

Foundation Learning in action project report

Walsall Adult and Community College A Whole Organisational Approach to Foundation Learning

Project introduction

As often happens in a recession, the younger adult population in Walsall is experiencing rising unemployment and increasing difficulty entering the labour market. 22% of this working-age population is without a Level 2 qualification and 83% of these (35,000 people) have no qualifications at all. WACC sought to explore the potential of the new Foundation Learning curriculum for meeting the needs of those with no qualifications in the 19–25 age group with a view to developing learning and progression to apprenticeships.

WACC has a history of providing skills for life, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), and some vocational qualifications predominantly at Level 2, but had not brought the provision together. Gaining a greater insight into the Foundation Learning curriculum and its application to an **adult** cohort was a key driver for the WACC project.

We also sought to explore how a partnership approach to Foundation Learning for adults might be achieved so we committed to working with selected Community Association partners who had a strong outreach and engagement profile with the client learner group. Adults who participated in interviews and consultations were paid expenses and shopping vouchers for their input. Community Association partners were paid a fee for organising, recruiting, hosting and video-recording the learner forums.

Region

West Midlands

Provider profile

Walsall Adult and Community College (WACC) primarily serves the needs of adult learners, both directly and in partnership with a number of third sector organisations.

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Project objectives and intended outcomes

The project's original aim was to undertake research that would inform an 'intelligence-led' Foundation Learning curriculum model for adults that reflected labour market priorities and motivate adult learners to increase their personal commitment to their learning and development helping them to develop vocational and personal skills for work.

The project objectives were:

- 1 To audit practice within the college, third sector partners, and other providers including Foundation Learning pilots.
- 2 To utilise third sector networks to engage adult representatives of the target learner group in consultation.
- 3 To develop curriculum models in at least two vocational areas.
- 4 To identify at least three supported employment settings and a model for supported employment.
- 5 To develop a brand identity for the programme and a marketing and promotions model to inspire programme take-up.

Project activities and approach

1 Audit of Practice

The audit of practice involved a systematic appraisal of the curriculum offered directly by the college and by our ten third sector community partnerships. The audit consisted of an analysis of each partner's provision and a desktop exercise to map the provision offered to the Foundation Learning model. The audit revealed that the Foundation Learning curriculum model was not well developed in either the college or the Community Association partnership:

- While individual aspects of a Foundation Learning curriculum such as information advice and guidance (IAG), personal planning and development, literacy, numeracy, ESOL, and vocational learning were strong, these had not been connected together to provide a holistic service for adult learners to support their skills, competence, and employability development. Historical focus on areas with priority funding such as skills for life (SfL) and full Level 2 learning had resulted in a fractured curriculum offer which did not provide coherent progression pathways for learners in any vocational discipline.
- However, the audit did identify a positive model operating within the area of Learning for Living and Work (LFLW) which provides learning below Level 1 for adults with learning difficulties and disabilities. This curriculum demonstrated an effective model of vocational, personal development and SfL learning which was well co-ordinated, successful and highly valued by learners and the community. Its weaknesses were:
 - A lack of supported work placement and/or social enterprise opportunities.
 - Low numbers of learners progressing on to further learning programmes despite the high success rates.
- Entry to employment (E2E) was operating in one of the Community Association partners. It had many positive elements but did not address the needs of adult learners at Level 1.

Conclusions from the audit

The LFLW curriculum model provides a strong Entry level foundation at that could be expanded and built upon as part of the Foundation Learning curriculum initiative. This would require expansion of the vocational offer and more work-focused or social enterprise elements.

2 Consultation with target learner groups

Two Community Association partners were selected to work with WACC on this project on the basis of their capacity to engage with the target learner group and their potential to co-deliver the Foundation Learning curriculum. The partners took responsibility for organising and leading learner focus groups. Appendix 1 outlines the brief that was used to structure these discussions.

The first of the focus groups, held on the 28th January at Manor Farm Community Association, was with a selection of six 19–25 year olds who were invited to discuss learning barriers and what they felt a good Foundation Learning programme should look like.

The table below outlines their responses and the coding used for categorising their responses to help identify the areas of greatest importance to the learners.

