

The story so far..... North Nottinghamshire College



Cross College challenges

North Nottinghamshire College is the leading provider of education and training in the North Nottinghamshire area and beyond, with 1300 full time and over 8,000 part time students. The College has a £15 million turnover and employs around 450 staff. For the last two years, the Skills for Life department at NNC have been working hard to raise the profile of functional skills within their organisation from the point of view of the learners, to something that is central to success with their studies. They have also worked hard with the programme areas in making functional skills a seamless experience for the learners to improve buy-in so raising attendance and success.

To support this process, Skills for Life staff have been working closely with many vocational areas to discuss topics that they would like to see being taught early on in functional skills sessions to assist the learners with their main vocational subjects. This has led to greater buy-in from vocational tutors and therefore better support with their learners. However, although things have improved, there are still issues surrounding learner engagement within functional skills lessons. At their last inspection, Ofsted awarded the College's Skills for Life provision a grade 3, so their main objective is to move the Skills for Life area from satisfactory to good or better. It is hoped that by improving learner engagement in functional skills classes, and hence learner satisfaction, better retention and inspection grades will follow. So, in addition to improving the quality of their functional skills delivery, the team also wished to change the culture across the College, ensuring buy-in and support from vocational colleagues.

Not alone

Derby College has been delivering functional skills to its full-time learners since 2007, and key skills since 2000, and is no stranger to the challenge of engaging learners. Experienced tutors from across the whole functional skills provision at Derby College were available to provide insights into how to possibly engage learners in a large general further education college. Meetings with Derby College staff, during a study visit, have helped the North Nottinghamshire team to realise that they are not alone with the challenge of engaging learners on full-time vocational programmes with functional skills.

Supported provider

North Nottinghamshire College:

- Chris Drake, Maths Curriculum Leader

Improvement partner

Derby College:

- James Danes, Learning Director

Highlighting the importance of functional skills cross College

Some initial actions were taken which highlighted the importance of functional skills within programmes of study.

- Functional skills is now included in the full-time prospectus, reinforcing the college's vision and message to students
- Timetabling was instigated by the Skills for Life department, with vocational teams planning around times designated by Skills for Life for functional skills lessons.
- Level 1 full-time learners are required to undertake two functional skills lessons per week, while level 2 full-time learners undertake one and level
- 3 learners infill where required.

Having good English and Maths grades are important for entering the world of work or higher education, so we help all our full-time students to achieve them, either through GCSEs or Functional Skills qualifications.

You can work at different levels:

Functional Skills (Entry Level, Levels 1 and 2) in English, Maths and ICT

Functional Skills courses give you practical skills which allow you to work confidently, effectively and independently. We try to ensure that as many students as possible undertake at least one Functional Skills class each week.

In order to improve learner engagement in the classroom, the Skills for Life team have been developing different delivery models revolving around topic based scenarios. It is hoped this will facilitate the transfer of skills from "familiar" to "unfamiliar" contexts. So far topics have been tailored to vocational areas for the "familiar" contexts in order to demonstrate relevance to the learners' main programmes.

Coping with overlap

Change is continuous, and while all vocational learners are now undertaking functional skills, there are some apprentices continuing from the previous year who are completing key skills qualifications. This results in a mixture of learners within the classroom. Discrete adult learning classes have also changed from adult basic numeracy and literacy to functional skills. Take up has been good, and it will be interesting to see whether retention and success rates are improved.

So far, so good

"We are very pleased with the support so far; it has helped us reinvigorate delivery".

- Chris Drake, Maths Curriculum Leader