



One college's essential skills journey

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“The teaching approach at Ayr College has enabled me to build confidence and people skills. The approach has given me the ability to look at how others perceive me so I can become a more effective learner.”

Elizabeth Reid,
health care learner

One college's essential skills journey

For the past six years, Ayr College has been realising a strategy that was, by intention, far reaching in its implications for design, delivery and assessment across the entire curriculum. We captured this strategy within a policy document we simply named 'essential skills'; this policy document continues to drive and inspire innovation and change.

At that time, few of us had even heard of *A Curriculum for Excellence* never mind understand or appreciate the paradigm-changing nature of this new approach to learning and teaching and curriculum design. But when we did learn more we were, to say the least, somewhat relieved to see that the development of the four capacities and the common responsibility to also develop literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing was completely concordant with our own ideas and aspirations.

For us, essential skills are skills that punctuate and permeate effective learning and teaching in whose absence the learning experience is sterile and fatally compromised. We define these in our policy as "... generic or process skills useful and usable within a range of different contexts. They transcend specific application and are crucial for the development of life-long learning. Essential skills enable the integration and novel application of different aspects of learning, provide learners with the wherewithal to make best possible, and most flexible, use of learning and contribute to Scotland's wider economic development."

Our essential skills suite incorporates

- **Communication**
- **Numeracy**
- **ICT**
- **Problem solving**
- **Working with others**
- **Personal learning**
- **Employability**
- **Citizenship**
- **Health and wellbeing**

Lecturer's Perspective

Essential skills development is at the heart of the Ayr College lecturer role and is a fundamental aspect of lesson planning. Each and every delivery of learning and teaching details not only learning objectives but also the essential skills that will be facilitated and developed. Essential skills development takes place through approaches and methods, and effective learning and teaching is inevitably essential skills rich. How many different jobs will our learners have before the age of 38 and how do we prepare them for jobs that don't yet exist?

When this initiative was introduced, some staff questioned the validity, nature and focus of the new direction. Some felt that they had entered FE to teach care, hospitality, or business, and so on, and not to teach essential skills. Put simply, the initial reaction was "what has this to do with me?" That feeling has decreased as staff engaged with targeted professional

development coupled with the gradual implementation of supporting and reinforcing initiatives. However, the credibility of our new direction was also enhanced significantly by a deeper and wider understanding of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

Cameron Bell (curriculum leader, construction) explains: "Having to focus so heavily on essential skills development for every learning experience was difficult to begin with – especially during the pilot phase - and I had concerns that this would deflect from the vocational progress learners must achieve. Now it is second nature and I have been surprised and delighted at the results. I have a common language to discuss professional practice with colleagues across the college and my learners are now much more aware of their essential skills development and why this is critical to their future success."

"I have been surprised and delighted at the results."

Cameron Bell,
curriculum leader, construction



"I have seen a steady shift in the expectations of lecturing staff"

Sandra Ferguson,
lecturer, business



The early challenge around the question of what being a professional lecturer at Ayr College meant was entirely predictable and understandable and had to be acknowledged and strategically managed - carefully, sensitively but progressively. Our message was that, certainly, there has to be a degree of autonomy to any professional role – otherwise the role is not professional. An organisation cannot and should not so prescribe a role so as to make autonomy redundant.

On the other hand, a profession exists within the organisation that gives validity and authority to the role. If that's the case, then the organisation has a responsibility to clearly define its expectations, set boundaries and negotiate and agree accountability and responsibility. The professional lecturer is obliged to act professionally within these – and expectations, boundaries, etc, naturally and appropriately vary across institutions, sectors and professions.

Sandra Ferguson (lecturer, business) comments: "Over the last few years, I have seen a steady shift in the understanding and expectations of lecturing staff. We see ourselves as having a much wider, deeper and common professional role than before. In my role as a lecturer of business, I have contributed to various programmes throughout the college including fashion, hospitality and supportive education. I have participated in professional discussions and projects about, and in support of, enhancing the learning and teaching experience. Alongside the implementation and development of *A Curriculum for Excellence*, Ayr College has encouraged lecturers, like me, to see themselves not so much as a business lecturer but more as a holistic educator within a business context. That does take a bit of time to get your head around but it certainly gives more of the flavour of what is needed and expected from my role as a lecturer at Ayr College"

Key stages in change process

Core skills (CS)

Personal learning development (PLD)

Other related initiatives

2006-8

Consultation with staff - the start of culture change. Core skill development the responsibility of all. Sustainable and not bolt on.

