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**Summary paper  
and conclusions:**  
the characteristics  
of pre-vocational  
programme design  
and delivery



# Introduction

During the latter part of 2015 and the first months of 2016 the Foundation, with active support from Ofsted and guided by a small external Steering Group, conducted a focused inquiry into the design and delivery of pre-vocational programmes. Prompted by:

- encouragement in the CAVTL One Year On Report (published in November 2014) to “give further consideration to the particular characteristics and features of pre-vocational (as opposed to vocational) programmes”, which was considered to demand “a particular set of considerations about design and content which are different from those related to vocational provision”;
- accelerating moves to local determination of FE and skills needs, devolution of associated funding and responsibility for the pattern of provision, and the introduction of localised commissioning models, and
- identification of “second chance” learning as one of the two key functions of further education in the BIS Dual Mandate paper issued in March 2015, which envisaged “an FE sector confident and capable of reaching into its local community, joining up Ministerial Skills Funding Letter (December 2015) as “addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged” and which suggested this would require partnership working, flexibility, a clear accountability framework and a robust informal learning offer which supports the hardest to reach to take steps back into life and work.

This work has been informed by impending changes to funding, notably the potential enhanced flexibilities afforded by creation of an adult education budget.

Desk-based research, visits to six providers identified as demonstrating effective practice, and an invitation seminar have led to the publication of a suite of case studies and supporting papers, now available at:

[www.excellencegateway.org.uk/search?content=pre-vocational+&=Search](http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/search?content=pre-vocational+&=Search)

This paper is offered as a further output of the inquiry, and is designed for use by providers who are involved in, or considering, the design and delivery of pre-vocational programmes, especially those addressing the needs of disadvantaged learners. The paper is also likely to be of interest to those responsible for planning and commissioning local provision, and policy makers.



<sup>1</sup> Described in the Ministerial Skills Funding Letter (December 2015) as “a single funding line which replaces what had been three separate funding lines: funding for adult further education outside of apprenticeships (previously held within the adult skills budget); Community Learning; and Discretionary Learner Support”.

## Pre-vocational learners and their needs

The Foundation deliberately did not seek to limit the scope of its inquiry by pre-defining what was understood by the term “pre-vocational”, nor by specifying the nature of the provision to be covered by visits. Providers presented a wide range of programmes: for young learners who were struggling to enter or cope with mainstream study, often because of personal issues; people in the 19-24 age group and NEET, sometimes as a result of chaotic lifestyles; those of all ages currently out of employment but seeking work, including mandated Job Centre Plus clients; people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; those recently arrived in the UK and hindered by their English language skills; redundant workers; local residents who were seeking to enter the job market but unsure about their vocational suitability or preference; and people who were considering a change of life direction, including some who were exploring business start-up options. What characterised the majority of prospective, current and potential learners interviewed can be summarised as:

- a lack of confidence and a low level of self-belief, often as a result of poor previous educational experiences;
- assessed as currently operating at Entry/Level 1 in English and/or maths;
- experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, with many learners being multiply disadvantaged and/or living in highly pressured contexts;
- having personal issues which act as a barrier to sustained employment;
- being unclear about a potential career path, and needing support to set realistic goals.

Seminar discussion suggests that learners reflecting some or all of these characteristics make up maybe 40% of the current FE population – perhaps as many as 1.3-1.5 million individuals - with some providers (and some areas of the country) having an even higher incidence of this client group.



<sup>2</sup>The figure is an extrapolation of points raised at the invitation seminar held as part of this inquiry, including reference to the number of 16 year-olds leaving school without five GCSEs; a forecast increase in this percentage as a result of changes in the qualifications system; the proportion of adult learners in colleges and in specialist adult learning providers following programmes below Level 2; and the number of people attending provision under the current Community Learning funding stream, which is expressly targeted at addressing disadvantage and attracting “hard-to-reach” learners, though not necessarily leading to qualifications

## The provider response

Providers visited, and seminar discussion, suggest that a meaningful response to the needs of those learners identified as “pre-vocational” by this inquiry requires:

