

The Education & Training Foundation

Pre-vocational Programmes

Realising potential: insights into the design and delivery of pre-vocational programmes

WMC: The Camden College



This case study focuses on how WMC has put in place a range of strategies to support students to engage in their programmes, to stay on course and to succeed. It also reflects recent increases in the proportion of students taking accredited qualifications, and ways in which the College is increasingly promoting opportunities for learners to enable them to boost their chance of employment.

Brief description

The college has a clear mission **“to be a learner-centred college dedicated to widening access to education for all that will provide opportunities for lifelong learning and improving employment prospects, for the diverse range of London adults who may not be able to study full time, particularly local people who have missed out on their initial education”**.

The College offers programmes from Entry Level to Level 4, with the majority of learners engaged at Level 2 and below; over half of programme delivery falls into Foundation Learning.

When Working Men’s College was last inspected (March 2013, Grade One) OFSTED found that;

“the proportion of learners who achieve their qualifications is very high and ... success rates are significantly above national averages for nearly all subjects. Learners make outstanding progress. Most learners have very low starting points and many have significant barriers to learning and they achieve their qualifications and progress very well. [...] Learners develop many additional skills, gaining confidence and enhancing their lives and their employability. Many learners report that their lives have changed significantly as a result of their college experience.” Inspectors also found that **“the college has a very inclusive and stimulating ethos which promotes the understanding of cultural diversity and social inclusion extremely well”** and it **“has excellent partnership arrangements with local training providers and recruitment agencies”**.

Published data shows that in 2014/15 the College achieved 93.8% student retention, with many progressing in-year to further study: the 5,000 student number equates to over 13,000 enrolments. 96.1% of learners achieved their qualification goals, and the overall WMC success rate was 89.9%.

Effective practice - the detail

The College works with those furthest away from employment and has gained positive feedback from those taking courses, with the benchmarked rate for learner satisfaction 17 points above the national average in response to the prompt “I’m learning new skills and new abilities”. The main Crowndale Road site (the only venue visited as part of this study) presents a friendly and welcoming yet purposive environment, and the College’s promotion of equality and diversity is highly evident. Potential students spoken to at a busy Foundation Learning interview and assessment session universally looked forward to studying there.

Helen Hammond, WMC Principal indicates that, in line with its mission:

“Our job is to find them a pathway, though this may not necessarily be a linear route into work, indeed it’s often a bit of a zig-zag. Really we are about what used to be called ‘first steps learning’. For many local people that means giving them English language skills – there is a huge, insatiable ESOL demand here – and also helping them to move on once they have the language. We are adding a vocational element to ESOL provision, and making it meaningful. So a number of our learners progress with us, though we also refer them to other providers (the other SDIs, and local colleges) where there are areas of expertise we are not equipped to offer here. Softer skills are also developed alongside accredited skills: what you might call a customer service offer, though at WMC it’s an integral part of what we do and how we work. Part of that is making sure we have a post-19, adult ethos and a genuinely inclusive approach. We are probably the perfect size to secure that: large enough to operate in a cost-effective manner, but not so large that we become impersonal, lose the friendliness and approachability.”

New infrastructure, and a refreshed offer

WMC has undergone internal changes in the last 18 months, including a change of leadership at the end of 2014, and now organises its programme under three Curriculum Heads:

- Visual Arts and Humanities, including art, design, fashion, textiles, media, humanities, performance arts and languages; the programme features both full-time and part-time routes to three Foundation Diplomas which prepare learners for study at university or a professional career in the creative industries – these are the only courses at WMC which admit learners aged 16+;
- Foundation Learning, including ESOL, English and maths, functional skills, GCSEs and community classes;
- Vocational and Employment Skills, including vocational courses in computing, business and medical administration, teaching support, nursing, hair and beauty, and health and social care.

A Head of Learner Support sits alongside these curriculum heads within the curriculum management team and has responsibility for a range of staff and resources including the College Disability Officer, teaching assistants (equivalent to 5/6 FTEs), a dyslexia tutor, welfare officer, learner involvement officer, a recently appointed e-learning development manager and the College library.

This management team has overseen a range of recent programme developments. For example, WMC has two contracts with the London Borough of Camden, worth c£250,000, focused on employability and targeted at hard-to-reach learners. These include the Get Into Learning outreach initiative delivered in community centres, and designed to develop the language, literacy and numeracy skills essential to overcome disadvantage and deprivation. This programme aims to respond directly to the expressed need of local residents and helps individuals to build the confidence to then engage outside their immediate community.

