

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

Newcastle City Learning



This case study focuses on how Newcastle City Learning works co-operatively with a range of local agencies to provide employability programmes for a diverse range of clients, and on how the service emphasises employment opportunities in its own offer, learning environment and future planning.

Brief description

In the past year, Newcastle City Learning has achieved above-average retention, achievement and success rates in all areas of activity apart from apprenticeships: it had an 83% success rate in 19+ adult skills provision, and 85.8% success rate in directly delivered 16-18 study programmes. In 2014/15 some 29 ESOL learners were placed into work by JET, an IAG agency that works closely with the learners at NCL. Full positive destination data on 2014/15 has not yet been published by SFA.

When Newcastle City Learning was last inspected (May 2014, Grade Two) OFSTED found that “outcomes for learners on classroom learning and apprenticeships are good [and on] workplace learning they are outstanding. Many learners with significant barriers to learning and with very low starting points achieve well and develop a good range of very useful personal, social and employability skills. [...] Tutors make good use of initial assessment to meet the needs of a very diverse range of learners.”

OFSTED also visited NCL as part of their 2012 employability survey – looking at the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment – and concluded that the service had “a very clear and effective strategy for helping participants find employment including those with multiple barriers and those furthest away from the job market [and that it had] responded very positively to the increase in participants who are mandated to the provision. It is using funding flexibilities well to meet their needs, especially those with multiple barriers to learning and employment. NCL works very effectively with partners and subcontractors to provide a wide range of provision and progression routes.”

The service has also drawn on the most recently published BIS outcomes-based performance measures (relating to 2013) to compare its performance:

Outcome-based success measures (2013)

	Sustained employment rate	Sustained employment – those on benefit	Sustained learning rate	Sustained positive destination rate
Gateshead Council	56	41	18	66
Newcastle College	58	34	16	65
NCL	50	34	25	65
N Tyneside Council	43	39	19	55
All providers (England)	59	42	19	68

The service’s own assessment of achievement gaps, annexed to its 2016-2019 Draft Strategic Plan, shows (excluding a small number of not known/provided cases) a 90.6% success rate for those without a declared disability, and figures in the range 85.3% to 92.3% for those with one of eleven specified disabling conditions. Parallel data by ethnicity shows an 89.7% success rate for learners categorising themselves as white, with others falling in the range 77.8% to 94.1%: learners of black ethnicity perform least well compared with service averages.

Effective practice - the detail

The four NCL priorities for delivery are English and maths, ESOL, family learning and enabling people to gain an “employment edge”. Service Manager Caroline Miller sets the context and outlines the developments:

- “What drives us is a belief in the unbreakable bond between education, health and well-being, and how all that we do as a service supports the city and its residents to be economically successful. Thinking about what we might regard as pre-vocational provision, I’d emphasise four areas:
- currently we have about 200 learners within our English, maths and ESOL programmes who have been referred to us by JCP – about a quarter of our total cohort in these areas;
- LLDD work, where we make sure our programmes are focused towards work or volunteering. Using EFA funding we are working to put in place a set of opportunities that provide real stretch, including preparing our learners with high needs for work in social enterprises: in essence, supported internships;
- ESOL, a huge area for us, where 50% of our learners are on JSA, with 50% of those mandated to us by Jobcentre Plus. A number of our ESOL learners are highly capable individuals, but lack the language skills to get a job here: several have told us they want to set up their own businesses (in arts and crafts, food production etc.) and in response to that we last term we put on an on-site market, which was a learning experience in its own right, and probably turned out to be the best thing we have ever done;
- Group of learners who, though presenting themselves for our VET courses, are not ready for study at that level. Our tutors are very good at identifying these cases at interview, and do not hesitate to refer individuals to Functional Skills (most need to develop their English and/or maths) or elsewhere in the service for relevant support. The learners will then be admitted onto the VET course they want to follow when they are ready for it.

“For us, the critical thing about pre-vocational is that it enables the learner to be able to take full advantage of mainstream VET, whether here or elsewhere - we have no hesitation in passing them on to other local providers, once they are ready, if that’s where they can get the programme that fits them best. As providers we should be thinking not about an individual learning plan, but a career plan: ¹

Caroline Miller
Service Manager

This isn’t just about learning programmes, it’s about ethos and environment. Our plans include an upgrade of the reception area, and new displays – an employers’ wall, with a listing of all employers who work with the service, and an area for learners who are setting up a business to be able to advertise their products and services. I see this as a visual emphasis on what Newcastle City Learning is all about, so that we get people thinking about work as soon as they come through the door. (Our thinking extends to non-work-related areas, e.g. a community wall to engage folk in charitable work and an equalities wall to celebrate diversity.)”

