

OUTSTANDING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT TECHNICAL SKILLS NATIONAL PROGRAMME

Case study by:

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Overview and Key Themes

The overall project aim was “**Transforming the Business Curriculum to meet Industry Standards**”.

The transformation of the business curriculum was based on developing three key themes:

- 1) **Employer partnerships:** Moving beyond traditional employer engagement, the project aimed at building meaningful new and existing employer partnerships. Through these partnerships, the OTLA project aimed to offer more exciting opportunities, such as employer-led student projects to engage students more in their own learning and skills development.
- 2) **Staff Industry Immersion:** The project aimed for all business teaching staff to complete several days of industry immersion, over the year to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date in fast-changing industries.
- 3) **Preparation for External Assessments:** During the previous academic year, the Business Faculty at Activate Learning had changed from the BTEC Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) specification to the BTEC National Qualification Framework (NQF) specification. Involving externally assessed units, the Faculty experienced a significant drop in achievement, largely due to poor ‘exam performance’. This was echoed nationally as vocational teaching staff were perceived as being unfamiliar with how to best prepare their learners for the external assessments. Therefore, the project explored strategies to better prepare staff and students for external assessments.



“We have recognized the importance of getting back into industry....in terms of external assessments we have taken a very different approach this year”

AIDAN ARNOLD
FACULTY MANAGER
CITY OF OXFORD COLLEGE

Partners

The project involved both partner colleges and partner employers.

Partner colleges:

The Activate Learning Group; Banbury & Bicester College, City of Oxford College, Reading College, Bracknell & Wokingham College

The Guildford College Group; Guildford College, Farnham VI Form College, Merrist Wood College

South Devon College

Employer Partners

Several employer partnerships had already been formed and others were developed further through the project. Other new partnerships were formed as a direct result of the project. Employer partners, which had direct contact with students, provided staff industry immersion opportunities or actively participated in Advisory Board meetings. Employers included:

Bayer PLC, BDO, British Airways, Boots, Hilton Hotel Group, Oxford Bus Company, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action Group, Pennington's Manches, Satellite Catapult, Siemens, University of Reading, Waitrose, 3M.



KEY DATA AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Numbers Involved

	DIRECT IMPACT	INDIRECT IMPACT	COMMENT
Managers	8	7	Direct impact on managers across all three main providers. Indirect impact on managers in other areas who benefited from key findings
Practitioners	27	12	Direct impact on curriculum staff who deliver on business programmes across the three partner colleges. Indirect impact on teaching staff in other subject areas who benefited from project findings (e.g. advice on how to prepare best for external assessments).
Learners	588	350	Direct impact on learners in business faculties across three partner colleges. Indirect impact on learners in other subject areas who benefited from improved provision because of the project.
Providers	3	0	Activate Learning Group, Guildford College Group, South Devon College (who joined in November).
Employers	9	11	Direct impact on 12 employers who have formed or developed partnerships with local college because of the project. Indirect impact on other employers who have been involved in a smaller way, e.g. by having a staff member to carry out industry immersion.

Key Aims and Methods

The vision of the project was that all three themes would be connected and have impacts on the industry (e.g. industry immersion would improve and update staff skills and knowledge, thereby supporting the improvement of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment (TLA)) The project would also include real examples of work-based practice to build learners knowledge and skills in preparing for external assessments. However, to highlight the methods used, the three themes are elaborated.

Preparation for External Assessment

The overall aim of this area of the project was to achieve better results in the BTEC NQF external assessments. The methods used to achieve this during the project were as follows:

- **Staff training events** delivered by BTEC trainers with expertise in both the nature of the assessments and the business industry. Staff were given the opportunity to engage in two separate events.
- **Development of a resource bank** to support staff in delivering the externally assessed modules to a high quality. Some resources were developed by staff and others were purchased from external sources.
- **Research conducted** into how learners retain information best, and how this impacts on their ability to perform in assessments.
- **Referring to 'external assessments' rather than 'exams'** as many external assessments are industry-based tasks. Referring to them as exams puts students in a negative mindset and makes them not approach the assessment in the right way.
- **Mock assessments** were carried out across all sites. This had not been done previously. It was vital for learners to attempt time constrained assessments and get feedback on their performance to help develop the skills needed to succeed in the assessments.
- **Sharing of ideas and effective practice** across all campuses involved helped to gain a few useful ideas for how to approach certain topics and assessment methods in an optimum way.

Employer Partnerships

One initial step we took was to start referring to our 'employer engagement' as 'employer partnerships' to highlight the more holistic involvement of an employer with benefits to both parties. Specific methods taken to boost employer partnerships were as follows:

- **Sharing of effective practice** identified in some areas with employer-led projects set up and run, with clearly written project briefs, on which to base new projects.
- **Clear target setting** for each college to form employer partnerships and deliver an employer-led project.
- **Liaising with our work experience coordinators.** The expectation was for them to not just find and support work placement opportunities for learners, but to develop these links with suitable employers to build additional projects.
- **Establish connections between senior leaders** of the colleges and external companies. Simply by involving senior leaders in communications between parties, the partnerships became stronger and more strategic. The partnerships should not be just reliant on one staff member on each side to maintain the link.

Staff Industry Immersion

The challenge of the project was to ensure all staff completed industry immersion at a busy time of year. Had the project run during the summer term, staff would have had more time available to complete their days in industry. However, it was not necessarily the case

that this would be the best time for the employers. It was important that all staff completed some immersion during the project, so the following methods were used:

- **Clear targets set** for staff to complete industry immersion, tied into performance appraisal process. Staff had to complete a full day's immersion by December and three full days by the end of the academic year.
- **Liaison with our work experience coordinators** in the same way we did for the employer partnership theme, so these staff members would search for staff placements as well as just student placements.