BRING YOUR IDEAS AND WE WILL PROVIDE THE SKILLS YOU NEED TO MAKE THEM HAPPEN.

Come along to the Success, Enterprise and Employability Drop-ins (SEEDs), which take place every week, and tell us what you would like to learn.

Often, we will be able to give you a learning package then and there so you can quickly get the skills you need. There will also be a programme of short courses (known as Growth Labs) around topics you tell us you want to learn about, for example: making money at home, running a business, financial literacy, CV writing and form filling.

Another programme, Understanding Business Enterprise, consists of ten stand-alone but inter-related one-day sessions delivered over a ten-week period and targeted at those with a business idea but who need to develop specific entrepreneurial skills/understanding. Topics covered on this programme include, for example, marketing, deal negotiation, managing business finances, learning how to write a business plan and understanding resource and legal issues.

WMC is developing its links with local employers, and works with the Economic Development Unit at the Borough Council to design a response to specific local needs. It also integrates mandated JCP clients into its programmes, primarily in Foundation Learning. One recent bespoke offer included job-readiness skills for residents interested in construction sector opportunities, where WMC designed a learning programme covering health and safety, team-working, equal opportunities and appropriate communication skills. At the time of the visit the College was about to start delivering an administration course for clerical volunteers at Whittington Hospital.

Internal progression pathways

The College's published financial statements for year ending 31 July 2015 confirms an intent to expand the volume of Level 3+ courses, both to secure additional internal progression routes and in response to national policy for the wider further education sector. As part of this strategy WMC introduced hair and beauty courses in the last academic year, following the creation of a salon at the main Crowndale Road site during summer 2014 and in light of experience gained in delivering such courses at Holloway Prison. In keeping with its mission as a provider of second chance learning opportunities the hair and beauty portfolio includes a Level 1 and Level 2 offer. The Level 1 course is essentially pre-vocational in nature and is open access although.

Philippa Law, Head of Vocational and Employability Skills says:

“There needs to be a fairly good grasp of the English language so we usually look for a minimum level of E2. As with all WMC courses, we will cross-refer to Foundation Learning if tutors find a learner needs help with language. No prior experience of the industry is necessary, just an interest and a willingness to learn. These are termly courses and so we generally run three a year, starting in September, January and April. The class sizes are quite small since we cannot accommodate more than 12 learners per class: our September 2015 Level 1 had 9 starts, and the January course has 10. The level 1 course runs two days a week over 12 weeks, and that equates to 144 GLH. One day is broken in half and the tutors cover nails in the morning and make-up in the afternoon; the second day is for hairdressing. So the learners get a taster and introduction to all areas prior to making a decision on their accredited qualification at level 2. In 2014/15 there were 90 learners on an Introduction to the Hair and Beauty Sector programme. 40 of those subsequently progressed onto a Level 2 course within Hair and Beauty during the same academic year, and a further 17 had enrolments in other subjects in '14/15 (sideways progression). Since we are a new department we don't have historic progression data to benchmark against, but this looks like a very high rate and very positive. All WMC accredited courses in Hair and Beauty have success rates above national benchmarks.”

The College offers similar Level 1 introductory/“preparing to work” programmes in other vocational areas – administration, working with children, youth work, adult social care, hospitality – where there are internal progression routes to Level 2 (the qualification required for entry into employment). The majority of such courses require Entry Level 3 English and Maths, and experience of working in the occupational area is desirable, though not essential.

Such Level 1 courses thus act as a natural progression opportunity for learners on Foundation Learning programmes. Analysis of ILR records has been undertaken to identify any learner, in any given year, with a learning aim in Subject Sector 14 (Preparation for Life and Work), and to then identify those learners who subsequently enrolled onto a vocational learning aim within the College:

	Learners in Foundation Learning - SSA 14	% progressing in year	Progressed to VOC in 13/14	Progressed to VOC in 14/15	Progressed to VOC in 15/16
2013/14 full year	2225	9.17%	204	157	69
2014/15 full year	2187	10.01%	–	219	130
2015/16 at 18/01/16	1497	8.55%	–	–	128

The above table displays a percentage for learners progressing in-year, and only those moving onto a vocational course at WMC; others may have progressed to provision at other providers.