The Westgate College building is also used by other City Council staff – adult social services, including the mental health team; young people’s well-being; the police community support team; child mental health all have space from which to work. Caroline explains how “this really helps us make useful operational links which benefit our learners; and it also helps spread the word of what we are all about. It’s more than just employment and getting people into jobs, it’s also about the way people engage with their community. We deal with the personal and the social issues, as well as skills training; we seek to raise aspiration and help people to make a positive contribution. We need to be realistic, and avoid having an expectation that all our learners will go into work straight away.”

¹ This idea of the career pathway is attributable to attendance at a workshop session run by High Baird College at the 2015 Women’s Leadership Network conference, an event supported by ETF

JCP mandation

Local agreements have historically led to JCPs across the city referring claimants to Newcastle College for core employability training, and using Newcastle City Learning for JSA claimants needing specific help with language, English and maths skills development. Close working by NCL with Jobcentre Plus and Newcastle College helps to ensure that the high number of participants needing ESOL provision to improve their employability can access learning at a level and location to suit them. The two providers have jointly developed a curriculum package which is delivered consistently, and which extends to cross-referral of learners where appropriate; the NCL and College agreement has recently resulted in a joint strategy to review support of those ESOL learners who seem unable to progress.

JCP refers some 40 claimants a month to NCL, and is highly satisfied with the service provided, the administrative efficiency with which the arrangement is managed, and a good feedback system on learners' progress. Newcastle City Learning has recently been asked by JCP Newcastle West to provide a course on IT employability for mandated learners, and is responding positively, putting on an initial programme at short notice.

Mandated learners currently account for 22% of Newcastle City Learning's ESOL provision (73 of the 333 learners currently on programme), over a third studying English (68 mandated learners out of 187), and 21% of those on maths courses (60 out of 289). ESOL cohorts referred by JCP are subject to an extended (2 week) initial assessment period, with many learners found to have "spikey profiles", and then placed into the most suitable class to develop skills in the areas where they have most need. Even during the initial assessment period for all Skills for Life learners there is a clear focus on jobs and employability. Programmes effectively develop participants' skills such as team-working, time management and problem solving skills which they recognise in themselves and others. Staff use participants' experiences of work and applying for jobs effectively to develop individual learning plans and the provision. Employability skills, such as using a computer, job search, language used in job interviews and numeracy for work, are an integral part of the provision.

Of the Performance data on the 55% of NCL ESOL learners in 2014/15 who were on Jobseekers Allowance shows a retention rate of 97% (the same as for all ESOL learners), 87.1% achievement rate (compared with 89% for ESOL overall) and a success rate of 85.4% (compared with 87.3% for ESOL overall).

In ESOL sessions there are extremely lively discussions with mixed-ability groups who encourage and learn from each other. Tutors who “know their learners inside out, and how to engage them” have fostered good relationships in the classroom between learners from a wide range of cultures. This ensures learners’ mutual respect, and has resulted in a strong atmosphere of peer support.

NCL staff have found that mixing mandated and self-referring students can be very influential and motivating, see the NCL Student of the Year comments at Annex 2.

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Westgate Market

Managers at NCL were aware that several learners were keen to become self-employed and set up their own micro-enterprises, and came up with the idea of running a Christmas Market at the Westgate campus to test out such an opportunity and teach enterprise skills. Liaison with a range of agencies, including Trading Standards and JCP, resulted in planning for an on-site market which took place in mid-December 2015, and which was widely promoted across the city, including via social media.

Hardus du Plessis, Employment and Skills Manager at NCL

“The majority of stalls were taken up by ESOL learners, but also by students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and other learners. Putting it all in place gave us the opportunity to involve students in planning the event and led to them undertaking further independent research. A pre-event session, preparing would-be vendors for the market, was held some two weeks before the event and covered basic marketing principles (‘the five Ps’), self-employment and the law, and signposting where to go in Newcastle for more help with business set-up. Learners wanting to sell food – we made the canteen over to them on the day – were required to have a Food Hygiene Certificate, and we gave them information on all that and arranged for them to take a relevant level 2 course, with the cookery tutor supervising food preparation on the day. We also used the market as a focus for class-based activities on business communications, promotion and publicity. Tutors continued to provide support, but really it became a learning-through-action project. Learners’ families got involved (the partner of one of our students became our event photographer, for example) and business support agencies also participated: the next market – there is another one planned for March – will have space for them outside the main market hall. The whole thing is now almost getting to the point where the students run it themselves, we’re handing the idea over to them.”