- a clear, values-based institutional mission;
- a welcoming environment and learner-centred ethos;
- a co-design approach to programme planning, to stimulate engagement and to ensure relevance;
- an integrated approach to teaching, including curriculum design and delivery, developed together with professional colleagues and partners;
- individualised programmes, designed with learners and focused on progression;
- an emphasis on “employability” (inc. job search, CV compilation, interview technique etc., where not previously covered) and on the development of “soft skills”<sup>3</sup>;
- attention to personal and social development including growth in self-confidence;
- strong mechanisms for learner support, including partnership working with a range of specialist local agencies;
- wider collaborations in the locality, including with voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) agencies, with stakeholders and with employers to identify needs, and with other providers to secure “next step” pathways;
- an overarching commitment to equality and diversity.

## Core aspects of high quality pre-vocational provision

The study of effective practice occasioned by this inquiry suggests that the characteristics of pre-vocational provision are broadly reflective of effective teaching and learning across all high quality FE provision. The CAVTL report (2013) also accepted Ofsted’s characteristics of outstanding provision, but in addition, defined some distinctive features of excellent vocational teaching and learning. In the context of pre-vocational provision, the following distinctive features are considered significant from the effective practice seen in the providers visited. These take into account the nature of the client group, the attention paid to the “whole person” in provision targeted at those currently at some distance from the job market, and the intent to prepare learners for the world of work, although the content of programmes may vary depending upon the distinct cohort and/or in light of local context.



<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere in this paper we use “soft skills” as shorthand for the mix of personal attributes, behaviours, attitudes and aptitudes identified in, e.g., Inspiring Growth: the CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey (July 2015) as the “most important factors employers weigh up when recruiting school and college leavers”, which “rank well ahead of formal qualifications”. These relate, inter alia, to business and customer awareness, and self-management. Nicky Morgan, Secretary of State for Education, used part of her February 2016 address to an AoC Conference to make a similar point, referring to “character traits like self-improvement, determination and self-discipline” and identifying colleges as “places that develop the character of their students to prepare them for life in modern Britain”.

## Goal setting and progress reviews

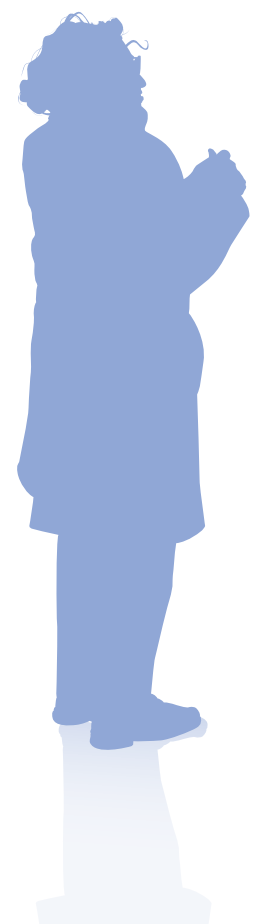
- an individualised programme, based on robust initial and diagnostic assessment and a recognition of prior educational attainment and experience, with value placed on that;
- learning being placed in the context of a “career pathway” which is discussed and planned with the learner and which includes clear, aspirational but realisable goals aimed at raising learner motivation and commitment;
- a personalised, probably phased programme, based on detailed assessment of starting points and reflected in an individual learning plan which contains challenging targets;
- learner progress being subject to regular review which, where necessary, allows for a change in programme, pathway and/or end goal.

## Addressing personal and social development

- a learning programme which addresses personal development as well as the skills needed to gain employment, and will thus be empowering of the individual learner;
- activity-based learning which provides opportunity for peer support and encourages the development and adoption of team-working skills;
- the inclusion of soft skills development, such as raised confidence and personal resilience, which needs to be assessed, and with learner progress in these areas recorded in order to motivate, broaden personal horizons and enhance life chances;
- clear attention paid to English and maths development needs, including language skills for non-native speakers, tailored to the world of work and leading to formal assessment and accreditation in these areas.

