

Practitioner-Led Action Research Programme

Let's Be Employable

An investigation in to the impact of employer led
curriculum delivery on the aspirations and
outcomes for learners



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1. Introduction and Rationale

The current economic climate and well documented reduced social mobility within the region has had a significant impact on the aspirations of young people and their ability to progress in to employment. The raising of the participation age, need to ensure young people are engaged, introduction of new learning possibilities (Studio Schools, Free Schools etc.) and resulting perceived need to make career choices earlier all affect progression and attainment opportunities.

The College mission is to '*release potential and transform lives*'. This is most effectively achieved by ensuring young people in education are given the opportunity to maximise exposure to the skills and experience of those who may influence choice and provide life changing chances. By working with employers to develop and enhance vocational education and training we will influence the personal and professional development of our learners and raise the aspirations of local young people, positively impacting on their life chances.

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College is sector leading in the development of Skills Competitions and innovative practice, highlighting our commitment to providing employers with an independent thinking and highly skilled workforce for the future, and the next step in this journey is to further engage employers in the design, delivery and assessment of qualifications so that they may shape the future.

Vocationally themed programmes of learning are designed to prepare young people equip prospective employees with the skills and abilities to perform but may fail to portray a realistic image of the world of work. The programmes in question have historically poor retention rates and learners often leave having completed level 2 or 3 qualifications without the impetus to progress to higher or further study. The result of this is two-fold; a workforce which is low skilled and requires further investment by employers in order to achieve industry prescribed outcomes and thus an influx of learners returning to education and skills training as mature learners when barriers to learning may be so much more prevalent.

When considering the attitude of students', research by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (www.dius.gov.uk) 2009 suggests "*the willingness to make an effort and their overall motivation as a key factor, along with aptitude, for deciding progression options. Pupils who do not demonstrate high levels of motivation are expected to struggle with more advanced level courses and in environments where independent learning is a key element*".

Engaging current employers within the sector in the delivery and assessment process will not only add value and currency to the learning experience but raise the aspirations of young people by supporting progression and a realistic expectation or the world of work.

Universities recognise this as a valuable alternative to more traditional modes of delivery. Findings by QAA (www.qaa.ac.uk) when researching the importance of employer engagement determine that *“it is an area of increasing importance to the strategic development of higher education institutions. The skills required of the future workforce and the predicted demographic changes are encouraging institutions to become more flexible in the types of learner they recruit, the range of learning opportunities they make available and the modes of study they offer.”* They also suggest *“the employer’s selection of candidates may differ from more traditional entry criteria and they may select candidates who may not always have the appropriate qualifications for entry to the programme but may be deemed more employable.”*

By completing the research the expectation is to raise the aspirations and improve the life chances of learners. Some embark upon routes of study having been subject to negative influencing factors such as poor behaviour, lack of social skills, negative school experiences, disrupted home environment and lack of prior attainment, all of which have a significant impact on chosen post 16 pathways and outcomes.

By engaging employers in the design and delivery of vocationally biased programmes of study it is possible to witness an increase in the progression rates of learners in to employment, higher education and long term career orientated roles, and have a positive impact on local and on the wider economy and social mobility of the target group.

If successful the project may inform further curriculum development and direct appropriate planning and delivery methodologies for the College across a wide range of specialist areas.

It will be used to promote the approach to local and regional employers with the intention of illustrating the benefits of involvement in education and training and highlighting the influence they can have on the current and future labour market and by default economic benefits for employers.

Should the project be successful and support routes in to employment and careers the College will have the potential to develop training and consultancy information for supporting other local, regional and national providers.

2. Methodology

The research will investigate the aspirations of young people on completion of a level 3 programme of study having had the benefit of employer involvement in delivery and compare the aspirational and progression data with previous cohorts. The college will engage a local employer to deliver a module of the level 3 Media (Moving Image) programme whilst engaging them in a real project with defined outcomes for a paying client.

A target group of 8 current learners has been identified and will participate in qualitative and quantitative research processes (outcomes data analysis and questionnaires). Comparison benchmark data from historical sources and interviews with previous cohorts will be used to provide trend data and quantifiable outcomes for the research.

