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higher education,
skills and work



First Steps Pilot Project: Evaluation Report

Delivered via the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre (CAEC), based at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).



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Introduction

This report evaluates the 'First Steps' Pilot Project which was funded as one of the 'Special Projects' which emerged from the Regeneration Sector Development Group part of Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance (GMSA) and delivered via the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre (CAEC), based at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU).

GMSA

The GMSA is an alliance of universities, colleges and work based learning providers who aim to promote and provide access to Higher Education for non traditional learners by providing options for progression (for learners) whilst also engaging with local employers to ensure that their workforce needs are met by involving and engaging them in the process.

MMU/CAEC

The CAEC has been delivering level modules in the community for a number of years working with and alongside community partners (employer organisations based in the community) to support the recruitment of learners from local communities and the delivery of modules in community bases.

As a member of the Regeneration Sector Development Group, the CAEC applied for funding as a 'Special Project' and was successful in securing some money to deliver 'The First Steps Project' which aimed to:

- Develop and expand the delivery of community based active learning modules across Greater Manchester
- To do this by working with two Higher Education (HE) or Further Education (FE) partners using the same model as used by the CAEC therefore encouraging them to have a presence in their communities
- To encourage educational partners to work with and via 'community partners' (which are organisations existing within communities see terms of reference below) and as a result to increase their institutions presence and build relationships in the community.
- Increase community members' access to community based active learning
- Provide progression options and opportunities to learners who otherwise may not consider studying at university

Terms of Reference: The terms 'community partner' and 'employer' are used interchangeably throughout this report, both refer to 'employer' organisations in the community.

All quotes used in this report have been taken directly from learner evaluation forms.

1. The Projects

Two educational partners agreed to work with MMU as part of the First Steps Project to deliver modules accessible to communities based on the MMU Community Based Active Learning model. These partners were Tameside College (TC) and Manchester University (MU) please see table below for a brief outline.

It should be noted that the two models used by both TC and MU were adapted to meet their specific requirements, availability of resources and preferences which will be explored in more detail in sections 2 and 3.

Partner - Education	Tameside College	Manchester University
Department		School of Education: Diploma in Community and Youth Work Programme
Module being delivered	Schools of Participation (MMU Module)	Mentoring
Community Partner	Tameside Borough Council (TBC): across three neighbourhoods	Peacemakers, Oldham
Community Partner also Employer	Yes	Yes
Module delivered in Community	Yes	No, but additional support sessions delivered in the community
Number of Learners	16	13
Learner Circumstances	3 employees of TBC 3 volunteers in the community 10 local residents	10 volunteers with peacemakers 1 volunteer from another organisation 2 diploma students
Cost to learners	Free	Free
Number of Learners completed	6	12
Fees charged (by educational institution)	No	Yes
Fees paid by community partner	No	Yes

2. Partner 1: Tameside College

a. The Project

Tameside College worked with MMU to deliver the “Schools of Participation” module at a community venue in Tameside, with Tameside Borough Council as a community partner (see changes and adaptations below for details).

The project included three council employees from across three priority neighbourhoods in Tameside (known as learning champions) recruiting and bringing together local people (volunteers and residents from their allocated areas) who would learn alongside them, with the learning champions offering support and guidance between sessions. The learning champions themselves would be supported by their manager via meetings and formal supervision.

Although Tameside Borough Council did not pay any fees towards the course they did pay for a community venue for the duration of the course and were involved in the planning, evaluation and support of the project.

MMU provided a trainer/facilitator to deliver their module who worked alongside a tutor from the college to deliver the training (see changes and adaptations below for details).

A total of 16 learners attended the first session however this dropped down to 6 final learners who completed the training.

b. Changes/Adaptations:

- It emerged that colleges can only deliver modules with existing accrediting bodies, therefore the possibility of the college creating and delivering a level 4 module of their own had to be eliminated due to tight timescales. However, Tameside College expressed an interest in doing this in the future. As a result an existing MMU module was delivered in conjunction with a MMU trainer.
- Further complications emerged as a result of this approach due to the number of different people now involved in the process.
- First Steps funds had to be re-organised to accommodate trainer fees.

c. The Course

The “Schools of Participation” module is worth 10 credits at Level 5 and is part of the BA (Hons) in Youth and Community Work. Learners were registered as students (at MMU with the library only, this process enabled MMU to provide the training for learners free of charge) and those who completed the course would be awarded certificates of attendance. If they wished to ‘draw down’ the credits towards the BA they would be assessed at point of entry. Learners were therefore encouraged to keep reflective journals of their practice to assist them should they wish to progress at a later date and/or as evidence of work done.