Dos	Don'ts
Offer Choice (C)	Travel – costs too much (P)
Work Experiences (C)	Don't make it too repetitive (TL)
Good Clear Initial Advice and Guidance (IM)	Don't make it too rigid (TL)
Friendly Environment (S)	Don't single people out (TL)
Enjoyable (P/S)	Don't make class sizes too big (TL)
Taster sessions in all vocational Programmes (C)	Don't make too formal (TL)
Childcare (P)	Don't put us on wrong courses (P)
Timing of Classes to Suit (P)	Don't make courses names too broad (IM)
To fit around work/children in school (P)	Don't mislead us (IM)
Make sure clear when advertising (IM)	Don't pressurise us (TL)
Flexibility (P)	Don't leave us unsupported (TL)
Clear wording when advertising that can be understood (IM)	Breakdown Jargon (IM)
Include the social side to learning (P/S)	Listen (P/TL)
Make it inspiring (TL)	Key P Personal need C Curriculum S Social need IM Information and marketing TL Teaching and learning
Good teaching – make enjoyable (TL)	
Local Learning (P)	
Costs involved (P)	
Value for money (P)	
Treat us individually don't stereotype (P)	
Get rid of barriers (P/TL)	
Make us feel safe and secure (P)	
Someone you can turn to (mentor in college) (P)	
Work place (mentor) (P)	
Prepare us for the future (P)	

Of the 37 'Dos and Don'ts', the highest responses relates to issues of personal and practical needs (49%); the second highest relates to issues around teaching and learning approaches (30%); the third highest response relates to information and marketing (2%) and the lowest level of response relates to curriculum content (1%).

This would suggest that the curriculum content is less important to this learner group than an organisation's approaches to supporting personal and practical needs, teaching and learning methodologies and approaches, and the quality and standards of information and marketing materials.

The second focus group, held on the 9th February, was with a more challenging group of thirteen learners aged 18–20 years who had no experience of any form of employment or training since leaving school at sixteen.

The group facilitator took a slightly different approach to the consultation activity and the result was a ‘wish list’. The same coding of responses was applied to this wish-list and can be seen below:

The client forum wish list

- More breaks – after a while we lose concentration, more breaks would keep us on task (P)
- All of the learners on the programme are successful – through being supported and treated individually so everyone could progress (P)
- Set your own personal, achievable goals (P)
- You would be able to achieve goals (P)
- Good employment at the end of it from the support given on the programme (C)
- Advice given throughout (IM)
- Private tutors to help you (P)
- Practical work that will help us to learn (C/TL)
- Distance learning – not just things done within classroom (TL)
- Time management – what needs doing in class and what can be done elsewhere (TL)
- Learn things that relate to you (C)
- Gain experience (C)
- Tutors that understand you and that you can relate to – to share good and bad experiences (PS)
- Different types and ways of learning to be used (TL)
- Understand that different people learn different things in different ways (TL)
- Use of good equipment (TL)
- Learn things we use everyday – such as number skills, telling the time, money (TL)
- Gain transferable skills (C)
- Have a good learning environment – comfortable seats, correct heating etc. (E)
- Good communication skills between staff and learners (P)
- Tutors that make you want to learn (TL/P)
- Gain confidence in yourself and your abilities (P)
- Get ready for culture of work (E)
- Different tasters in skills/employment (C)
- Safe environment to make mistakes (TL/P)
- Peer mentors to help you (TL/P)
- Create your own personal development planner (TL/P)

This slightly younger adult learner cohort is consistent with the other group in the importance they place on organisations meeting their personal and practical needs (39%). However, this group placed higher emphasis on teaching and learning approaches (39%) and a much lower emphasis on information and marketing (4%). The importance of curriculum content was low (1%) as with the other group.

Through the consultations, we were also able to explore approaches to programme delivery, for example, active learning, interactive problem solving, mentoring and peer support. Additionally, both focus groups attached importance to trust, understanding, tolerance and respect.

Conclusions from consultations

The client consultation focus groups reinforced the importance of personalisation and support and showed that negative learning experiences could often be tracked back to compulsory learning (whether at school or in further education).

Our assumptions that the vocational content of the programme would be the most significant aspect for our client learner group were challenged through this consultation exercise. Whilst the client groups' wish lists included requirements for learning to be relevant and help them get work, it appeared that they did not have fixed vocational interests and vocational tasters emerged as a more appropriate model.