Supporting learners to succeed

Discussion with **WMC Curriculum Managers** indicates a **holistic approach to learner support, which begins at initial interview and assessment sessions, where members of the learner support team are present alongside subject tutors; the National Careers Service also participates actively in these sessions, which are held throughout the year. Individual learning plans set challenging targets and tutors place high expectations on all learners;** as a result, learners are highly motivated to refine their skills and use specialist processes and techniques. Class sizes in Foundation Learning are kept low to ensure individualised attention. An electronic register system (EBS software) flags unexplained absence and tutors identify “at risk” learners, who are promptly followed up and offered additional support to catch up on topics missed: attendance data is reported monthly to the college management team and thence to Governors.

Learner progress against ILP targets is reviewed regularly and recorded in the course file. Learning support assistants (LSAs) are assigned to deliver in-class support where needed, and also deliver out-of-class workshops on specific topics to small groups of learners – usually no more than four – identified by tutors as in need of additional help, or self-referring. Support is mainly focused on language, English and maths but also covers learning how to learn: following routines, keeping records, using a computer, study skills etc. The support workshops are run in three- or six-week blocks, for two hours per week, and one-to-one sessions with LSAs can be arranged where necessary, providing tailored support.

OFSTED found that **“care and support for learners are outstanding, covering all aspects of study, pastoral care and financial support. Adapted resources are available for those learners who need them as well as childcare facilities. Tutors make very effective use of initial assessment to identify learners’ starting points and progress is monitored carefully to ensure that learners get the support they need to achieve. Peer support is well developed. Information, advice and guidance are outstanding and are provided by qualified and experienced education career guidance workers in all centres.”**

Jacqui Forrester

Head of Learner Support, says that she places:

“High expectations on all support staff, who act as a professional team and offer a consistent service. We keep all the curriculum side in the loop – managers, curriculum leads and tutors – and make sure they know what we are doing, and why. Systematic needs assessment leads to assignment of support staff with the appropriate skills. We are seeing more and more ‘sharing’ of learners, offering ESOL support into IT or into ceramics classes for example, and are becoming a very fluid organisation, focused on the needs of the individual learner. Learners know where we are, and all course inductions include pointers to our service; I keep an ‘open door’ policy, and the college environment has a nice feel, so coming for support is not seen as a negative. We have now branched out and are offering support into outreach classes too. Support team members work sessional hours and are assigned in line with their skills; where we feel we lack the necessary expertise, we also draw on external expertise, both to deliver direct support and to contribute to the CPD programme – we know who to talk to. We support maybe 300-350 learners a year. Interventions are timely, and their impact reviewed. We look at achievement rates and inject support to equalise opportunity: we’re always on the look-out for equality gaps, and jump on them.¹

We share information within the team, and attend curriculum team meetings: we refuse to ‘work in the dark’. We are constantly learning from our own mistakes, we’re not too proud to think we always get it right; we are always evaluating, changing, putting better practice in place. We help each other – there is strong sense of staff peer support. And we encourage our teachers to encourage our learners to help each other. Learning is not a selfish thing – we expect people to learn from each other. The teacher role is to monitor and to check, to sit back and be aware. Both tutors and the learning support team step in where needed, but really we try to help the learners try and work it out for themselves.”

Learner achievements are widely celebrated at WMC. There is an annual college-wide Learner Success Night – “something we always look forward to” – where learners speak of how participation at WMC has helped change their lives; and a Summer Exhibition of work by learners in art and design classes. Tutors also hold class/course celebration events, displays and shows.

¹ The effectiveness of this approach is evident from the OFSTED inspection report, which found that “achievement gaps between various groups of WMC learners are small, with very effective action taken to reduce these differences. Gaps between different ethnic groups, postcodes, and learners with disabilities are all insignificant; there are no performance differences for gender, and those learners requiring additional support perform as well as any others.”

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Staffing

Teaching staff at WMC are expected to have a relevant teaching qualification and experience; appointments are made after “a very careful selection process” including a micro-teaching session as well as interview. **The College has long-standing arrangements with UCL Institute of Education, and with Greenwich University, to provide placements for trainee teachers, including a mentoring relationship with WMC staff; this has facilitated identification of potential future staff members.** Senior staff at the College also recognise that by working with current PGCE learners they are able to access the latest approaches to teacher training, and regard it as mutually beneficial. Tutors on vocational and employability courses are expected to have relevant industry experience and will, if needed, be placed on higher level teaching qualification courses.

