement is essential. Whatever you deliver, there has to be a measure by which success is gauged and this is just as important for soft skills even though they can be harder to measure. ELATT are using an Individual Learner Plan that includes self-reflective tools to analyse and develop some of these competencies.

- The assessment strategy should include assessment of literacy and numeracy skills to reinforce their importance to learners.

- Learners sometimes find it demotivating when qualifications only offer a 'Pass' grade and ELATT believe it is important to explore how to motivate learners by recognising extra effort, and achievement that goes beyond a pass; for example,

punctuality in meeting deadlines, showing initiative and demonstrating good customer service. This more accurately reflects the pressures of a real work environment and is good practice for learners.

- Learners found the teaching strategies for problem-solving challenging but also rewarding and enjoyable. Using real-life scenarios that require learners to work in an authentic way helps learners to develop confidence and competence in their technical skills **and** the soft skills that employers value. Providing opportunities for group work reinforced the need to work together effectively as a team; another of the attributes employers valued.

- The curriculum offer will need to be regularly reviewed to ensure it continues to reflect, and adapt to, employer and learner needs. This is supported by an extensive range of QCF units now available on the Register of Regulated Qualifications and growing resource banks being developed by awarding organisations.