## Learner and learning support

- adoption, from an early stage in a learner’s engagement, of a “whole person” approach, including any assessed need for personal and social development/support;
- consideration of wrap-around learner support needs, and securing a meaningful but respectful response – this may be an area where providers will need to work with / refer on to partner agencies rather than develop their own internal expertise;
- provision of additional learning support, where identified as being needed, either in-class and/or via the design and delivery of workshops, computer-based resources and other interventions developed in-house;
- especially for younger learners, the availability of pastoral support and an impartial mentoring service.



## A focus on employability, but not necessarily employment

- programmes which include an emphasis on functional “employability” processes, including job search, CV compilation, interview technique etc., where these have not been previously covered;
- unlike mainstream vocational education and training, pre-vocational programmes are unlikely to be focused on a specific occupational sector, but may include consideration of the type of work sought (e.g. office based vs workshop, customer facing or “behind the scenes”, etc.) and/or offer a range of “taster” sessions/”inspirational visits”;
- programmes will however include opportunity for familiarisation with the world of work, and will where possible include assignment to in-house simulated work environments, social enterprises, placements or external work experience with suitable employers;
- work experience should be subject to rigorous quality assurance, such as that available via the Work Experience Quality Standard operated by Fair Train;
- providers should additionally consider what support they can provide for those learners who may be interested in self-employment and/or in volunteering, both of which – though currently outside scope of BIS outcome measures reported on the basis of matched data - are regarded as positive destinations, and growing in significance in the prevailing economic context.

## Learner progression, including pathways, “bridging” and IAG

- provision will be clearly focused on learner progression, and structured in phases which increasingly lead to identified progression pathways;
- there will be clear signposting of “next step” opportunities, whether into further study within the institution, by referral to another provider, or into employment and learners will be encouraged and facilitated to explore and refine their options;
- transition into next steps, whether they be further learning, more focused preparation for employment (including volunteering), or a sustainable job, will be structured and well-supported; where the “next step” is outside the current provider, there is likely to be a continuing relationship with the learner to secure effective transfer to the new environment;



## Appropriate staffing and professional practice

- pre-vocational programmes for disadvantaged learners will be developed, delivered and supported by empathetic staff carefully selected on account of their values and commitment, and an ability to forge positive relationships and model desired behaviours;
- teaching and support staff are likely to adopt a team-based approach to delivery, and will need to be released to give time to effective co-ordination of the work offered;
- programmes will be learner centred, relevant, activity-based and responsive;
- delivery is likely to be offered in a flexible way, to maximise accessibility, and will incorporate blended learning opportunities to encourage learner independence.

## Leadership and management considerations

As implied from the above listing of features and characteristics of high quality pre-vocational provision, work on this agenda carries a range of challenges for institutional leadership and senior managers. Intrinsic expenditure on intensive initial and diagnostic assessment coupled with regular progress reviews, “planned-in” flexibilities, small group sizes, the use of specialist staff teams and securing necessary wrap-around learner and learning support are compounded by the costs of partnership working with a range of providers and other agencies, and liaison with a mix of funding sources, often with distinct monitoring and reporting requirements. This means the institution needs to have a strong, clear, values-based commitment to this area of provision, including governance arrangements which generate a strategic preparedness to commit resources that may well occasion internal cross-subsidy and/or creative generation of additional external income. This is likely to be based on an appreciation by leadership that high-cost investment at this stage in a learner’s journey will carry benefits “down the line”, and so form part of a virtuous value-for-money chain.

Other leadership and management implications highlighted by this inquiry include:

- having in place a process of strategic needs identification, of the type envisaged by the “community learning trust” model,<sup>4</sup> which draws on partnership working with other providers, key local stakeholders, outreach-based community consultation and analysis of pertinent data, including demographic trends and labour market intelligence;
- providing an environment where learners feel safe and valued;



<sup>4</sup> The Community Learning Trust (CLT) model was first mooted in the BIS New Challenges, New Chances consultation of 2011, and its implementation described in the FE Reform Plan (December 2011) in the following terms: “using the public funding subsidy to support access, and progression in its widest sense, for people who are disadvantaged and who are furthest from learning and therefore least likely to participate. In the 2012/13 academic year we will pilot different locally-based ‘community learning trust’ models to channel Adult Safeguarded Learning funding and lead the planning of local provision in cities, towns and rural settings. [...] The new trusts will take account of the views of local government, local communities and local business leaders to ensure the purpose and objectives for the budget are implemented in ways that meet local need.” A prospectus inviting bids for pilot CLTs was published in April 2012; fifteen pilots ran during 2012/13; since 2013 use of the Community Learning budget requires operation of a partnership approach to address disadvantage.