Preparation for change to new core skills model for FT non-advanced programmes

Systematic review of quality systems and process and restructuring of programme roles. Recruitment and of learning development advisors and training in the humanistic approach.

Workshops informing and including key staff in change to new core skills model. Preparation for change to non-advanced programmes.

2008-9

Change in direction and what we do. Implementation of essential skills policy (core skills and PLD model).

Implementation of model; agreements with programme teams and curriculum leaders. Contextualisation of core skills.

Implementation of learning development advisor model for FT non-advanced programmes.

Programme self-evaluation process included essential skill development, involving input from core skills and learning development advisor teams.

2009-10

Structural changes. More ownership/awareness of essential skills development through learning and teaching.

Implementation of new core skills framework. Successful and highly supportive SQA external verification visit in response to new core skills model.

New structured PLD programmes for SCQF levels 4, 5 and 6.

Lesson planning process developed and implemented. New essential skills curriculum unit launched with support facilities created. Classroom observations by curriculum leaders, managers and directors.

2010/11

Consolidation, relationship building, measurement and evaluation. Essential skills development through support of learning and teaching staff.

Each team member trained to deliver and assess communication, numeracy and OCT to SCQF level 6. Core skills workshops to HN class tutors. Specific quality process developed and implemented.

Review of PLD programmes.

Relevance of essential skills development at open evening & inductions. Respect campaign. Support staff training. Impact of essential skills development by students. Cross college classroom observations by specialist team.

The Future

Enhance essential skills process and procedures. Redefine essential skills policy.

Further refinement and extension of supporting processes and procedures.

Extend to advanced FT and PT programmes.

Induction & training of new lecturing staff about what lecturing means at Ayr College.

A radical change to core skills development

We abandoned, quite some time ago, the discrete delivery of core skills – an experience some learners found occasionally disconnected, sometimes repetitive and typically uninspiring. Despite the constant internal and external reminders of how vital core skills were, that message was simply not translating well to the learner or programme experience. How many times do we interview learners who do not know they have a core skills profile let alone understand from where that profile emerged?

But there were exceptions to this general rule. Unsurprisingly, core skills staff who got through their work quickly were more popular with learners; those who also repurposed existing assessment materials from other units were even more popular and tended to have better PIs. In both instances, learners seemed to take more note, more understand and more value their experience and achievement of core skills. And the core skills staff, who repurposed work from other programme units, tended to be perceived as more effective team players by their programme colleagues.

We knew the importance and value of core skills but our learners often didn't. That was something we needed to address as part of our wider essential skills agenda.

Things have changed now. Our core skills team work with programme colleagues to change and modify delivery and assessment to harvest as much core skill assessment material as possible and within, as we term it, the 'natural harmonic of the programme'. The core skills team still work face to face with learners but only to fill in the gaps left or to raise learners' core skills attainment beyond that required by the programme SCQF level.

As programme and core skills teams become more experienced in and confident about this work, fewer and fewer gaps are left. Almost all programmes achieve certification of problem solving and working with others through automatic certification and our SQA external verification experiences of the entire core skills suite have been very encouraging and supportive. Our learners have a more acute understanding of core skills and their progress in these, and we reinforce the criticality of these skills (alongside the other essential skills) from pre-induction onwards.

We encourage all full time learners to engage with understand the importance of essential skills development long before programmes begin.



“Improving your essential skills makes you more intelligent!”

Emma Murray,
SCQF level 4 learner



“Essential skills have been integrated throughout my course and I've developed skills which I believe will help me do a job as well as qualifications, which will hopefully get me into a job.”

Russell Marshall

Holistic and coherent developments

But core skills are only part of our picture. The vast majority of our FTFE programmes include sessions facilitated by a relatively new group of staff - 'learning development advisors' (LDAs). LDAs are responsible not only for guidance and pastoral care but work closely with their programme colleagues to focus exclusively and specifically upon essential skills development.

"The greatest reward as a learning development advisor," Nobu Cook comments, "is to develop and enhance learners' essential skills and provide them with a unique learning experience that will last well beyond the programme

experience. This is, and needs to be, an experience that transcends from just merely knowing about ability to truly believing in oneself and taking ownership of learning now and in the future."

