

Collaborative approach to positive learning outcomes for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities



Summary: Local strategic development and collaborative working.

The FE+ colleges cover the Tees Valley corridor (Darlington; Hartlepool; Middlesbrough; Redcar & Cleveland and Stockton) and include five general further education colleges and one specialist art and design college offering Further and Higher Education provision across a range of disciplines.

- Cleveland College of Art & Design [CCAD]
- Darlington College [DC]
- Hartlepool College of Further Education [HCFE]
- Middlesbrough College [MC]
- Redcar & Cleveland College [R&C]
- Stockton Riverside College [SRC]

The FE+ Group wanted to build on their strategic approach to working with colleagues across the Tees Valley region and synchronise the support offered amongst the colleges in developing good planning and communication networks regarding support, transition/progression for learners in the region.

The cluster work set out to achieve a number of objectives including:

- the development of a database/shared portal for learners about what the FE+ provision can offer
- collaborative opportunities for social enterprise
- developing opportunities for supported work experience and/or placements
- monitoring and tracking of learner outcomes (into employment, independent living or progression into further education/training) as part of a collaborative partnership
- the development of a publication called the Transitions Information Pack which is a guide to the additional learning support available to help learners succeed

Key lessons learned

Some of the key points that the cluster found when working on the project include:-

- It takes considerably longer than you think to gather the data that informs your decisions.
- Even small scale projects such as these need time to go through several research cycles to enable proper testing with pilot groups ahead of wider publication.
- Working with and gaining the trust of parents/carers is essential
- Early identification of mainstream learners that are not succeeding in schools can be best supported through a range of transitional pathways.
- Ensure that staff working with learners have specialist knowledge of their client group
- Ensure key workers are available at specific times of day to support learners e.g. coming into college, lunchtime and at the end of day for reflective work.
- Involve a range of professionals, parents and young people when designing marketing/transitional templates and materials.
- Students really value work experience placements -positive feedback was given by all learners with regard to their placements.
- Learners can be encouraged to experience new skills (one learner who started a web design/digital imaging course worked at level 3 due to specialist skills developed on the course.)
- Never underestimate the importance of working in partnership to provide specialist programmes

- Curriculum model needs to be flexible to meet a wide range of student needs

Introduction

Planning our approach

We met as an FE+ Group team and agreed the areas each college would lead. Activity was shaped and determined by consulting with teaching staff, students, senior management and parents. The group set out an action plan with detailed key targets and deadlines.

What we did

Co-ordination for the project was via the FE+ Operations Manager who monitored all activity. All colleges worked collaboratively to shape the FE+ Group's strategic and support structures. The project strengthened and reinforced current activity. However over time it became apparent, through working with staff and students, some parts of the projects needed to focus much more on internal activity and modifications that would provide staff and students with the level of support they require, before branching out to a more strategic position.

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

Each FE+ partner led a particular objective, liaising with partners and sharing best practice.

Hartlepool College of FE [HCFE] developed a more vocationally relevant curriculum for learners. The new curriculum offer, VISION, was tested in September 2012 with a small group of learners and will be rolled out in September 2013. The brochure for this is available to view.

Middlesbrough College [MC] focused on transition planning for learners with a learning support need. It was felt that if learners could access information about the wide and varied learning support that the college provided, they (and those involved with young people in their transition planning) would be able to make a more informed choice about their next steps and feel reassured that the right levels of support would be available to help them succeed. MC devised an appropriate publication called the Transitions Information Pack that would be both printed and on their website making it widely accessible to young people, parents, local schools, agencies, the Local Authority and the Integrated Youth Support Service. This will be available on MC's website from August 2013 (<http://www.mbro.ac.uk>)