The evidence will be analysed by utilising quantitative data comparison methodologies (minimum of 2 year trend data) providing statistical evidence of progression and career choices and the income opportunities generated linking to opportunities for improved social mobility.

Qualitative information will be recorded and evidenced by use of recognised interpretive processes.

Research approaches for educational purposes fall into two categories or '*paradigms*'. '*Positivism*' strives to produce measurability, objectivity, predictability and patterning, a '*quantitative*' research approach, providing general, rather than specific answers, and with the possibility of being conducted from afar and in an impersonal manner. '*Interpretivism*' however, provides the researcher the opportunity to investigate, understand and interpret meanings by the retrieval of '*qualitative*' data, and may be employed when a more '*subjective*' study is required. Cohen et al (2000) describes paradigms as allowing '*differing approaches to the study of behaviour*' and therefore, the use of each would be appropriate, dependent upon the nature of the study.

For the purpose of this research both quantitative (data collection) and qualitative (interviews) methods will be adopted and to ensure an eclectic approach this will be supplemented by observation to correlate and triangulate findings.

Quantitative methods are used as part of the research to provide base-line and trend data reflecting actual outcomes for learners over a 3 year period. Quantitative methods of data analysis can be of great value to the researcher when aiming to draw meaningful results from a reliable data source, the main beneficial aspect being that it provides the means to separate out the large number of confounding factors that often obscure the main qualitative findings.

Quantitative analytical approaches also allow the reporting of summary results in numerical terms to be given with a specified degree of confidence for example a percentage outcome.

The result of interviews will however provide qualitative data and a more in depth personal knowledge of the impact of change supplemented by observation. This allows the researcher to look at what is taking place “*in situ, rather than at second-hand*” as supported by Patton (1990) and therefore interaction and group dynamics can be included in the findings.

Used as an appropriate method of collection, as it allowed the collection of observational data better described as ‘*live*’ data from ‘*live*’ situations” by Cohen et al (2005). When watching behaviour and listening to participants discuss and share ideas and views, it proves an informative process. It allows the researcher to “*See things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed*” and “*To discover things that participants might not freely talk about in interview situations*” Cohen et al (2005)

Triangulation is “*A powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity, particularly in qualitative research*” (Campbell and Fiske, 1959, in Cohen, Mannion and Morrison 2005) and this will support an eclectic approach including the use of individual, group, organisational, and societal input in data collection providing a means of validity.

The focus of this study being the perceptions and concerns of those involved with the changing educational delivery modes and methods, and its effects on their future progression, the research approach used is predominantly interpretive, allowing the views of participants, and their concerns and feelings to be considered.

The predominant findings will concentrate on the choices that learners make on completion of a programme of study by comparison of prior cohorts (using exit interviews as qualitative evidence and progression and attainment statistics as quantitative benchmarks) and the trial group itself by gauging their change in behaviour and aspirations for the future.

By collating data in relation to the predicted progression pathway of learners at the start of the study module and comparing it to the end the measure of impact that employer input has had on the participants in respect of the following will be evidenced:

- a) Progression choices
- b) Level of attainment
- c) Employability skills developed
- d) Long term career aspirations

Qualitative sources of information will form the base for findings by way of:

- a) Initial interview with participants to determine their current attainment levels and career aspirations
- b) Observation by the researcher to gather additional informal feedback during the term
- c) End interviews to contrast and compare choices and attitudes as well as predicted outcomes
- d) Video case study of selected participants to map the journey
- e) Interviews with learners who completed the same study programme last academic year to determine their journey on completion

Methods chosen reflect the nature and availability of information sources and will provide the most definable outcomes. By working alongside the employer/deliverer there will also be opportunity to gather information in relation to the suitability of current methodologies used when teaching vocational programmes and how improvements can be made to ensure learners are more prepared for the role and responsibilities of employment. By comparing attitudes and aspirations at the beginning of the project the positive impact on life choices may be measured.

It is also important to determine and evidence the views of the employer and this will be done by continual support whilst delivering (a teaching mentor) and by informal meetings to measure progress against project targets.