Much of the groups' interests revolved around personal support, mentoring and variety in teaching and learning methods. There was considerable emphasis on ensuring programme information was clear, suggesting that the client group had felt misled by the learning sector in the past and that this had contributed to their failure to succeed. It reinforced the importance of clear and personalised threshold advice, guidance and goal-setting and on-programme mentoring and support.

3 Developing curriculum models

A number of Foundation Learning curriculum models were explored during the project; the model which matched the findings of our learner group research is one that allows for an exploration of vocational interests and aptitudes, along with significant personal development and support, and development in ICT and skills for life.

From previous experience with the client learner group, progression from Foundation Learning to a Level 2 learning programme within one academic year seems unlikely. A better Foundation Learning curriculum structure appears to be a two-year programme:

- 'Exploring Careers in...' a preliminary one-year programme of vocational tasters.
- A more focused and vocationally specialised second academic year of 'Pre-Apprenticeship Learning' (PAL) programme to build learner skills and vocational aptitudes in preparation for progression onto an apprenticeship or other Level 2 learning (Appendix 2). The PAL programme can be accessed by learners directly if the earlier step of preliminary learning is not required.

For now, the model retains skills for life learning as we feel that functional skills provision is not yet fully tested and the exam element may not support the client groups' learning needs and preferences.

The proposed model integrates an element of First Steps learning and support as the initial step in the identification of personal learning and skills needs, work preferences and aptitudes, and for individual goal-setting.

4 Developing a supported employment model

This aspect of the project has been the most difficult to progress within the timeframe. However, there have been some significant successes:

- WACC has improved its profile with Walsall Council as a work experience service provider making positive progress primarily through the Future Jobs Fund initiative. Consultation with the Council Human Resources & Organisational Development (HROD) team provided a helpful insight into how a Foundation Learning curriculum could support and underpin the public sector apprenticeship initiative and the concept of a Foundation Learning Talent Pool has been developed. This pool is made up of individuals who fail to secure or retain council employment through the Future Jobs Fund or the apprenticeship scheme. A referral system has been established whereby the college retains these individuals in the talent pool providing them with further training and support via the PAL programme until re-referral for selection to the Council's programmes.
- WACC became a member of the Best of Walsall (BOW), a BIZNET of over 200 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who meet regularly to explore and develop inter-company support. BOW is now emerging as a significant partner to the college in terms of curriculum development and a potential source of supported employment and work experience opportunities and services to support our learners.
- There is reluctance amongst employers to support work experiences particularly at this level, often reinforced by negative experiences of school pupil placements and the demands of providing appropriate support especially in organisations where resources are limited. To counteract this, the college is promoting its services and its learners to employers and developing social enterprise elements within the curriculum.

5 Information and marketing

Promotional materials (mugs, pens and USB sticks) for the PAL programme were developed in consultation with Walsall Council for use at promotional events with external agencies. They contain a simple strap line intended to encourage an initial enquiry.

We are working to ensure that IAG and any written materials designed to inform the potential learner are clear, concise and honest.



Evaluation and impact

Our learning has grown as the curriculum and funding models for our Foundation Learning curriculum have evolved. The project has helped us to keep a focus on the emerging picture regarding Foundation Learning for adult cohorts. We are confident that our developing curriculum models reflect the needs of the learners as revealed by our client consultations and that Foundation Learning under the QCF provides an opportunity for us to implement and fund a more flexible model than that previously operated.

Our key learning points were:

- The importance of client consultation to check assumptions and gain greater insight into client needs and preferences. Without the focus groups we would not have realised that personal support and learning preferences were more important to the client group than vocational and work skills.
- The significance the client group placed on clear and transparent information and the importance of comprehensive IAG to dispel negative experiences of being 'misled' through marketing.
- The importance of structured vocational tasters to combat the apparent lack of vocational focus or clear occupational goals amongst the client learner group.
- The need to engage with partners to broaden the vocational taster WACC can offer.
- The importance of structuring and defining work placement opportunities to match vocational needs and provide a responsive service to learners engaged in pre-apprenticeship work. The project did not tackle this effectively within the timeframe but will continue with this beyond the project lifetime.

Next steps, ensuring sustainability

- The college has developed a new staffing structure that provides leadership for, and investment in, employability services and Foundation Learning pathways.
- A Foundation Learning champion has been established, linking with LSIS curriculum advisors and leading staff development sessions on Foundation Learning.
- New employer partnerships with the council and BOW are enabling new supported work partnerships to develop in a range of work routes including business administration, ICT, catering and grounds maintenance.