Seven sessions were delivered and included a visit to MMU both to register, have lunch and a training session with Carol Packham (director of the CAEC and one of the lecturers on the BA (Hons in Youth and Community Work).

“It has provided me with the basis on which to develop my understanding of community work”

d. The Learners

In Tameside the learners consisted of a combination of employees, volunteers and local residents.

Of the six learners who completed the training four were women and two were men, in addition to the six learners, one learner successfully secured employment mid way. Three of the six were employees of TBC (known as learning champions) and the other three were individuals who were engaged in volunteering within their communities. The six learners committed themselves to the process from the beginning and enjoyed sharing diverse experiences (from across the borough) and the opportunity to share good practice which was rarely available.

e. What Helped

- The fact that learners were supported by their employer was a big factor in enabling the process to run as smoothly as possible. This not only involved being released from work for the learning but also being supported via formal supervision.
- Convenience of the module being delivered at a local venue was reported to be both important and valued by the learners as travel and costs has been indicated as a barrier.
- Learners enjoyed the session at MMU.
- Learners also reported the benefits of being able to work with colleagues from across the borough.

f. What Hindered the Process

- Frequency of sessions (which were run fortnightly) appeared to create a barrier.
- A two week half term break after session one caused disruption and resulted in a number of learners being lost.
- Having restricted library access was reported as a disadvantage.
- Due to tight timescales the preliminary session where learners meet with the trainer/tutor and are informed of the course, process, jointly agree frequency of sessions and so on had to be dropped. This resulted in a number of learners not having accurate information about the course and adequate commitment.
- It was intended that the learning champions would generate interest and invite local residents to the preliminary meeting however it resulted in them having to actually recruit the learners independently.
- As a result of the above, residents lacked a direct relationship and contact with a 'community base' and organisation.
- Following on from the above, covering three neighbourhoods rather than working with one locally established community base caused difficulties.
- As there were a number of partners and stakeholders it became difficult to ensure smooth communication and to keep everybody updated including the learners.
- A tutor from Tameside College and trainer from MMU working together caused difficulties in relation to booking mutually convenient times to meet, teach etc.

3. Partner 2: Manchester University

a. The Project

The project involved cooperative work between a voluntary sector organisation responsible for a number of volunteer projects and the School of Education at the University of Manchester. A course was designed to address the interests of the partner organisation and to be an option for students registered on the School of Education's *Diploma in Community and Youth Work Studies* programme. The School of Education designed and facilitated the course and the partnership organisation arranged to support ten of their volunteer mentors with fees and study support. The learning was free for the learners. Assessment was a compulsory part of the programme and the training was delivered from the MU site as opposed to in the community. The course and agreement had already been designed and put in place prior to the First Steps Project, the aim of the First Steps Project was to 'add value' to the existing training by providing more support for learners in the community to ensure successful outcomes and to monitor and evaluate the process both with the community partner and with both CAEC and TC.

The project included:

- Meetings with the partner organisation prior to the start of the course to discuss the needs of the potential students and the organisation
- Development of the unit based on previous courses organised in cooperation with the partner organisation
- Information sessions held at the partner organisation facilitated by the tutor prior to the start of the course to provide an induction to the course and assistance with registration issues
- A ten session evening course held at the University facilitated by the tutor
- Drop-in sessions held at the partner organisation facilitated by the tutor
- Weekly drop-in support sessions facilitated by the partner organisation
- Student access to an intranet programme with course materials, study skills information and facilities for communication with other students and staff
- Student access to the university library, Athens codes and student cards.
- Assessment of learning through a group or individual oral presentation (students' could choose whether to do a joint presentation) followed by questions for 25% of the mark and a short written piece for 75% of the mark

b. The Course

The course, entitled "Mentoring as Informal Education", was a ten credit undergraduate unit subject to the usual registration, quality assurance and examination procedures for any standard undergraduate unit. "Associate students" could undertake the course as an individual unit – and, should they complete the attendance and assessment criteria, could be issued with a course certificate from the tutor indicating the credit level.

c. The Learners

Thirteen learners registered for the course, ten of these were existing volunteers with the community partner. One was an associate learner from another organisation and two were existing diploma students, a total of eleven learners registered as 'associate learners' with MU. Eight of the thirteen were female and five were male. One volunteer had to drop out due to personal circumstances.