The project findings will be documented in differing ways but predominantly by:

- a) The presentation of a full report documenting the qualitative and quantitative impact on the target group in respect of their aspirations and progression choices
- b) Video record of the journey of the participants throughout the trial
- c) Interviews with the employer at the outset and completion of the project

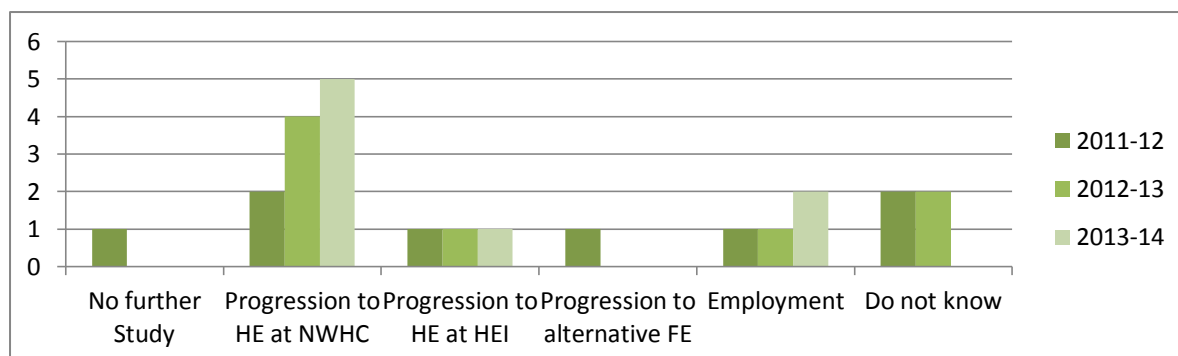
Once findings are confirmed the project will be presented through the required process at national dissemination events by way of a formal presentation and video evidence.

Within the organisation the information and findings will be shared by way of a report and presentation to senior management and Governance. The project findings will then be distributed to appropriate managers and planning staff, used to inform future curriculum planning, and have a direct impact on teaching and learning methodologies adopted by staff.

3. Results/ Findings

All cohorts

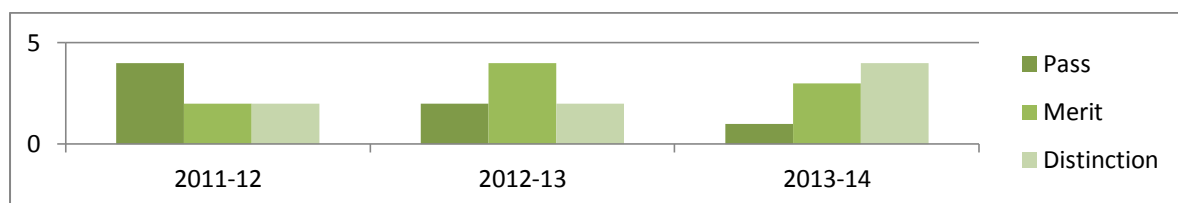
Progression choices



	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
No further Study	1	0	0
Progression to HE at NWHC	2	4	5
Progression to HE at HEI	1	1	1
Progression to alternative FE	1	0	0
Employment	1	1	2
Do not know	2	2	0

Over the 3 year period there has been a significant increase (100%) in the number of learners who progress to HE level programmes. When questioned further it could be concluded that this was due to the perceived lack of employment opportunities within the sector and the wish to improve skill and attainment levels prior to entering the job market.

Level of attainment

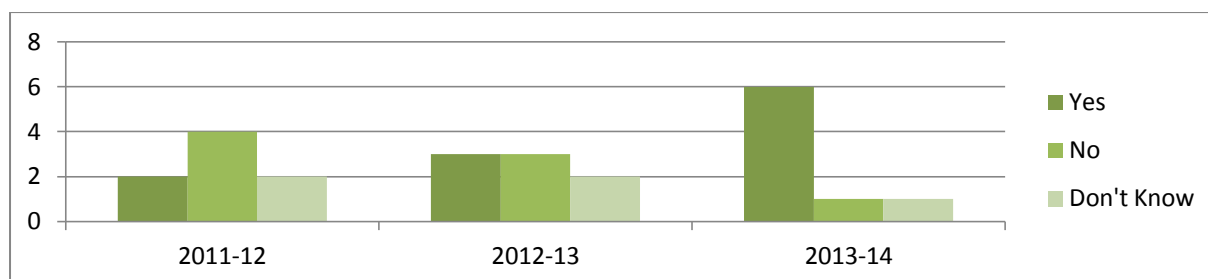


	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Pass	4	2	1
Merit	2	4	3
Distinction	2	2	4