Selection of learning support staff is equally rigorous, and applicants are appointed for having “the right attitude”, personal skills and experience. Recruitment is matched to need; the team includes speakers of community languages, and teaching support assistants are expected to demonstrate a specialism in English and/or maths. All support staff are registered with the Camden Training and Development Service where they can access specialist assistance and training, and also access an ongoing programme of CPD. In-house training sessions have been augmented by specialist input from local agencies on, for example, epilepsy awareness, dementia training, the implications of diabetes etc. – training and awareness raising of healthy lifestyles which is also used when working with learners. **LSAs are encouraged, guided and supported to obtain teaching qualifications, and eight have to date achieved this. Learning assistant performance is subject to the same observation processes as apply to teaching staff – one spoke of “being comfortable in the classroom, but also stretched and challenged” - and appropriate support and development opportunities are in place.**

Tutors on vocational and employability courses are expected to have relevant industry experience and will, if needed, be placed on higher level teaching qualification courses.

WMC experiences the same logistical problems as other adult education providers in securing part-time, hourly paid staff attendance at training sessions, but full college-wide staff days in September and December 2015 achieved “really good attendance, and a very positive vibe”. Topics covered within the current year’s CPD programme include e-learning, where the College has recently introduced a development strategy with clear targets and milestones.

Safeguarding and Prevent training are overseen by the Learner Support service. The College is currently working with other London-based SDIs with the aim of developing some joint staff training activities.

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Benefits

Student retention rates are very high, and learners rate their experience at WMC very positively.

An all-inclusive and stimulating ethos embraces all learners, staff and visitors. Learners' experiences and contributions are highly valued in lessons and the college celebrates learners' achievements and successes through high profile events.

Well-qualified, empathetic and knowledgeable tutors engage very well with all learners and have very high expectations of them. As a result, learners are highly motivated, take much pride in their substantial achievements and are very eager to improve.

Learners benefit from peer support. The additional learning support is particularly effective in helping less confident learners or those with mental health problems. Tutors collaborate well with support workers.

Learners develop excellent personal and social skills. A large majority of learners are involved in additional activities such as fundraising and community work. They develop enhanced interpersonal skills and gain in confidence and self-esteem. Many learners report that their college experience has been life changing and enabled them to become more self-sufficient in the community.

The large majority of learners progress to further study. Many learners have progressed from a basic ESOL course to qualifications in other subject areas and then onto higher level qualifications.

As OFSTED indicates, **“learners develop excellent employability skills and gain an excellent understanding of the career and progression opportunities open to them. Many learners progress into employment or become self-employed as a result of the expert information, advice and guidance provided by college staff.”**

Provider background

Working Men's College – currently re-branding itself as WMC: The Camden College – was founded in 1854, and is the oldest surviving adult education institute in Europe. It was one of a small number of Specialist Designated Institutions (SDIs) recognised to receive public funding for further education and skills under the 1992 FHE Act, is constituted as a company limited by guarantee, and is a registered charity. WMC is governed by a 19-strong Board and has a workforce of 99 FTE, but this figure disguises a significant number of sessionally paid part-time staff.

WMC has an annual turnover of approximately £5.4m (including just under £4m in allocations from SFA, and just over £300,000 from EFA) and caters for some 5,000 learners, all but c100 being aged 19.

Locality

WMC is based in Camden in central London, “an area that [according to the College website] houses the highest concentration of media professionals in London ... and that has become London’s new hub for creativity”. The College operates from two main sites, and 28 outreach centres; unlike some other SDIs, it is focused on responding to local need, with some 70-75% of its learners coming from the immediate borough. Camden is a very diverse community with half the residents qualified at degree level or higher, but with school leaver attainment lower than the national average. The wards which surround the College have very high levels of multiple deprivation. Learners accessing Foundation Learning at the College demonstrably come from more socio-economically deprived post-codes. 27% of Camden residents are members of minority ethnic communities, with a large Bangladeshi population; the College also draws attention to the growing incidence of learners from southern Europe, attracted to London by the possibility of employment, who are often vocationally skilled but need to develop their English.

Background to the Project

This case study forms part of a suite of six which were developed between January and March 2016. They provide insights and illustrations which will be of benefit to leaders, managers and practitioners when they are:

- Developing and delivering their pre-vocational offer;
- Considering the implications for the professional development support needs of staff involved in prevocational design and delivery.

The project has been commissioned and funded by the Education and Training Foundation, developed in consultation with Ofsted and HOLEX, and with the support and guidance of those listed at Annex 1.

Annex 1

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