- securing an organisational ethos which welcomes experimentation and creates opportunities for curriculum development and innovation;
- encouraging all staff – individually, in teams, across and beyond the institution – to subject their work to continuous review and, through the proactive application of rigorous quality assurance processes, aim to improve the standard of work undertaken;
- sharing successful practice, both internally and more widely in the locality, and embedding effective approaches in other areas of curriculum design and delivery;
- engaging learners formatively in their curriculum choices, selection of work experience placements and review of progress, so that there is a genuine element of co-design in the activities undertaken, leading to learners expanding their horizons for action;
- celebrating learner achievements;
- promoting the wider benefits of successful pre-vocational work with disadvantaged learners within the locality.

These are issues which merit attention by providers already engaged in pre-vocational provision, by organisations considering developing such provision, and by bodies responsible for commissioning a local pattern of FE provision, where options for a specialist service unit/organisation focused on the engagement of and progression by disadvantaged learners of all ages might be worthy of consideration.



<sup>4</sup> The Community Learning Trust (CLT) model was first mooted in the BIS New Challenges, New Chances consultation of 2011, and its implementation described in the FE Reform Plan (December 2011) in the following terms: “using the public funding subsidy to support access, and progression in its widest sense, for people who are disadvantaged and who are furthest from learning and therefore least likely to participate. In the 2012/13 academic year we will pilot different locally-based ‘community learning trust’ models to channel Adult Safeguarded Learning funding and lead the planning of local provision in cities, towns and rural settings. [...] The new trusts will take account of the views of local government, local communities and local business leaders to ensure the purpose and objectives for the budget are implemented in ways that meet local need.” A prospectus inviting bids for pilot CLTs was published in April 2012; fifteen pilots ran during 2012/13; since 2013 use of the Community Learning budget requires operation of a partnership approach to address disadvantage.



The Foundation wishes to thank the following for their engagement in this inquiry:

### *Providers visited*

- Wolverhampton Adult Education Service
- WMC – The Camden College
- City College Peterborough
- Humber Learning Consortium
- Bedford College
- Newcastle City Learning

### *Effective practice examples referenced*

- City Gateway, for its work on a Skills Profile ([home.citygateway.org.uk](http://home.citygateway.org.uk))
- ELATT, for sharing its work on developing relationships with businesses that are trying to fulfil their corporate social responsibility. Together they create bespoke programmes that benefit both learners and the businesses
- Fair Train, for its development and management of the Work Experience Quality Standard
- Learning & Work Institute for sharing its work on The Citizen’s Curriculum
- Women’s Technology Training Limited (Blackburne House Education), for its work on helping women from disadvantaged backgrounds develop confidence and skills that prepare them for work, further education or training

### *Steering Group*

- Susan Austin, BIS
- Joni Cunningham, Redbridge Institute/HOLEX
- Paul Joyce HMI, Ofsted
- Ed Munn, DWP
- Jackie Parry, Project Manager
- Sue Pember, HOLEX
- Bob Powell, Project Consultant
- Jenny Williams, ETF



<sup>5</sup> See Ofsted Good Practice Example at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/468860/East\\_London\\_Advanced\\_Technology\\_Training\\_-\\_good\\_practice\\_example.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/468860/East_London_Advanced_Technology_Training_-_good_practice_example.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.fairtrain.org/quality-standard>

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/our-work/life-and-society/citizens-curriculum?redirectedfrom=niace>

<sup>8</sup> See Ofsted Good Practice example at [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/454053/Women\\_s\\_Technology\\_Training\\_Limited\\_Blackburne\\_House\\_Education\\_-\\_good\\_practice\\_example.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/454053/Women_s_Technology_Training_Limited_Blackburne_House_Education_-_good_practice_example.pdf)