Over the 3 year period there has been an increase in learners achieving the module at the higher grade. Outcomes are evidently improving and the most significant

improvement has been in the current year with a decrease in pass grades and a 50% increase in learners achieving at Distinction level (100% improvement on last years' outcomes)

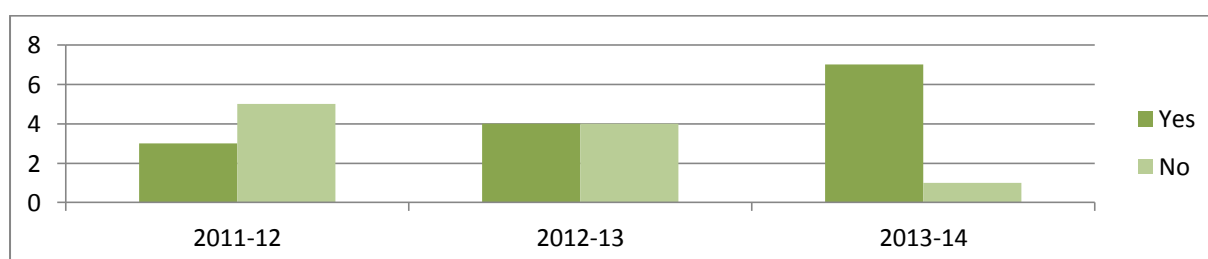
Employability skills developed



	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Yes	2	3	6
No	4	3	1
Don't Know	2	2	1

Of the 2013-14 cohort 75% of learners feel that their overall employability skills have improved in contrast to 25% of the cohort questioned in 2011-12. The skill set being described as such elements as managerial skills, self-management, team work, literacy and numeracy, knowledge of the job market, competitor behaviours, readiness for work, marketing etc.....

Long term career aspirations



	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Yes	3	4	7
No	5	4	1

When asked if their long term career aspirations were greater than prior to the employer involvement all the participants in the current cohort responded positively. This in comparison to previous years' data leads to the belief that employer

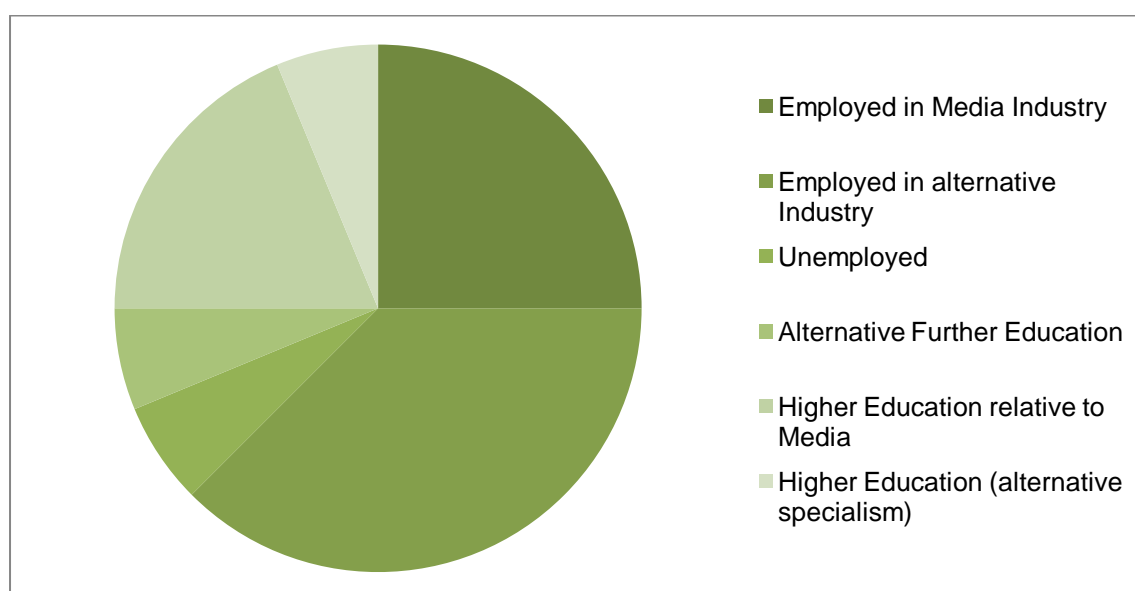
involvement has had a major impact on clarifying expectations and raising the aspirations of the target group.

