

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT TECHNICAL SKILLS NATIONAL PROGRAMME

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tombola



INTRODUCTION

This project aimed to look at how feasible it is to create an incubation studio as a transitional stage for students progressing from college game development and digital courses into the creative digital sector, specifically focused on the Games/Virtual & Augmented reality industries.

An incubation studio in this instance is envisaged as an intermediate platform for learners to engage in industrially-informed high-quality education, working on live briefs in a professional environment located external to college facilities.

A focus of this was to facilitate the progression of students with SEN, specifically who are on the Autistic Spectrum (as a significant minority of our learners are) and who often do not progress into paid employment due to a (sometimes perceived) lack of employability skills.

Another focus was to see if this incubation studio could be used as a potential way of facilitating the work placement requirements of the T Levels.



“Only 16% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time paid employment.”

**THE AUTISM EMPLOYMENT GAP.
NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY
2016**



Project Aims

- We aimed to explore the feasibility of an incubation studio as a transitional stage for students progressing from college Tech courses into the VR/AR industry.
- This may be a vehicle to help us deliver the new digital T-levels. IP and confidentiality agreements make it difficult for under students 18 to find work experience in digital design studios. This project will allow us to explore whether the incubator studio will provide a meaningful alternative to this.
- Students will take on real life commissioned work for external clients. This could include both creative companies who have a skills gap our students can fill and non-creative companies who need specific tech skills.
- Commissions will form the vehicle for learners to develop a range of creative digital skills and importantly, gain the employability and soft skills that are inherent when working with a range of clients.
- While not exclusively, the project will be focused on supporting students with specific educational needs. Many our digital creative students are on the autistic spectrum, specifically with Asperger's. They can find the leap to higher education difficult in terms of their personal confidence and when interacting with industry professionals. This project will be tailored to develop their professional competencies and help them progress to

employment by providing students with a supportive environment within which to hone these core professional skills.

- Work with a range of external partners to deliver this project.
- Educational partners will adapt and use the model to run in their organisations.

PROJECT RATIONALE

Multiple factors contributed to the need for this project, some of the primary drivers were:

- The proposed substantive work-placement requirements for the incoming T Level qualifications and the challenge of finding these placements in the creative technical industries
- Many creative digital and games studios often require the signing of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) which cannot be signed by 16-17-year olds due the highly secretive nature of the industry and strict intellectual property (IP) issues.
- The nature of the industry (dominated by SMEs) could make it particularly difficult for indie studios to take on placement students.
- A significant minority of our learners have specific education needs (SEN), the vast majority of whom are on the Autistic Spectrum. For Year 2 Level 3, games provision the ratio is around 1:3 and our HE provision in games the ratio is 1:2. The majority of SEN learners do well here in college but often have difficulties when moving to HE at other institutions or do not go on to find employment nationally, “Only 16% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time paid employment.” It would be hoped that an incubation studio could be a vehicle for developing employability and social skills and as a means of getting SEN students used to working with people in the ‘world of work.’

METHODS

We reached out to employers using a few local employer networks and employer links we were part of and invited employers to participate in the steering groups.

These participation events were activity-based and focused on how to establish an incubation studio.

Site visits to potential studio locations were conducted, discussions with local authority over access to facilities were conducted.

The projects team researched potential funding solutions for the project.

Project management and collaboration was facilitated using Trello, an online productivity tool that allowed all participants to engage and

contribute to the project as it developed.

Staff conducted research into T Levels – particularly the digital pathway. Students, employers and providers actively collaborated in the creation of the curriculum road map for HE, creating the subject specialism pathways.

Learner voice was conducted to seek learner views and input.

We also recorded video reflective diaries, both as a means of evaluating current progress, but also as a legacy for the project so other practitioners could gain insight into the process.

IMPACT AND OUTCOMES

Employers

The businesses we worked with on this project engaged enthusiastically and indicated the need to create a 'Talent Pipeline' for their skills needs.

Citing the lack of skilled employees in the area, they noted that this was causing significant issues for their businesses such as high recruitment costs and wage inflation. Indeed, the employers who contributed to this project were often in competition for the same staff and noted that they had 'poached' staff from each other in the past.