Project materials

Appendix 1

Foundation Learning forum brief

Appendix 2

Foundation Learning curriculum for adults example models

Appendix 1: Foundation Learning forum brief

Purpose:

To engage potential client group in planning the Walsall Adult and Community College and Community Partnership approach to design and delivery of the Foundation Learning programme.

To gain a greater understanding of the client group's perceived and experienced barriers to engagement, completion, qualification success, and progression to Level 2 learning and into sustained employment.

To establish an initial understanding of any common features in preferred learning style across the client group.

Approach

Establish a rapport by explaining the project and the importance and value of the clients' advice and guidance.

Agree ground rules for the meeting.

Invite clients to reflect on their prior learning journey and to highlight experiences where they felt really involved, motivated, and successful in their learning (do not limit this to reflections on school/college or formal learning – encourage them to expand their thinking beyond this, for example when learning to drive, play an instrument, swim etc). Tease out what elements of the learning made it a success for them.

Invite clients to reflect on less positive experiences or times when they felt blocked from learning and success, again try to tease out the underlying features of this experience.

Explore commonalities in the reflections.

Share the national model for Foundation Learning and explain its elements.

Lead a brainstorm covering the Must Dos in Foundation Learning and the Must Not Dos in Foundation Learning – try to do this from a number of perspectives, for example,

What the organisation must/must not do

What the learner must/must not do

What employers must/must not do

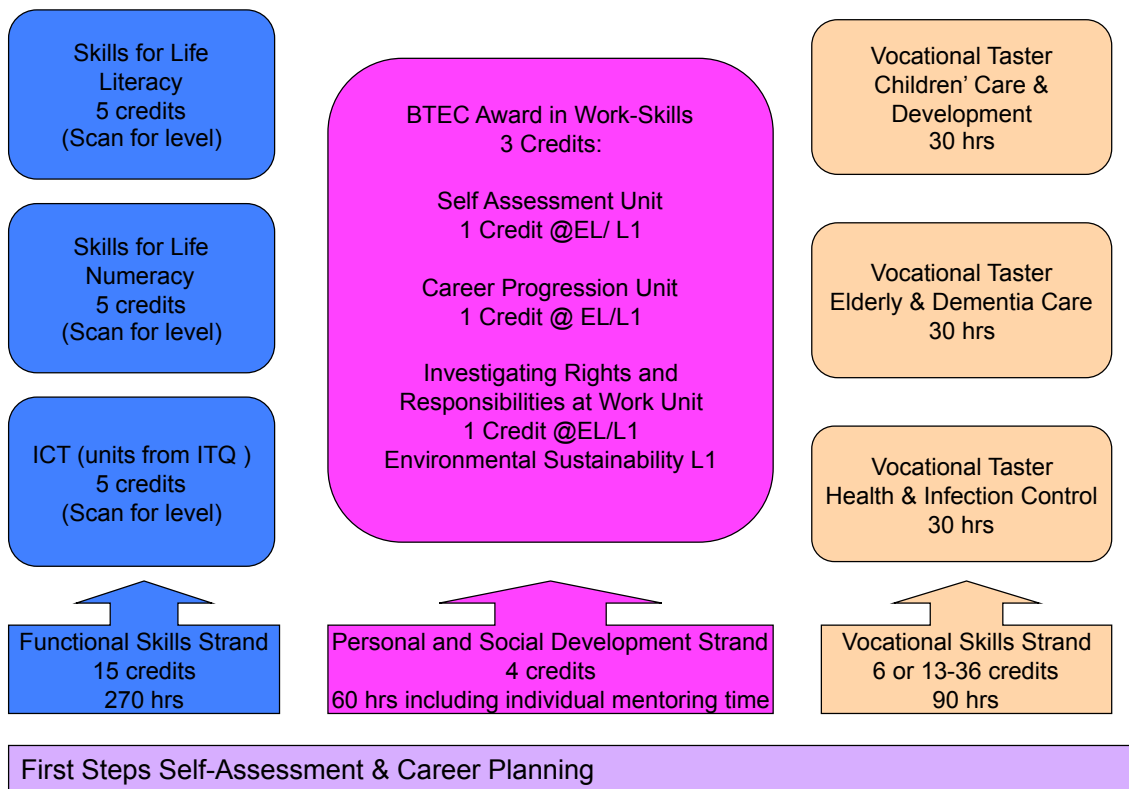
At the end of each brainstorm try to achieve consensus on the 'top 3 musts/must nots'.