Former learners (16)

When completing the questionnaires former students were very vocal when discussing their experience at the college.

When asked if they enjoyed the course all participants said that they had a positive experience but highlighted clear areas for improvement such as IAG and work experience opportunities. The course met their expectations which would indicate initial course information was concise and allowed the applicants to make clear and definitive choices but several commented that the programme was not as 'practical' as they felt it should be and so there was little opportunity to develop an understanding of the work roles related to future employment, although all said that they had participated in some form of work experience whilst studying.

The 16 participants of past cohorts were asked 'Where are you now?' The following results show a worrying picture of employability on completion of level 3 programmes in this specialism.



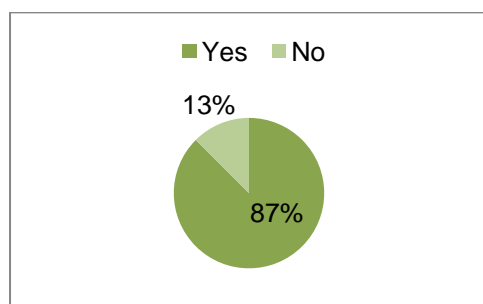
Employed in Media Industry	4
Employed in alternative Industry	6
Unemployed	1
Alternative Further Education	1
Higher Education relative to Media	3
Higher Education (alternative specialism)	1

As illustrated only 4 (25%) of those who completed to level 3 standard are continuing to be employed within a Media based role. A higher percentage (37.5%) are employed but have not secured work within the specialism. On further questioning none of the past cohort is employed in jobs which pay above the national average salary of £26,500. Of those continuing in education only 2 stated that they are continuing with media related study. In addition to this when asked '*are you doing what you thought you would be doing?*' only those who were employed in the sector (4 respondents: 25%) answered positively. This would appear to indicate that at the point of completion of a level 3 programme in the specialism very few learners have a clearly defined pathway for progression in relation to education or employment.

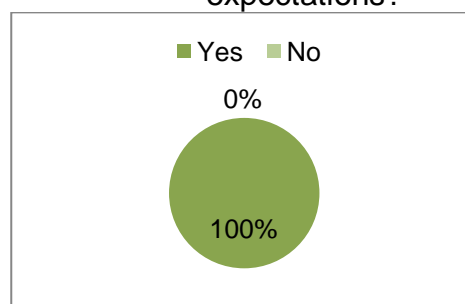
The final question being designed to enable the learners to influence future planning asked '*Do you think the course would be better if more employers were involved in design and delivery?*' All but one of the respondents stated that they felt this would be beneficial and that it may 'open doors' for employment opportunities. Several also added that they felt employers need the contact with education in order to maintain a real expectancy of what is being taught and how which would support them in having a more realistic expectation of those looking for work and their skill set.

Current learners initial questions (8)

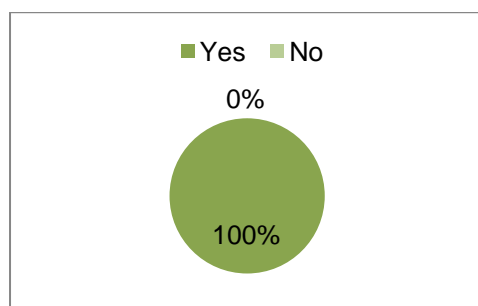
1 Are you enjoying the course?



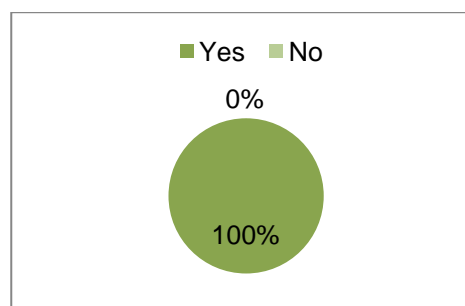
2 Does the course meet your expectations?



