

4.18 Colchester Institute

Energising Harwich – excellence in support for students/pre-employment training

The Energising Harwich project was originally grant-funded as a UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) Employer Ownership of Skills pilot from January 2013 to December 2014. It aimed to address recruitment and training needs and prepare companies in and around Harwich and the wider Haven Gateway area for new business opportunities that would arise from the construction of a dedicated harbour and operations centre for high speed offshore support vessels and two large scale wind farm developments off the East Anglian coastline.

The project was directed and driven by a consortium of employers and stakeholder organisations (of which Colchester Institute was a member) through steering and advisory groups which had real representation from the local community. It had two components:

1. an offer to employers of subsidised business and skills training and
2. a Passport to Work programme for the long term unemployed.

Colchester Institute's Passport to Work (P2W) programme is an example of excellent practice and was shortlisted for a 2015 TES Award in Support for Students.

Following an initial interview and assessment, including random drug testing, students attended an introductory/diagnostic programme, operating from 9am to 3.30pm for three days a week over four weeks at the college's well-equipped Energy Skills Centre, which opened in March 2013. This Introduction to the Renewable Energy Sector programme offered students the opportunity to:

- gain engineering bench fitting skills and experience through practical tasks and activity in the workshop;
- learn how to plan a career, improve a CV and employability skills;
- learn about health and safety in the workplace;
- experience working at height;
- gain an insight into the offshore wind farm sector through research activities;
- participate in enjoyable team building activities;
- obtain certificates in abrasive wheels, manual handling and ladders & step-ladders.

On completion, students were awarded a certificate of attendance and had the opportunity to gain a Construction Skills Certification Scheme card. They were assessed and graded on team work; their ability to work alone; attention to detail; attitude; self-motivation; punctuality; practical ability, and health and safety compliance. Those that demonstrated commitment, worked hard and showed the greatest potential were offered the opportunity to progress on to one of two Passport to Work

programme options designed to give them the qualifications, tickets and H&S certificates/licences that would greatly enhance their employment opportunities within the supply chain to the offshore wind farm sector.

These were either a 12-week level 2 Diploma in Performing Engineering Operations or a three-week course around Logistics and Construction Plant Operations, offered as an alternative to the engineering training package. Both options included mandatory H&S certificates relevant to their preferred career route and an additional minimum of one week's work experience with a local employer, if available, to try out the skills they had gained.

Working in close partnership with local Jobcentre Plus (JCP) teams ensured an efficient system of candidate referral, on-going monitoring of progress and one-to-one support as needed, to assist individuals completing the programme successfully. The project offered ongoing pastoral support to students during and beyond their period of study, providing them with links to local employers for work experience and/or job vacancies. This continued contact has provided essential information on job outcomes from past students – this is combined with ongoing claimant information from the Department for Work and Pensions/Jobcentre Plus.

The pass rate for students completing the programme was 96% with job outcomes reaching 80% by December 2014. A breakdown of job outcomes by age can be seen below:

Age group	Total P2W students	Secured employment on completion of P2W	% employed
16-18 age	3	2	67%
19-24 age	25	20	80%
25+ age	65	52	80%
Total:	93	74	80%

The majority of the students joining the programme had no qualifications and gaining a level 2 Diploma in 12 weeks was a very significant achievement for them. It boosted their self-confidence and built a positive outlook for their future. Many were working at level 1 or below in English, but with support and direction were able to complete the diploma's written work.

Student example 1: After 20 years of employment in motor vehicle maintenance, Richard, aged 43, from Jaywick, Clacton, lost his job in 2011, at the height of the global recession.

Unemployed for two years, despite applying for a variety of jobs, with no qualifications and limited skills, he had started to lose hope of securing employment with a future. On completing the programme, he started work as a 'PPE Stores Person', a post used as a stepping stone to progress into offshore technician roles.

Richard said:

“I have never been happier in myself or in my work. As the men [with whom I work] say 'I am living the dream'. The P2W programme opened a door which has given me financial security for my family, and as such my home life is happier too.”

Student example 2: Having been made redundant as a kitchen fitter, Ricky, aged 29, from Harwich, then spent four years as a carer and was then unemployed for a year before joining the programme. He successfully completed his Performing Engineering Operations Diploma gaining new skills in welding, electrical maintenance and bench hand-tools and GWO Basic Safety course and the essential 'tickets' required to work in the offshore wind sector. Determined to use his new skills and licences, he quickly found a job, in wind turbine maintenance, working on the London Array Wind Farm.

Ricky said:

“Energising Harwich gave me the skills and licences to gain work in the offshore industry - but I feel the most important thing it gave me was the self-belief and confidence to grab an opportunity with both hands when it appeared.”

Comments from employers are equally positive.

Tony Pratt, partner of Dunninghams Ltd, Dovercourt, specialists in welding, steel fabrications and general engineering, said:

“Students were given the opportunity to go out to the wind farm and work alongside our maintenance teams, which they took up with great enthusiasm. The students worked very well and were able to use the skills and training they had received from the project within a real working environment. This experience was both beneficial to the students but also of great value to our business – and subsequently we were able to offer employment to three of the men until the end of the contract.”

The delivery model was designed to ensure that resources were utilised efficiently. Candidates had to compete for places, reflecting the real world. The programme was designed in consultation with employers who identified the relevant skill sets that were needed, which were continually reviewed and adapted. The training offered had high value to individuals who,

in most cases, did not have previous attainments. This led to greater self-worth, confidence and optimism for the future.

Delivered over 12 weeks, the course was tough and challenged the students to learn, succeed and to develop ambition. As it was open to students of all ages, it gave 25+ learners the opportunity to learn new skills and compete with younger candidates. Students displayed considerable enthusiasm and commitment, seeing the programme as a 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' and recommended it to friends and family.

Significant challenges had to be overcome. Deprivation and a lack of employment opportunities can lead to low self-worth, lack of motivation and drive, and dependency on the benefits system. Individuals needed support and delivery needed to be flexible. Some had problems with benefits and travel costs which the project team resolved through direct liaison with JCP advisers. Poor timekeeping and absence were not tolerated, with a poor performance procedure being used if required. Team working was important to move students away from 'isolation' to a 'sense of belonging'.

It was difficult to get some employers to commit to work trials and work experience, with a minority perceiving it as time consuming and costly, and exploitative of unemployed individuals. Work experience placements are also limited by the seasonality of the sector. However, the project is one of the first in the UK to provide students with offshore wind farm work experience. Work trials such as Jack-Up Barge Masters resulted in six permanent jobs and the initial development of a Jack-Up Barge Master apprenticeship framework.

The Passport to Work model has been highly successful in developing skills and preparing unemployed individuals for meaningful work with a high level of job outcomes. Strong employer links are maintained through regular newsletters, highlighting funding mechanisms available for training their staff and good news stories and work trials through the programme.

Life beyond the project

Working in partnership with Department for Work and Pensions/ JCP and Tendring District Council, the college secured additional funding to continue the success of the engineering Passport to Work programme during 2015.

Colchester Institute is utilising Skills Funding Agency Adult Skills funding to support accredited engineering training. DWP/JCP have committed to funding specialist offshore H&S tickets, along with travel, accommodation and medical costs, and Tendring DC is funding the continued random drugs testing and a dedicated administration officer to support the programme, maintain employer links and offer pastoral support.

Colchester Institute is an FE college.