Recording

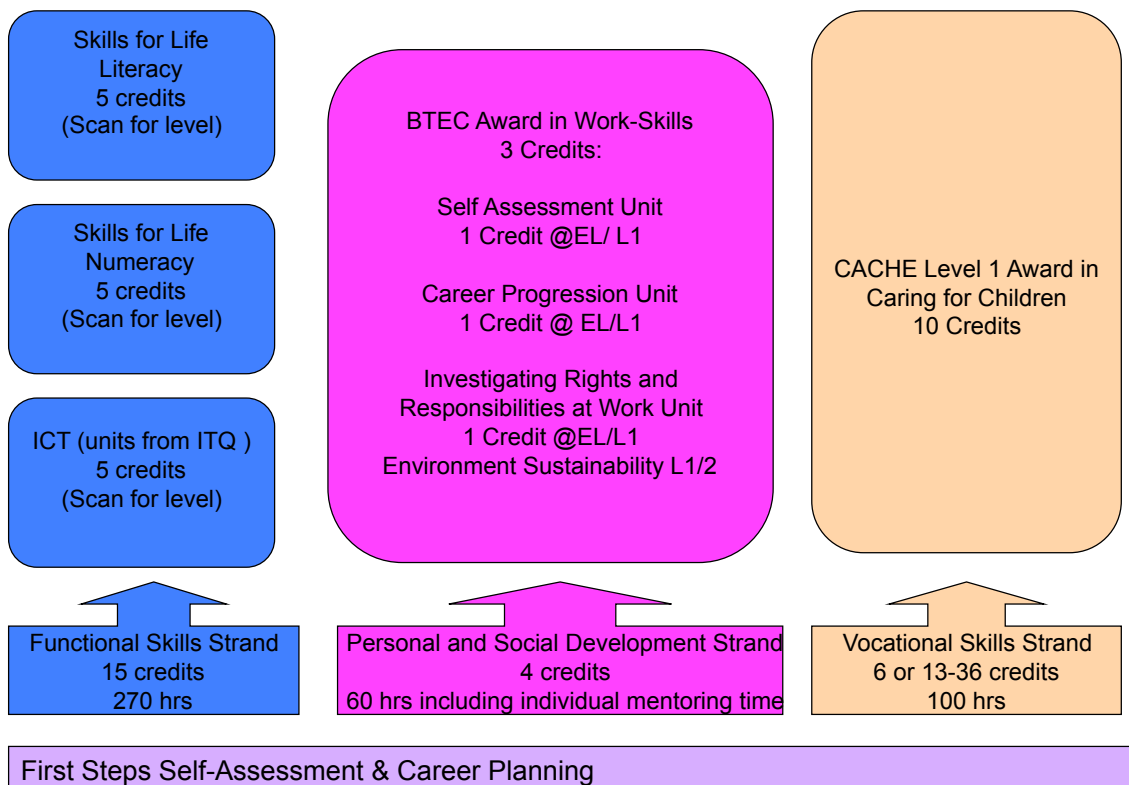
Preferably as an audio visual/audio record to be developed as a podcast and a written record that can form the basis of a wiki.