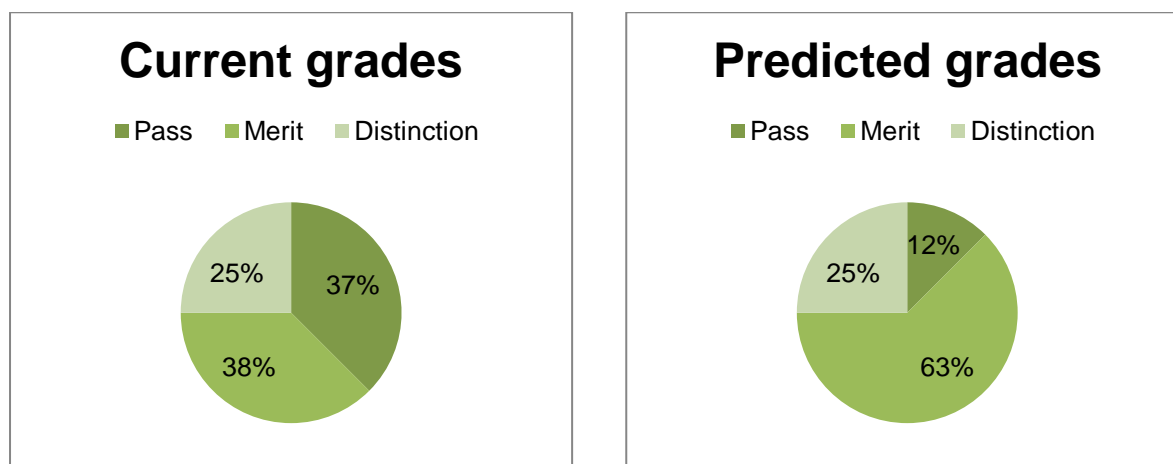
3 Do you feel the course is varied enough to give you the opportunity to develop your skills?



4 Do you feel there is enough support and guidance from teaching staff to allow you to develop a specialism?



When asked ‘Do you feel there is enough support and guidance from teaching staff to allow you to develop a specialism?’ all participants noted that the level of tutor support went beyond their expectation and that they has been given the opportunity to research, practice and develop skills in order to choose specialist route for higher level study or employment.



When analysing the current working grades against the current predicted grades it can be seen that there is an expected rise in the number of merit awards and reduction in those achieving only at a pass grade, the number of distinction level achievements however is expected to remain at 25%. There are several reasons that may be attributed including the lack of stretch at challenge with those who are already attaining comfortable Merit profiles or the lack of final impetus and push towards higher level outcomes by learners (perhaps a level of disengagement?)

All learners had completed a minimum work experience requirement and participated in commercial work whilst on the programme. Benefits for them included ‘access to additional facilities’, ‘the mentoring provided by external staff’, ‘opportunities to make industry contacts’ and ‘being able to try to work more independently and see a real outcome’.

All participants stated that they had received information, advice and guidance about their next steps and commented that ‘the guidance team were brilliant, they gave us lots of help to research and apply’ and that ‘the course tutors certainly seem to know their stuff, if they could not advise or answer a question then they just fetched someone who could’.

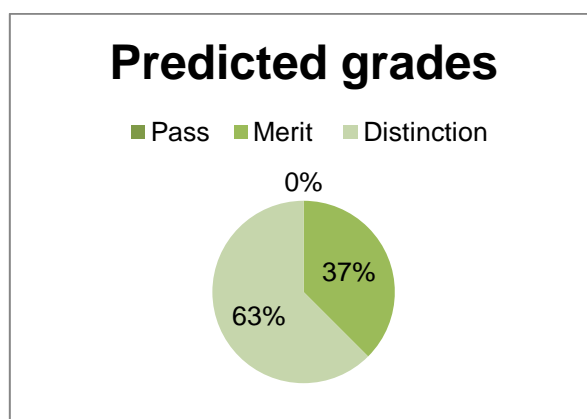
Comparison between the prior and subsequent aspirations and progression planning of the learners has shown some interesting results illustrated later in the report.

Current learner end interview questions (8)

When asked *'Did the use of an employer delivering on the course meet your expectations?'* all of the participants were very keen to say that they felt it was really useful and beneficial to have someone who was *'real'* giving them instruction.