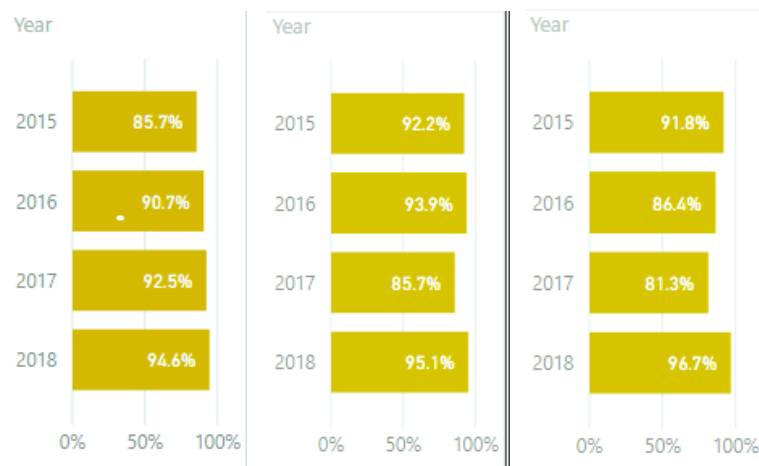
End result & Impact

Impact

- **Staff and students are better prepared** for external assessments through greater expertise in the assessment process, e.g. mock assessments took place on all campuses to enable learners to receive feedback and understand how to ensure a positive performance in their assessments.
- **Strong employer partnerships developed** such as those between Guildford College and the Hilton Hotel Group, Bracknell and Wokingham College and 3M. Many of the partnerships formed are sustainable as senior members of staff from each party have communicated about the partnership.
- **Future practice and policies will change** such as being clearer on entry criteria, especially for Level 2 learners progressing onto a Level 3 BTEC course.
- **Projected significant improvement in results** based on improved preparation; results due one month after completion of the project!
- **Change of culture** amongst staff whereby they now give more consideration to keeping their skills and knowledge up-to-date.
- **Employer partners are more connected with their local colleges** and communities and have a greater access to future talent as a result of stronger partnerships formed and developed through the project.

Outcomes

- **Increase in retention data** For all Business courses across the project (all campuses involved). We believe this is due to the different approach to external assessments, ensuring learners feel better prepared and are not 'scared off' by the prospect of exams.
- **Improved attendance** data on Business courses in all partner colleges compared to this time last year. We attribute this to a better, more engaging curriculum involving more employer-led projects and students feeling more positive about how they are prepared for external assessments.
- **Improved attendance at external assessments** this year compared to last year, due to students feeling more prepared and confident.
- **Staff industry immersion** completed by 25 out of 27 practitioners. Further links formed for future industry immersion such as British Airways staff training days.



From left to right: the retention data for all business programmes at Banbury, Oxford and Reading College, highlighting the increase in retention from this time last year (up 14% in reading).

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Moving TLA to outstanding

The three key themes of the project all aimed to move the standard of teaching, learning and assessment to outstanding. It is becoming increasingly well-recognised that 'outstanding' TLA on vocational courses must involve current skills and knowledge.

One of the partners, Activate Learning, runs an 'Attributes' programme which is conducted by all full-time students and focuses on the skills required to be successful in the workplace. Part of the attribute development can be done through employer-led projects in which the focus is on current skills required to succeed in the workplace.

Another key indicator of outstanding TLA is the results achieved, which we predict will improve significantly because of the project.

An outstanding curriculum on an externally-assessed vocational course involves development of knowledge and skills for both internally and externally assessed units.

Upskilling Workforce and Technical Skills

It is now recognised within the partner colleges that all staff should complete industry immersion as a standard part of their CPD, and this forms part of the appraisal process.

Staff are supported to conduct industry immersion by support staff and by being encouraged to take days away from their usual timetable to carry it out. The principle of 'dual professionalism' is being supported within colleges to make links between teaching staff and industry stronger.

Preparation for the Skills Plan

As vocational courses move to T-Level programmes, preparation for end-point assessments is going to become more and more important. The ability of managers to

plan programmes that can combine the development of employer partnerships and industry skills with effective preparation for external assessments will be essential. The ability of teachers to deliver current skills and knowledge effectively in preparation for end-point assessments will be equally important.

Many of the key findings from the project will be considered as colleges move to T-level programmes. Many of the key findings are listed below under 'lessons learned'.

EVALUATION, KEY POINTS and OUTPUTS

Lessons learned

- Plan to allow time for mock assessments with feedback in advance of assessments
- Do not over-teach certain topics; apply the principles of cognitive loading
- Ensure that learners progressing to higher level courses have the right skills-set
- Do not refer to assessments as 'exams' when they are vocationally-based
- Time constrained knowledge and skills assessments
- Use and embed key terminology as much as possible
- Develop the ability to answer questions in the style of the external assessments throughout the programme
- Involve employers in preparation for externally set-tasks where appropriate to bring it to life

Main Takeaway Message

An externally-assessed unit must be taught differently to an internally-assessed unit. Students must be given time to practice the skills required by the assessment and get quick feedback to identify their areas of knowledge and the skills needed to improve. They also need to see the relevance of the assessments, i.e. perceiving them as vocationally-relevant tasks rather than 'exams'.

Outputs and Resources

The outputs produced from the project were as follows:

- **A How2 Guide on delivering externally-assessed units.**
- **A potential continuing professional development programme for technical and vocational staff.**
- **An advice and guidance leaflet for delivering specifically BTEC externally-assessed units**
- **A bank of resources to support business staff delivering BTEC NQF programmes.**