Supported internships and Study Programmes for LLDD

Newcastle City Learning has a long history of work with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The most recent OFSTED inspection report found that, in Foundation Learning (including targeted 16-18 study programmes) “all students are making at least the progress expected of them and many are working above the standard expected for their stage and level of programme” and that “activities are relevant, structured and crafted well to motivate learners and build upon their strengths and interests to maximise progress”.

Work with Newcastle Supported Employment results in NCL supporting eleven vulnerable young people – those with a sensory impairment, physical disability, mental health problems, learning difficulties and autism – through a combination of directly delivered pre-vocational education, work experience, IAG and supported business development. Under the Newcastle scheme, which is commissioned by the City Council, learners are selected for participation by being assessed as quite close to work readiness. They attend NCL on Mondays and Tuesdays for English, maths and other learning opportunities in order to better function in real-life work settings, while on Wednesday to Friday they attend work placements within Capability’s Coffee Shop and the Print Studio in Heaton, and other various employers across the city. A further cohort of eleven vulnerable young people is expected in September 2016. This will be a supported internship scheme and work placements will be within INTU retail outlets in Eldon Square.

NCL is seeking to promote direct development of social enterprise ventures within which EFA-supported participants might be engaged. The service’s past experience in supporting the creation of a disabled theatre group, The Twisting Ducks Theatre Company (see www.thetwistingducks.co.uk) will bring value to this proposed development, though staff caution that high needs students’ desire to build a business case which secures financial backing may be aspirational.

Additionally, Newcastle City Learning have been working under the City Council's apprenticeship Plus and Wellbeing Fund – both administered by NCL. Apprenticeship Plus is designed to support those NEET in the 16-18 age-group suffering greatest disadvantage, and help local SMEs with a wage subsidy to take on apprenticeships and other learning for work, including learners with a learning difficulty and/or disability. The Wellbeing Fund is used to support those in the age group 16-24, to move them closer to or obtain sustainable employment. **Part of the service role is to act as a single point of contact both for the learner and the employer, to liaise with external support agencies as necessary, and to provide advice and help to the employer on how to ensure that they are prepared to accommodate the learner as a full member of the workforce, contributing to business needs.**

NCL also has a sub-contracting arrangement for Foundation Learning for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, with courses are targeted at those in the 16-24 age-group who attend for two years at the main service campus. The offer includes three staged employability pathways, a programme aimed at Entry 3/ Level 1 learners who would like to develop their skills by looking at voluntary opportunities before moving onto paid employment, and intensive maths and English and delivered in a mixed ability group. All programmes lead to accredited qualifications. As part of the provision learners are supported in transferring their skills into actual, hands-on work experience within the community whilst being supported by specialist staff; the main avenue for doing this is through work placements and practical vocational learning that is tailored for the individual. **Learners on the study programme develop their skills well with industry standard facilities and resources. Vocational tutors use their excellent industrial knowledge and background to help learners develop relevant skills, which is augmented with employability skills through well-organised work experience.**

Working with Partners

Newcastle City Learning has strong links with a range of partners including Jobcentre Plus, Your Homes Newcastle, Newcastle Futures Ltd (who have an office on-site at the main NCL Westgate Campus), Jobs in Education and Training (JET, who have a National Careers Service contract), and a wide range of employers. Following a tendering exercise in Spring 2015 it continues to work with Interactive Development Ltd to deliver specialist provision (see above), and engages with community partners to deliver project-based neighbourhood learning in deprived communities.

Effective partnership working with agencies and other local providers enables participants to access a **one-stop-shop of services including initial assessment, job search skills and specialist help with homelessness. The Hub facility, based at the Westgate Campus, is delivered as a partnership between NCL and JET, and offers the full range of careers information, advice and guidance services including CV refinement, interview skills training, job search management and access to current employer vacancies and work experience opportunities, and support to find a work placement or voluntary work.** Partners work closely together to share information about participants to avoid unnecessary duplication. NCL's successful work with subcontractors and partner agencies to increase the range of participants supported into employment has included good links with a local training provider that has resulted in many participants finding employment in care homes.