Employers also stated that they were often unsure about the right way to manage employees who may have Specific Educational Needs (SEN) within their organisations and this was also a driver for their participation.

Employers felt more comfortable and better equipped to value and support their employees on the Autistic Spectrum facilitated through CPD provided by ESPA.

Employers said they were interested in sponsoring an incubation studio should it be created.

Employers formed an Employer Advisory Board to inform the curriculum and plug the 'skills gap.'

Providers

Cumbria University were able to access the contacts Gateshead College has established in the Creative and Digital industries and join networks such as VRTGO Labs.

Staff were able to attend CPD around Virtual and Augmented Reality at PROTO, using equipment and giving advice on its use.

Delivery staff have been offered up-skilling placements with employer partners.

Our research around T Levels was shared with Keighley College. In turn, they shared their research and experience in how they run work experiences around manufacturing production schedules using their campus facilities.

Research into the digital T Level indicated that it is not suited to game development in its current form due to its emphasis on traditional software development and a lack of creative design elements, so we proceeded in exploring the HE route instead of T Level in this project.

Learners

Learners have benefited most from participation in this project, which is as we hoped.

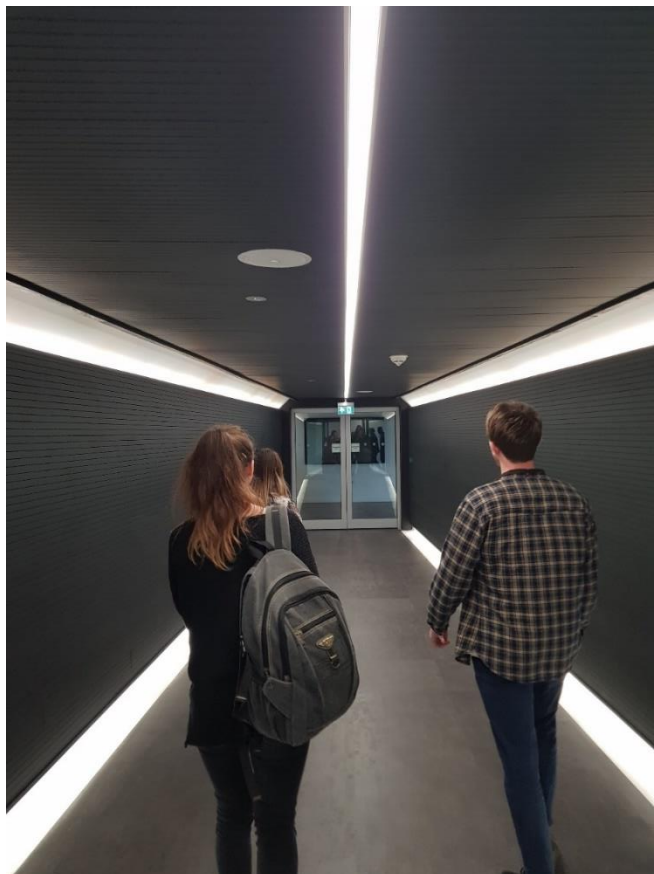
- All HE learners have undertaken commissioned work from Northumbrian Water.
- All Level 3 learners have benefitted from visiting the Tyne and Tees Valley Immersive Lab.
- Some GC learners have undertaken placements at Tombola LTD, some of whom are being considered for their Advanced Apprenticeship Programme.
- HE learners exhibited their VR work in the Great Exhibition of the North.
- All Art & Design, Media and Games Students were given careers and progression advice as well as mentoring opportunities from a senior producer at Hammerhead VR.
- Games Students were selected to participate in Play Testing at HammerheadVR.
- Students who are on the Autistic Spectrum (ASD) were able to participate in work experience and projects and support each other, giving presentations and receiving feedback from significant industry players.

Over 280 learners participated in the University of Cumbria (UoC) Game Jam and received feedback from industry experts from SUMO Digital.



Students Visit Norther Design Centre

Staff CPD at PROTO





Staff attend networking event



Members of GC Executive team and Gateshead Council discuss potential partnership at PROTO

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 Total direct and indirect project participants

| | DIRECT | INDIRECT |
|-----------------------------|--------|----------|
| Project Participants | | |
| Managers and senior leaders | 4 | 4 |
| Practitioners | 20 | 300 |
| Learners | 156 | 170 |
| Education Providers | 4 | 20 |
| Employers | 8 | 15 |



“We love working in partnership with Gateshead College to create opportunities for tech students to gain valuable career experience.”