The learners were current volunteers and committed to their work in the field and due to their involvement in community organisations, the learners were interested in learning from each other and contributing to others' learning, they were also interested in developing their skills and understanding despite limitations on their time.

d. Changes/Adaptations

- The existing module and process (for example core teaching held at MU) remained the same, however extra support sessions tailored to the needs of individuals were delivered out at the community base.
XXXXXX

e. What Helped

The University of Manchester [Higher Education Institution (HEI)]

- **Registration procedures:** Within the School of Education, we have set up a programme within the registration system for “associate students” who are able to register for single units.
- **Structure of the project:** The unit was able to slot into existing structures. The units available to Diploma and Associate students are designed for mature and experienced practitioners attending on a part-time basis and are offered on a modular basis without pre-requisites and with on-going rolling admission. A free-standing unit was therefore not an anomaly.
- **Relationship with the partner:** The partners have worked together over several years to develop relevant courses using different configurations and systems.
- **Approach to learning:** the tutor was experienced in offering participative learning programmes to individuals involved in on-going practice.
- **Facilities:** a nice room on campus with a data projector was readily available and reasonably accessible. The intranet programme was well established and could be used to disseminate materials. The learners very much appreciated the opportunity to be part of the university and use the campus venue.
- **Additional Sessions in the community:** enabled individual needs to be met.

The community partner

- **Track record in the field:** the organisation has worked with volunteer mentors in a variety of projects over several years. This meant that volunteer recruitment and support requirements were well understood and that there were a variety of projects feeding into the First Steps project.
- **Established links with the University:** the coordinator of the project within the partner organisation had been a student on the Diploma programme some years previously. In addition, the partner organisation had been involved in the development of previous versions of the course.
- **Facilities to support volunteers/students:** the organisation had computers, books, stationery, interested staff and volunteers
- **Diverse projects:** The partner had a flexible and diverse offering of projects that the students could select from.

f. What Hindered the process

The HEI

- **Access to student services:** Most of the students did not acquire a student card. The limited day-time opening of the student services office prohibited access for the majority of the students who were currently in employment during the day. Although postal applications were possible, the course being held outside of the usual registration period meant that applications were not dealt with swiftly enough.
- **Access to disability support:** as the students were (very) part-time and had a very short time-frame between application and the start of the course, accessing the limited hours of the disability support office was not possible.

The community partner

The community partner has not reported any difficulties with the arrangements or suggestions for improvements.

The learners

- The partner organisation recruited the students rather than the university selecting them. Some of the students were under-prepared for the course. Many of the students had had no previous higher educational experience; some had little previous educational success, had minimal study skills and lacked confidence. This meant that it took time for them to “settle” into the course.
- Two students were not established in a mentoring programme prior to starting the course.
- Students had very little time for study: most were working and volunteering as well as attending the course
- Several had no access to computers outside of the partner organisation's venue and found it difficult to access the computers at the University due to time constraints.

4. Progression/ Employability /Employer Involvement

a. Progression

“..I now want to progress onto a higher/more in depth course which will help me to work with the residents of my areas and provide a positive service to them”

Learners were informed about progression routes via:

- Written information on the process of accreditation.
- Holding the course on university campus and visits to the campus to provide exposure to the environment and facilities. Learners were also given prospectuses.
- Opportunity to meet directly with the course tutor/or to undergo the training with the course tutor and ask any unanswered questions.
- Application packs for the new BA in Applied Community and Youth Work Studies programme were sent to all Associate students.
- Questions about university (MU) study were discussed during sessions
- Associate students were able to ask Diploma students about the undergraduate programmes available at MU.
- Learners were also informed about progression to courses at the college up to Level 3 via the tutor who was co facilitating.
- The site tour (MMU) which included visiting the office and staff at the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre proved useful in relation to overcoming barriers.
- During the MMU visit a session with the course tutor/director enabled learners to ask questions and experience university life directly.
- A MMU representative also met with the learners at sessions at their community venue to provide an overview of the process of accreditation and to answer any questions.

b. Employability

Opportunities for progression into employment have been provided through:

- The mentors (learners) themselves have passed on information about employment opportunities and requirements to young people through the informal education projects in the community they were involved with alongside the unit
- The students had to develop and facilitate a presentation, which is a key skill in obtaining many jobs. Some were involved in team work.
- The learners developed skills in reflecting on their practice and keeping journals as a means of personal and professional development
- One learner was successful in securing employment early on in the course.
- Another learner is actively seeking new employment and has reported aspirations to gain better paid employment.