Redcar & Cleveland College [R&C] identified transitional opportunities for pre and post 16 learners attending Specialist schools and mainstream provision. College staff worked with Connexions and Elite to deliver two transitional pathways. Students attended college one day a week and a key worker supported them during the college day to ensure any issues were identified early and maximum support available. The learners had a range of individual needs and the programme was developed to maximise their ambitions and unfold the skills they did not know they had in various vocational areas. Learner pathways included work experience within the college in the Learning Resource Centre and Computer/IT office and vocational areas in Multimedia, painting and decorating, brickwork, engineering and hair and beauty. The pathways were very successful leading to an increase in these learners progressing onto FE provision in 2013/14. The college gained feedback from Specialist schools, parents, teachers and connexions that showed there was lack of awareness of the transitional programmes/pathways available to learners. The project enabled R&C to work closely with Specialist schools and other professionals to develop an electronic transitional template which is now a feature of the College website (<http://www.cleveland.ac.uk>) designed to include an initial tag with a landing stage, directing visitors to a choice of three information areas. The site identifies transitional pathways from year 9 upwards and also shows key specialist staff to contact (dependent on level of support). Completion of the template has resulted in a range of transitional/training opportunities being offered including bespoke programmes for higher level need learners in partnership with other organisations and professionals.

Cleveland College of Arts [CCAD] initially it was anticipated that the project would strengthen and reinforce current activity. However over time it became apparent through working with staff and students that the project would need to focus much more on internal activity and modifications that would provide staff and students with the level of support they require, before branching this out to a more strategic position.

Stockton Riverside College [SRC] researched the range of appropriate Social enterprise activities in Stockton. Too often, the addition of any enterprise for learners with learning difficulties is seen as a social enterprise and there was great scope for social enterprise development to generate real work and volunteering opportunities linked to learning programmes. Regional best practice models amongst the cluster shaped SRCs ideas for a best practice model. With this in mind, SRC worked together with its local partner specialist school (Abbey Hill) to develop and build upon their existing enterprise programmes, a feature that started as part of the phase one Green paper project work.

College staff worked with the Local Authority's Stockton Steps service and their Regeneration Project officer, who works with young people on social enterprise projects in Stockton, helped the College to develop social enterprise opportunities for learners who study at both the College and Abbey Hill School. From September 2013 learners will be able to access realistic and meaningful opportunities for social enterprise and to explore these as possible destinations for learners.

Darlington College [DC] engaged with a number of providers including the Local Authority and Dilston (Mencap) College. The college carried out an evaluation of the partnership pilot with a cohort of young people as well as conducting a series of meeting and designing a curriculum model ready for implementation. The outcome was a fit for purpose curriculum model that embraces partnership delivery and available support base.

What we are taking forward

The colleges are working together to aim to have everything in place for the start of the new academic year 2013/14. These actions will be reviewed via the FE+ LLDD sub group which meets bi-monthly.

How we are sharing the outputs from our cluster work

R&C has shared its standardised electronic template showing parents and learners the transitional pathways available via an interactive case study. A pdf file is also being developed for schools to use with learners with learning difficulties and or disabilities. Wider college staff and support workers will be introduced to the interactive case study <http://www.cleveland.ac.uk/individual-learning> and transitional mentors and guidance staff will be involved post application.

CCAD will share their range of best practice guides and strategic documents will be produced. The college will use JISC forums and networking groups to consult with colleagues on guidance for the development and review of these documents and guides.

MC the staff have shared the project with their FE+ Cluster partners but also more widely with other cluster organisations at a recent Regional Cluster Day.

SRC will lead a shared cluster self- assessment of regional opportunities for social enterprise activities appropriate for learners both as a realistic destination and part of the learners' preparation for employment or self employment.

DC will share their project with other FE providers.

What advice we would give to others

The cluster work has stimulated consideration and discussion across the whole college. It has given colleges the opportunity to reflect, consult and consider whether their current provision 'is fit for purpose'.

Remain focussed on the project outcomes and avoid allowing the content to grow beyond its original intentions. Allow sufficient time to conduct the research and produce the project. It always takes longer than you think. Where possible, conduct more than one research cycle before publication

Ensure learners are offered a range of opportunities to allow for new skills to be developed. Promote work experience through a supportive and well planned approach. Ensure that specialist staff who deliver transitional programmes are aware of partnerships. Be prepared to delivery bespoke programmes and ensure staff are flexible and can accommodate a range of individual needs.

Listen to the learners and particularly parents about what they want (it is often very different to what we think).

Further reading

R&C: <http://www.cleveland.ac.uk/individual-learning>
CCAD: <http://www.cleveland.ac.uk/individual-learning>
MC: <http://www.mbro.ac.uk>

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