Appendix 2: Foundation Learning curriculum for adults example models

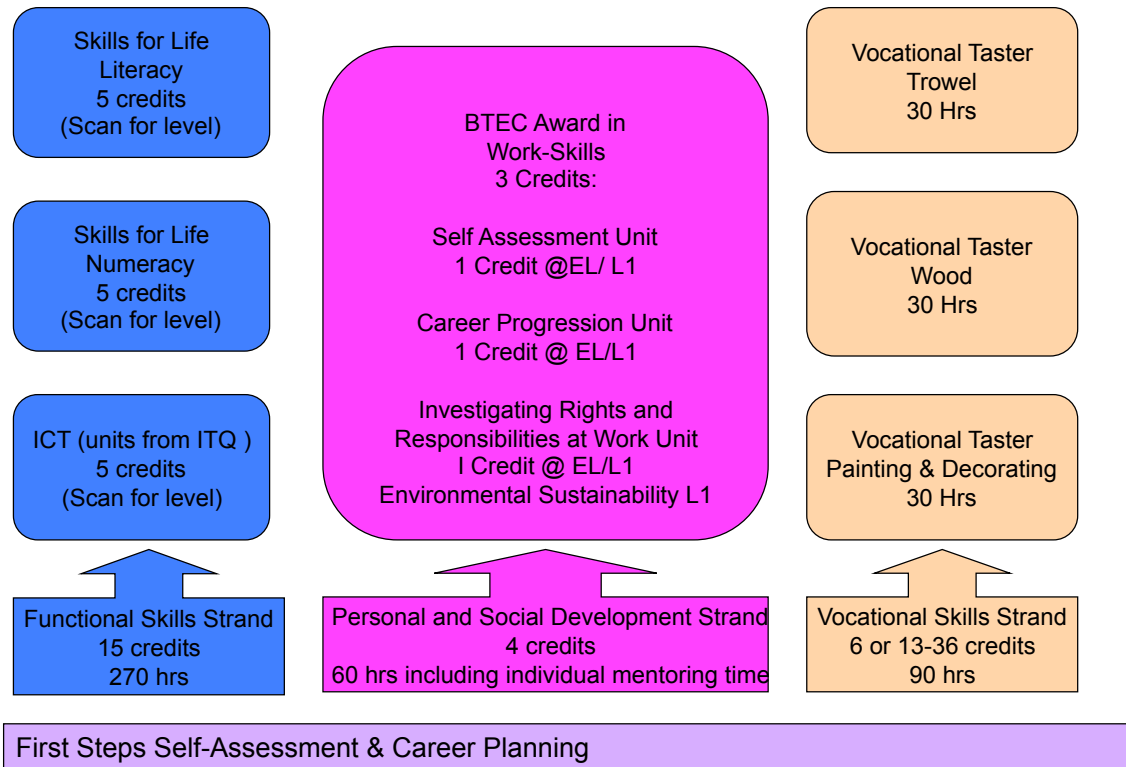
Explore Careers in Care



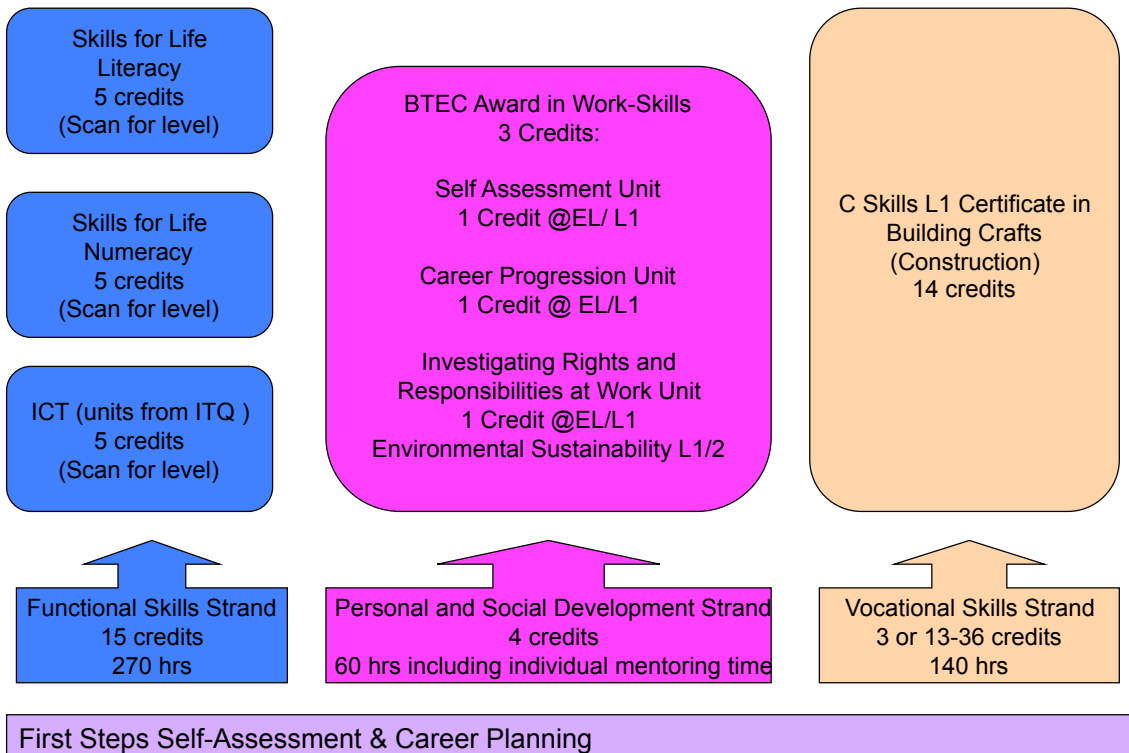