LDAs receive on-going training in a humanistic approach to learning and, through their relationships and activities, work hard to ensure that our learners not only know the value of essential skills and systematically progress in them but can benchmark and take more ownership of this learning. To underscore that, for example, twice each academic year learners are given the accumulated results of the programme team's essential



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Nobu Cook,
learning development advisor

"As essential skills are actively promoted by lecturers, LDAs and the core skills team, learners are routinely encouraged to develop and advance their citizenship and employability skills. This cooperative approach create a more holistic circle of learning."

Kerrin Goudie,
core skills lecturer

"Programme essential skills have made a difference. We evaluate programme essential skills sets annually and collaboratively with learners, lecturing and LDA staff. Programme essential skills sets, or more accurately their operational definitions, need to change so that they reflect the changing experiences, expectations and needs of our learners."

Graeme Donaldson,
curriculum manager carpentry, joinery,
painting and decorating

Prizing
Realness
Acceptance
Empathy
Trust



skills lesson planning and are invited to correlate this with their own experience and progress. The results often make for interesting discussions at programme team meetings – meetings that within our rules of engagement must always include learner representatives.

Programme teams discuss and agree what we term the 'programme essential skills set' each year. This is a (maximum) set of three essential skills (along with their operational definitions) that provide the team and learners with a kind of philosophy applied and developed consistently throughout the lifespan of the programme. 'Good time keeping' (an employability sub-skill), for example, may have been identified as something staff and learners thought appropriate to focus upon in a given year; another might be 'promoting punctuality and dependability' (another employability sub-skill). Different programmes may use the same programme essential skills set but operationally define these quite differently to reflect and meet the different needs of different groups. The same essential skills can be, and are, very flexibly and eloquently applied.

We further support and prioritise our essential skills policy through our observation of learning and teaching. Our cross-college team of observers look specifically for effective essential skills development and the implementation of programme essential skills, and have professional discussions in respect of these. Basically, practice that is rich in essential skills development is thought to be a

strength and, if largely absent, considered to be in need for further development.

We expect that our redesigned, extensive and more intensive lecturer probationary induction and training programme will, when implemented, further punctuate and reinforce what lecturing and, therefore, learning and teaching means at Ayr College.

We haven't forgotten about vocational and academic skills. But, to be honest and in common with the rest of the sector, we were already pretty good at that side of the business and few industries complain about or highlight such a deficit. What we did want to change, and have changed, was our focus upon the context within which vocational and academic skills were developed and give learners many more of the skills employers say are lacking in the workforce.

Face to face isn't by any manner of means the only way to develop essential skills; we are exploring other ways of concentrating the essential skills experience (such as the greater use of ICT) and look forward to seeing the results of various pilot projects in learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching services currently underway.



“This year at college has made me feel like I am coming alive. There used to be a grey cloud hanging over me, I felt I was just a mum and could not do anything else. Now I have found out who I really am.”

Lorraine McCurdie,
essential skills learner of the year, 2010

Responsibility of all

We have been asking a lot from our staff at Ayr College – and they in turn are asking a lot from Ayr College learners. Our recent college-wide 'Respect Campaign' has also given an added and important role to all staff where we each have an agreed and shared responsibility to ensure that the whole college environment is a place of learning and development. The result of what learners learn in classrooms and workshops is no longer restricted to classrooms and workshops.

As Carol Devine (receptionist) said: "I found the training very helpful in understanding and dealing with difficult situations at reception. We have never had any kind of system like this before when learners aren't being pleasant. It was very good and has helped so much to know what I can do and to feel I can play a bigger part."


Effective essential skills development takes place more effectively when the whole college joins in and takes an active part. Essential skills development, and the responsibility for this, needs to begin as soon as the college experience begins and continue throughout the entire journey. This vital experience cannot be restricted to places and times where the outcomes and expectations associated with more formal learning have traditionally been framed by the programme timetable.

There has been more than a just noticeable difference in our expectations and priorities. Our staff have engaged positively and productively to explore and extend

opportunities and possibilities. We have become a lot keener to identify, share and praise good practice and are unflinching in our organisational determination to continue to be in and around the nuts and bolts of the learning and teaching and college wide experience.

But, however it is framed and whoever is involved, learning and teaching is, after all, our most expensive resource and our most valuable tool. And it is effective learning and teaching that creates the conditions necessary to promote the specific and wider engagement, achievement, attainment and future success of learners.

As we all make efforts to do that even more effectively, we not only enhance individual choices, chances and prospects, we give employers an even wider set of skills they will be better able to recognise and utilise. When that happens we further stimulate sustainable social and economic growth and strengthen what for the foreseeable future is a national economy that most certainly needs to grow and develop.



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Carol Devine,
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