DEBRA BALLANTYNE.
HEAD OF PEOPLE
TOMBOLA LTD

LESSONS LEARNT

Employers

We were pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm of employers and the ease in which they engaged with us. Many of them lamenting the lack of cooperation in the past. This enthusiasm has translated into significant benefits to our provision.

What employers responded to was the focus that this project gave and the facilitation of meetings, but mostly that we followed through with actions and regular communication. In the past, employers felt that lip service was down to engagement and, “a lot of talking”, which lead to little that was tangible.

Employers outside of creative digital are eager to engage with creative digital curriculum. Our partners at Northumbrian Water Group were very interested in commissioning our students and the fact that they are looking at the, ‘Gamification of everything.’

Employers can be nervous of how they should best manage and accommodate the employees that may have SEN issues such as ASD, but they are genuinely enthusiastic to engage with positive means of doing so. Indeed, some employers we spoke to wished they could specifically advertise for people who have Asperger’s Syndrome for quality and testing roles.

Providers

We found engagement from FE providers to be extremely challenging. Whilst there was enthusiasm for the project, they were often unable to commit time to it, despite the offer of paying for cover. When pressed, respondents said the process of even finding quality cover was an issue and our FE partners had been 'cut to the bone' in terms of funding, all of which hampered our ability to engage with or FE colleagues.

The opposite was true of our partners in HE: we found a very enthusiastic response to the project from them both in terms of attitude and time available. Their insights into some of the legal and financial implications of establishing an incubation studio were invaluable to the feasibility study, bringing to our attention issues we had simply not considered before. We could consider these partners first in future.

Practitioners

All practitioners we engaged with saw the usefulness and potential benefit in this project. One issue they did find challenging was the timeframe for the project, particularly as it started just over half way through the academic year and the logistics of engaging with a project at this point was challenging.

"Getting to see what is cutting edge in industry and talk to developers has given me lots of ideas of how I can embed this in my teaching practice." *John Bartlett, Games Lecturer, Gateshead College*

Practitioners also welcomed the focus on SEN issues in this project, especially the games delivery staff. Much of our games provision had over a third of learners who are on the autistic spectrum and the time the project allowed to focus on meeting these learners' specific needs was appreciated.

"We kind of just deal with these issues every day, it's been reassuring to know that we're doing the right things and that this is having a positive impact on our learners on the Autistic Spectrum." *Len Leighton – Lead Practitioner and Lecturer, Gateshead College.*

Practitioners also appreciated the time they got to spend researching the upcoming T Levels. "We often have to react to these types of changes very quickly, but this research has given a heads up on what is coming, given us time to think and evaluate our options." Heather Penten, Curriculum Leader – Games Design, Gateshead College.

Establishing a separate commercial entity that is sustainable is considerably more expensive and complicated than we initially thought, especially when factoring the discounts and savings usually offered to us through educational licences. This could be a prohibiting factor in establishing a studio for T Level placements.



"We have had software companies approach us to ask if we have students with Asperger's who could do Q&A testing."

PATRICK CARHIL.
PRINCIPAL
ESPA



"Getting to see what is cutting edge in industry and talking to developers has given me lots of ideas of how I can embed this in my teaching practice."

John Bartlett.

Games Lecturer

Gateshead College

Learners

Learners have actively engaged with their opportunity to shape the curriculum model. They especially like the opportunity to review and contribute their ideas to the Level 5 specialist pathways for the HE model. "We really like the chance to shape the second-year options and working with employers has been really good experience." Alison, Level 5 HND Games Production student

Out of 49 Year 2 level 3 learners, 92% thought that they had benefitted from working on commissions, though some expressed reservations at first about that fact some of these commissions were from a utility company, however, once they realised they were still using the same skill sets and that they would be able to count this as work experience, enthusiasm rose markedly.