Further to this the value added to the module was diverse. Benefits discussed included *'having someone who is actually doing it and could be a potential employer in the future made us realise what the industry is really like'*, *'the time to discuss what my perceptions are and how they match those of a real workplace was invaluable to my future choice'*, *'I really thought this would be an easy option and that I could fall in to a job at the end of my level 3, I now realise that to earn a decent salary and make a contribution to an employer or company I really need to seriously consider getting a degree and some work experience'* and *'the employer made me look at alternatives to what I thought I wanted to do, I have much more idea of the direction the industry is going and can make a much more informed choice now'*.

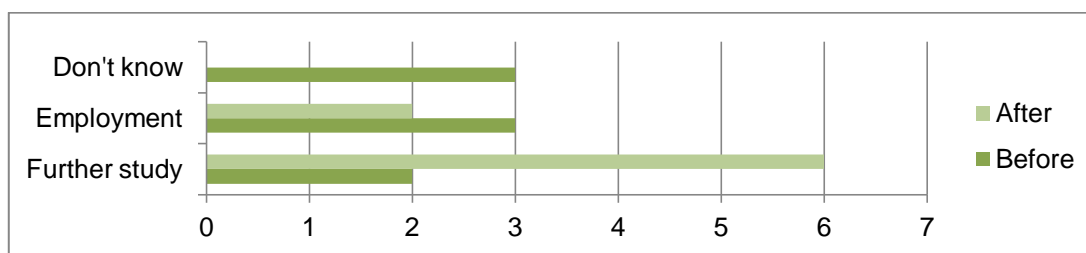
The predicted grades of 4 of the participants (50%) have improved on completion of the employer delivered module.



The individual predicted a Pass grade is currently working at Merit level and 3 of those previously working towards a Merit grade are now expected to attain a Distinction grade for the module.

Aspirations, according to the qualitative feedback provided, have been raised significantly as a result of the employer involvement in module delivery. The cohort has *'started to take career planning seriously'*, and they feel they now have a *'much more serious view'* of the expectations of the world of work'. It would appear from discussions with the cohort that they have previously felt that their limitations, both in ability and future progression opportunities, has been hampered by their surroundings, their previous educational history and certainly by their home and community boundaries. Some of these misconceptions have been eliminated by the employer and self-belief (possibly due to a rise in self-esteem which was prevalent post-delivery) is now evident within the cohort.

The above is also evidence through the future plans of the cohort and their progression goals and aspirations have significantly changed as illustrated in the graph below.



Before the employer involvement of delivery in the module the following was evident.

- 3 (37.5%) learners were unsure of their future aspirations/ progression opportunities and pathways
- 3 (37.5%) of the cohort were planning to go directly in to employment following the completion of the level 3 programme with an average expected income of £20,000
- 2 (25%) were planning to continue in education (1 to a local HEI to complete a degree and the other to remain at the College and progress to a HND qualification)

Subsequent to the employer involvement of delivery in the module those progression plans have changed significantly as illustrated by the following data.

- All (100%) have a clear idea of their future progression
- 2 (25%) of the cohort are planning to progress directly in to employment (and it should be considered that these participants have secured employment as a result of work experience completed during the programme)
- The remaining 75% of the learners (6) are now planning to remain in education (4 at the College to complete HNDs and 2 at local HEIs having applied for degree level study programme)

4. Conclusions

Analysis of the data and information gathered during the research substantiates the following conclusions:

- a) When identifying the progression of learners there has been a significant increase in the number of learners aspiring to achieve at a higher level through study. This may in part be attributed to the lack of employment opportunities within the sector discussed. This is also due in part to the additional number of graduates entering all professions (vocational included) and so raising the level of competition for available employment.
- b) Over the 3 year period analysed there has been an ongoing trend of improvement in outcomes for learners with a reduced number achieving the minimum threshold of the award following employer involvement in delivery. This correlates with an increased perception that employability skills are being more integrated into programme delivery, thus learners feel '*more employable*' when they complete and also demonstrate a marked increase of aspirational targets.
- c) Only 4 of the 16 prior learners have sustained employment within the sector which indicates a lack of competitive standard on completion of the learning programme or ineffective advice and guidance with learners unaware of the demands of the industry or leaving study with realistic expectations.
- d) The study would benefit from further and more intensive investigation as to the progression and current status of past learners. All respondents stated that they felt it would be beneficial to have employers involved in delivery of the programme and this would underpin the argument that there are misconceptions and lack of understanding of how the sector has changed over the past years. It would be interesting to discover if there is a trend forming showing preferred alternatives for the cohorts considering such aspects as levels of responsibility at a given point post completion and the type of specialism (if any) that the programme leads to for those not entering their initial job role.
- e) The current programme attracts learners, is structured effectively, meets learner expectations and varied enough to allow and support specialist choice for progression. The programme is influenced by excellent staff support and learners achieve good standards of graded outcomes but there is clear evidence that those outcomes are improved by external employer influence following an improvement in predicted and achieved grades for the study group.
- f) The findings also support a more positive and determined progression pathway indicted by all participants post employer delivery. Learners feel more confident in both their approach to defining and clarifying progression routes and in their awareness of current industry expectations which hence allows them to make more applicable choices.

5. Recommendations for change and actions

Further to the findings of the study it would be prudent for the organisation to consider:

1. A review of programme and curriculum design methodologies to maximise the potential of employer engagement in design and delivery.
2. Streamlined curriculum design across all subject sector areas to maximise retention of learners.
3. The continued and reviewed use of industry specific related Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) at the early intervention stage of programme delivery in order to ensure the aspirations of learners can be raised at the earliest opportunity.
4. The further embedding of contextualised 'employability skills' to enhance employment opportunities.
5. The use of 'alumni ambassadors' to promote and embed a realistic expectation of post learning employment and opportunities
6. Further investigation and implementation of vocational Higher Education pathways to ensure employability at graduate level is achievable for learners
7. The investigation and promotion of progression agreements in to employment and higher level study with strategic partners
8. The development of additional 'professional' qualifications
9. The further promotion and attainment of 'value added' outcomes for learners ensuring that learning is challenging and reflects the requirements of the appropriate industries
10. Further investigation and development of Higher Apprenticeships frameworks

**Changes to the current Higher Apprenticeship routes should be implemented by April 2014 and include the removal of Transferrable Skills, Employee Rights and Responsibilities and Personal Learning and Thinking Skills as mandatory requirements from Level 4+ frameworks and the removal of requirements around Guided Learning Hours from Level 4+ frameworks (www.skillsscfa.org).*

6. References

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Patton. M.Q. (1990) Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods (second edition). London: Sage Publications

New Higher Apprenticeship Specification for England available at:

<http://www.skillsfca.org/newsletter/april-2013.html> [accessed 13-05-14]

Appendix i

Former learner questions

1. Did you enjoy the course at NWHC?
2. Did the course meet your expectations?
3. Did you undertake work experience whilst on your level 3 programme?
4. Where are you now?

**If employment then what is your approximate salary?*

**If in education which course are you undertaking?*

	Please tick	Average salary	Course title and level
Employed in Media Industry			
Employed in alternative Industry			
Unemployed			
Alternative Further Education			
Higher Education relative to Media			
Higher Education (alternative specialism)			

5. Are you doing what you thought you would be doing?
6. Do you think the course would be better if more employers were involved in design and delivery?

Appendix ii

Initial learner questions

1. Are you enjoying the course?
2. Does the course meet your expectations?
3. Do you feel that the course is varied enough to give you the opportunity to develop your skills?
4. Do you feel there is enough support and guidance from teaching staff to allow you to develop a specialism?
5. What are your current working grades?
6. What are your current predicted grades?
7. Have you completed any work experience whilst on the course and if so what are the benefits?
8. Have you received any information, advice and guidance about what you can do once you have completed the course?
9. What are your future plans when you have completed the programme?

*If further study then what course and where?

*If employment then what would you expect to earn in your first job after completing the course?

Appendix iii

End interview learner questions

1. Did the use of an employer delivering on the course meet your expectations?
2. Do you feel the teaching delivered by the employer was valuable? If so why?
3. Have your current predicted grades changed? If so how?
4. Are your aspirations the same as before? If not then why?
5. What are your future plans when you have completed the programme?

**If further study then what course and where?*

**If employment then what would you expect to earn in your first job after completing the course*