PAL in Childcare



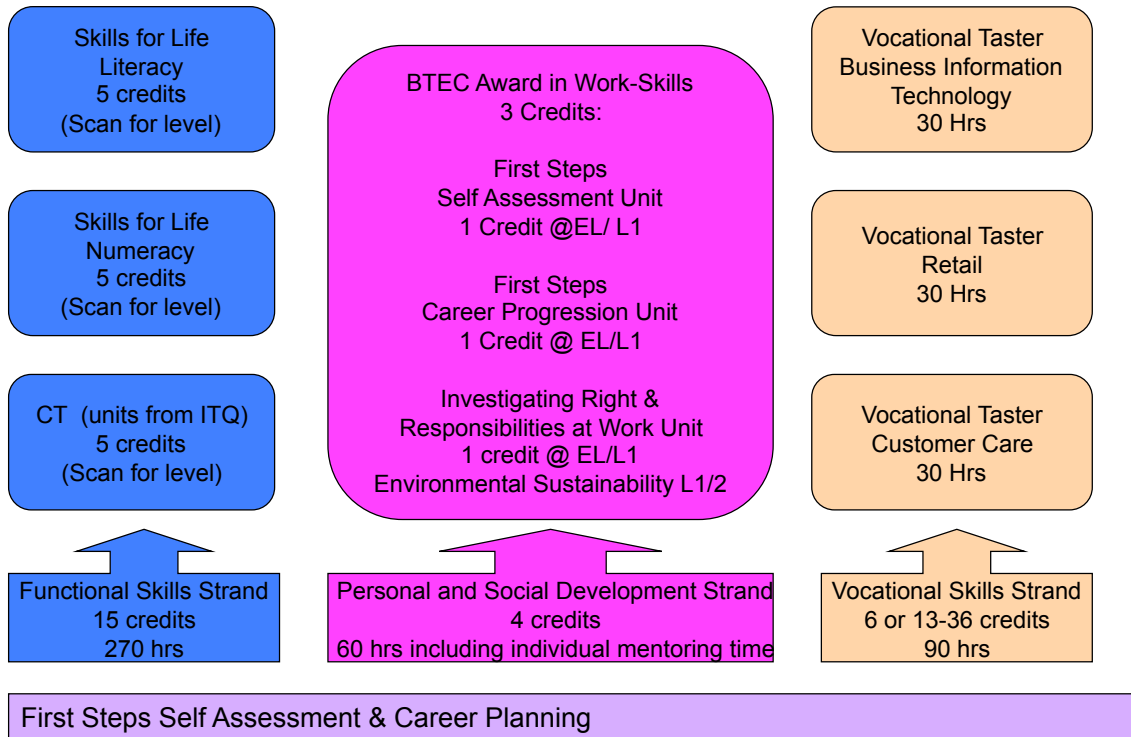
Explore Careers in Construction



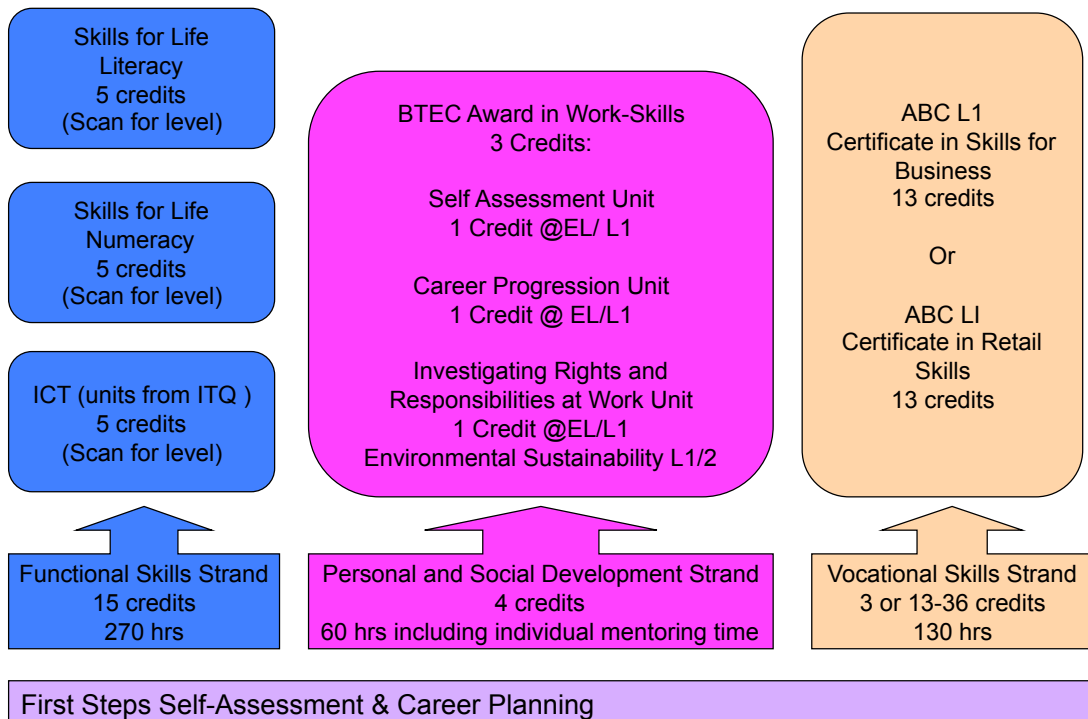
PAL in Construction