Female students particularly enjoyed the opportunity to meet with women professionals from HammerheadVR (Sally Blake, Senior Producer) and Tombola LTD (Debra Ballantyne, Head of People), finding it encouraging to find women in senior roles in a notoriously male dominated industry.

Our Learners on the Autistic Spectrum actively engaged with this project (and in the author's opinion were the real stars!). A learner with Asperger's Syndrome, who just a few years ago was unable to make eye contact with college staff, has presented his ideas to staff from Northumbrian Water; despite personal discomfort and anxiety has networked at employer events with Tombola and their staff; and recently has completed a placement at Tombola where he related that it, "...has been one of the best experiences of my life. I don't want to leave." His experience is not unique within our cohort and we now consider this one of the defining strengths of our provision.

Learners felt that the shift in emphasis to employability in our theme, "Beyond Entertainment," has helped them consider their future. 89% of learners surveyed said that the theme had helped them consider career options they had not considered before.

Transferability

The project has been developed with transparency and transferability in mind. We appreciate that Games Development is quite niche, but we believe the concept of an incubations facility (if not studio) could work in many disciplines, especially as a means of allowing learners with SEN to interact with employers in a meaningful way.

This could range from an offsite salon for hair and beauty students, a mechanic garage run by students, catering and hospitality through to agricultural studies. While the disciplines vary enormously, the potential of creating commercially functioning but transitional environments could benefit huge numbers of learners and provide a solution to the extremely challenging work placement requirements of the T Levels.

Equality and Diversity

A major focus of this project was E&D, specifically around the SEN issues highlighted. We have exceeded our expectations in terms of the potential benefits for our students with ASD.

Other benefits of this project have been the engagement with female professionals in the games industry. They have offered mentorship and inspiration to our female games students who in turn are choosing to become ambassadors and go into schools to inspire other young women to consider games development as a career option.

We would make this a co-priority in a future project of this nature from the start.

Outputs

- **Feasibility Study** – Documentation of the process and our recommendations and conclusions.
- **Curriculum model** - Pathways and curriculum plan that forms a roadmap and pathway for a potential incubation studio cohort (that is also now the plan for our current cohort of HE students).
- **Sample Assignment brief** – Level 5 Project management brief based on the Northumbrian Water commission.
- **Video diary** – Video diary by the project lead and colleagues where we reflect on the process as it is happening.
- **Video walkthrough:** Trello - of the use of Trello as a project management and collaboration tool.

Sustainability

We are currently looking at funding sources that could make the incubation studio a reality and business planning a sponsorship model with the partner organisations that would provide a sustainable basis for the project.

An employer board and database of digital and creative businesses has been formed and dedicated staff members are being utilised to see how we can maintain and even strengthen these relationships.

Colleagues from other subject areas are considering lessons they can learn from this and we are actively assisting through discussing our own project journey lessons learned and seeking ways this could be adapted. For example, in the Health sector, Music and Performing Arts, colleagues from catering have also been interested in how this could be adapted in their sector.

There has been 'critical mass' moment, where we are now in the enviable position of businesses contacting us as word has spread out

about the interactions with the likes of Software City and Tombola and so we are hoping to continue to build on these interactions to the benefit of our learners.

Next Steps

Gateshead College has added the creation of Employer Boards to its quality improvement plan and has reaffirmed its commitment to employment being its primary mission.

We are actively seeking funding for the establishment of an incubations studio from a range of potential sources, which may include bidding for public funded investment as we align this to the Local Enterprise Partnership and regional strategic plan. We are also exploring the opportunity suggested by our employer partners of establishing a sponsorship model to fund the studio as a commercially separate entity would allow us to use the studio not only as an outstanding teaching and learning facility for our HE students, but also as a means of delivering substantive work placements for our level 3 learners.

Social Media and other web resources

<https://otlagateshead.org/> - Dedicated website to OTLA

<https://trello.com/b/3HpZzqWu/otla-project> - Trello board used to manage project

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXBOxqL9zd8&list=PLHPUcoTCM1tIQj_nak60jvAc-vTwJlxA6 – YouTube playlist of video diaries, steering groups, and student presentations.

https://twitter.com/games_gc - twitter account for GC games

<https://twitter.com/OTLAGateshead> - Dedicated Twitter Feed for OTLA project.