Managers work well with a range of partners to plan a curriculum that meets both corporate priorities and the complex needs of diverse and disadvantaged communities. NCL works well with employers, helping large national retail employers with their recruitment and equipping participants with the necessary skills to apply for these new jobs. Work with smaller employers results in some good work-placement opportunities which develop participants' confidence and skills.

Benefits

Tutors make good use of initial assessment to meet the needs of a very diverse range of learners. Tutors use assessment well to identify learners' starting points and plan their learning effectively.

For the vast majority of the **learners who undertake classroom learning, success rates have been consistently good** for the last three years. Performance is equally good on both long and short courses.

Many learners make good progress in their learning and career aspirations.

NCL targets much of its service at disadvantaged learners, many with significant barriers to learning and/or employment. **Staff provide learners with good care, guidance and support** focussed on developing and improving their personal, social and employability skills. Learners are provided with very effective additional support and careers advice to develop resumes, job applications, interview skills and guidance on personal appearance for both interviews and work generally.

NCL supports learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in developing a wide range of 'soft' skills such as timekeeping and communicating effectively to enable them to be better prepared for work.

Learners who access a vocational work placement develop good skills such as meeting and greeting customers, using computer systems and working in teams.

NCL works very effectively with a range of partners and other organisations to support the service in developing learner confidence and self-esteem and raise individual aspirations.

Provider background

Newcastle City Learning (NCL) is a service unit of Newcastle upon Tyne City Council and, since December 2014, has operated under a local scheme of delegation which gives its 11-strong Governing Body responsibility for strategy, policy and quality and the power to make recommendations to the local authority on finance and staffing structures. It sits in the Customers, Culture and Skills Division of the Communities Directorate. At the heart of the service is an ethos of supporting those furthest away from the city labour market to develop their skills, and it is represented on the Working City Group. The published service mission is “to help people learn and achieve in a friendly and supportive environment” and its core values are striving for excellence; having a primary focus in all it does on learning, assessment and teaching; enabling people to realise their potential; working co-operatively; and challenging inequality.

In 2014/15 the service’s total income amounted to just over £5m: it secured £ 4.05m SFA grant funding, including just under £ 1.1m for Community Learning provision, and an additional £ 200,000 grant from EFA; accessed £ 205,000 in 24+ Advanced Learning Loans; and generated £ 311,000 in fee income. The biggest single provision area for the service is ESOL, followed by English and maths. In the last year NCL catered for a total 8,252 learners: 3,988 under ASB, 64 Apprenticeships and 4196 on Community Learning programmes. A further 698 students participated in 16-18 Study Programmes, the majority subcontracted via Trinity Solutions, which has since August 2015, and as the newly formed Trinity Academy, held a direct EFA contract.

Locality

Newcastle upon Tyne has a resident population of some 289,800. The city has become more ethnically diverse in recent years, and is designated a City of Sanctuary committed to building a culture of hospitality and welcome, especially for refugees fleeing war and persecution; 2011 census data reported 14.7% residents as non-white (an increase from 6.9% in 2001), and that 13.4% were born outside the UK. Some 18.7% of residents have a long-term health problem or disability that limits day-to-day activity; half of those are working age. Newcastle City Council was ranked 30th most deprived of 326 local authority areas in the 2015 Indices of Deprivation. More than a third of children and young people aged 0 to 18 live in the 10% most deprived wards nationally. Although overall GCSE results for Newcastle upon Tyne are in line with the North East and England, the number of school leavers achieving five or more GCSE's at grade A* to C is lower. 12% of the adult population has no qualifications, compared with 10% in the North East and 8.8% in Great Britain.

NOMIS statistics indicate that for the year to December 2015 the unemployment rate in Newcastle upon Tyne was 8.6%, compared to 7.6% for the North East and 5.7% nationally. Overall 27.4% of people were economically inactive, over a quarter of these as a result of long-term sickness. 7.3% of those economically active are self-employed, close to the North East average (7.4%) but lower than the 10.1% national average. The city is highly reliant on public administration, health and education jobs (39.5%, compared with 27.4% nationally), with Know Newcastle identifying a shortage of private sector employment.

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 Foundation would like to thank all six case study providers; for their time, commitment and help with the development and final production of the case study material.

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Annex 1

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