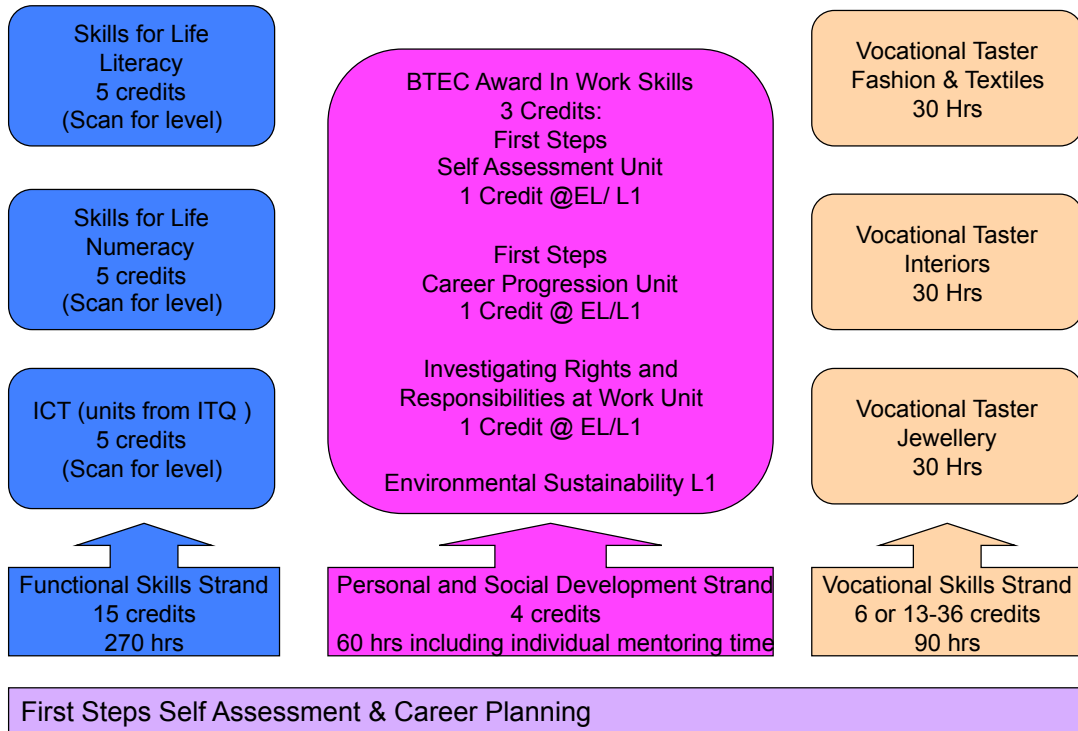
Explore Careers in Business



PAL in Business



Explore Careers in Creative Crafts



PAL in Interior Design