Registering learners with the North West Citizenship and Take Part Network so that they can be kept up to date with training, personal development and job opportunities and help effective networking.

c. Employer Involvement

The community partner:

- recruited the learners or their employees (learning champions) recruited learners
- in one project the partner agency paid fees and expenses in another they paid for the venue
- provided access to reading material computers
- provided on-going encouragement and support through discussions related to their learning, formal supervision and meetings
- Have been involved in monitoring and providing feedback to the college/university
- Both community partners have expressed an interest in continued involvement with the universities/college

5. Evaluation of both Models

A final evaluation meeting was held with both Tameside College and Manchester University to discuss, compare and draw any conclusions from these two pieces of work which were both but very differently in practice.

Findings:

- Both institutions already had existing relationships with their community partners
- In both cases the community partners were also the 'employers'
- Both Tameside and Manchester University agreed that Manchester is a huge step in terms of travel, expenses and culture/social barriers for local residents. This may also be the case for other parts of Greater Manchester; in these cases locally accessible courses might be more appropriate. This was particularly the case with Tameside and was supported through the learner evaluation forms where both travel and costs were indicated as the main reasons for not considering attending university.
- Retention of learners seemed to be better where there was only one community partner, one delivery institution and where learners were already engaged in some kind of meaningful activity whether paid or unpaid.
- In a short space of time between recruitment and delivery and in the case of part time courses where learners have other commitments it was much harder if not impossible to meet any specific learning needs or requirements.
- Tameside College have expressed an interest in working with MMU to devise modules which they could deliver themselves in their community but which would be accredited by MMU.
- Although the community partner in Tameside did not pay fees and expenses, they indicated that if the training was directly work related they would consider paying the fees.

6. Challenges for First Steps

There were a number of factors which impacted on the start dates, delivery and outcomes of the projects. These included:

- Delays with potential HE/FE partners considering the approach and whether or not it they thought it would be viable.
- Tight timescales: considering end of term times, half term and Easter.
- Funding implications of potential community partners and delays incurred whilst waiting for information on whether they were going to be funded post April 08.
- Tight timescales resulted in being unable to hold a 'preliminary' information giving session to potential learners resulting in a higher drop out rate as details such as frequency of sessions etc could not be discussed and agreed. (MMU)
- Tight timescales resulted in working with an existing community partner, in one case, to deliver a programme which had been agreed prior to First Steps. (MU)

7. Outcomes

- Total of 18 learners have successfully completed the training element of the courses
- Two of the students have enrolled on further course to enhance their academic skills
- One is applying to the BA in Applied Community and Youth Work Studies programme at Manchester University.
- One learner has progressed onto a distance learning programme and enquired about the possibility of using the learning to apply for accreditation of prior learning (APL).
- A couple of learners have spoken to Tameside College with the view to further learning opportunities
- Another learner is considering joining the Post Graduate Diploma, Youth and Community Work degree at MMU
- One learner quoted that as a result he hopes to, "move onto a better paid job"
- Two relationships with community partners enhanced and developed
- Two community partners interested in developing further work in conjunction with the universities/college
- TC interested in delivering modules in the community accredited by MMU in the future
- TC and MMU interested in drawing up a progression agreement
- People having time to work together and reflect on their work objectively.

8. Recommendations.

- **The Model:** To use the simpler model of one institution working with one community partner

- **Access to HE:** all community based courses must have at least one session at the host institution including a tour of the campus.
- **Community partner/employer:** to have an established venue and base in their community and direct contact/relationship with community members
- **Timescales:** When planning projects involving community partners generous amounts of time needs to be factored in to include short term contracts and renewal dates, school holiday and religious/cultural festivals
- **Employers and Fees:** Tameside community partner did not have to pay the fees in this instance, however they indicated that they would be willing to do so if the training directly related to their work.
- **Commitment:** It appears that there is a high success rate where the community partner is also the employer of either paid workers or volunteers and where people are already engaged in meaningful activity.
- **Equal Opportunities:** to consider ways in which learner support needs (including accessing support) can be met when working outside standard hours or working with set budgets.
- **Diverse Experiences:** Both projects fed back that learners appreciated working with others who may have slightly different experiences to their own. This was achieved by working in groups, and enabled the sharing of good practice and learning from each other.
- **Recruitment:** can take various forms subject to the institutions constraints and resources however it appears that preliminary sessions informing potential learners greatly helps the process in relation to securing commitment and managing expectations alongside identifying any additional needs.
- **Mixed Ability:** courses can be delivered to mixed ability groups providing they have the skills to be able to understand the content/assessment requirements.
- **Commitment:** it is important to clarify for the learners the amount of time/commitment needed to meet the requirements of the training.
- **Module Catalogue:** learners indicated (MMU) that they didn't have information on how, where and even if 'short' courses were run outside of the university. Its is necessary to ensure that people in the community are able to access information on the module catalogue etc.



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