

Apprenticeship Workforce Development: Collaborative Project Functional Skills – Changing the Paradigm

PROJECT PARTNER CASE STUDIES

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Introduction

The three delivery partners took a different element of apprenticeship delivery of functional skills to develop their case studies

1. Kids Planet Day Nurseries – Employers
2. College, But Different – Tutors
3. Professional Apprenticeships – Learners

Seren Skills, as a non-delivery partner, conducted focus group with learners from across the providers.

4. Seren Skills – The Learner Voice

‘Employer Action Summary’ – Kid’s Planet Case Study

(It is worth noting at this point that Kids Planet is the employer of its apprentices as well as the training provider.)

We have found that achievement of maths in early years apprenticeships is the biggest obstacle to successful achievement of early years apprenticeships across levels 2 and 3. We are both the training provider and the employer.

As an employer provider of early years apprenticeships, we recognise that nursery leaders/managers buy in to this mandatory apprenticeship requirement was essential to improve outcomes (82 % of our apprentices enter without a formal maths qualification and 62% without English.)

We wanted to change a staff team culture around functional skills which involved a multifaceted approach that addressed attitudes, behaviours, and practices. We addressed this in the following ways:

1. Assessed the Current Culture.

Surveys and feedback: we conducted feedback sessions with managers/leaders to understand the current attitudes and perceptions towards functional skills. There was a clear lack of awareness of the need for and importance of the need for maths/English formal qualifications, compounded by the removal of maths as a mandatory component from EYFS

2. Set Clear Goals and Expectations.

Following this we set out to define functional skills: and why they are important for the organisation and our teams. We emphasised how apprentices required dedicated time to attend sessions, the importance of exam prep and the support they would need from the nursery setting and the importance of being given the right exam conditions/time to sit exams. We used the Skill Scan and asked managers to give examples of uses in the workplace, so they had a better understanding of the functional skills curriculum.

3. Identifying Champions

From the focus groups we identified maths champions within the team to lead by example and support their peers.

4. Training and Professional Development

We are acutely aware that our tutors are not maths experts thus with expert partners we provided regular training/upskilling sessions, workshops, and access to online resources to build and enhance functional skills. We purchased a starter pack for all tutors of resources to support FS delivery

We dedicated one of our curriculum leads to mentor and model behaviour, encouraging peer-to-peer learning and mentoring to foster a collaborative learning environment.

In line with our values, we have created a culture of open communication where team members feel comfortable discussing challenges and seeking help, ensuring

that the workplace both academy and nursery is a safe space for learning and making mistakes, which is crucial for growth.

As the team grew in confidence, we actively encouraged innovative thinking and problem-solving as a part of developing functional skills. Supporting cross-functional teams to work on projects that require diverse skill sets, promoting broader skill development.

5. Integrated Functional Skills into Daily Work

We incorporated functional skills into everyday tasks and projects in the nurseries creating opportunities for team members to apply new skills in real-world scenarios. We also included functional skills as part of performance evaluations and appraisals.

6. Recognise and Reward Progress

To highlight the importance and integral role FS play we ensure we acknowledge achievements: and celebrate individual and team achievements related to the development and application of functional skills. Our Facebook pages regularly highlight maths sessions the apprentice has devised/led on in the nursery for example

By implementing this culture across the whole team has required a thoughtful and persistent approach. We are creating an environment that values continuous learning and skill development we have certainly changed the team culture around functional skills.

‘Tutor Confidence’ - College, But Different Case Study.

College, But Different focussed on the tutor response during the project. These are not functional skills tutors but curriculum tutors.

Within this project, we discovered that the tutors were not always confident in their responses, so added to the Skill Scan the answers and how to deliver the answer. We delivered sessions with Tutors on how best to conduct this maths and English Skill Scan.

Nine learners undertook the Skill Scan over the course of the project however they haven't taken the functional skills test yet.

Feedback from tutors who used the skill scan was very positive.

“Using this skills scan has helped me as a tutor to prepare better and support the learner – I quickly discovered that using the examples relevant to their industry has really helped. I have been able to expand on the examples as we have worked on the questions.

Quickly saw confidence grow with a couple of my learners – almost a “light bulb” moment as they understood the context of the questions.”

“This has helped my own confidence with talking to learners as maths is not my favourite subject. By using these examples, I feel I can now support the learners more confidently.

We have even “switched” it around – coming up with different examples and working out the maths. Had some fun with this!”

“Made me think about how questions are worded and how confusing they can be for the learner, especially if they have a fear/reluctance with maths or English. A nice, gentler way to introduce the subject by providing relevance. Works well alongside the BKSB initial assessments – they give the scores on ability, and the skills scan puts the emotion into it which is sometimes easier to identify with. Means we can support better.”

The team ethos was built up during this project with the tutors being more comfortable talking to learners around functional skills by using relevant examples to the learners' settings. This has meant that embedding maths and English into sessions (outside of the Bootcamp arrangement) became more natural and tutors found it easier to find opportunities to bring maths and English into their sessions by referring to the Skill Scan.

Previously, assessors would just mention functional skills in reviews: "the functional skills tutor will be in touch". Now they talk more freely and encouragingly about what the sessions will be like and give examples of lessons.

This supports with dispelling some of the "fear factor" that most learners (and indeed some tutors) have of Maths especially. This has also allowed for a greater synergy between the curriculum tutors and the functional skills tutors as both are able to use the examples in the Skill Scan to make the topics more relevant to the learners.

‘Inspiring achievement’ – Professional Apprenticeship Case Study.

Professional Apprenticeships was slightly ahead of the other two delivery partners in that it was working on a Bootcamp-style of functional skills after praise was given by Ofsted during its inspection in 2023. Professional Apprenticeships focussed on the learner’s experience and attitude towards the Bootcamp model of delivery.

As a reminder the Bootcamp delivery consists of ten 2-hour long sessions for Maths and six 2-hour long sessions for English, supplemented by weekly homework. The intensity gives learners the chance to focus and build learning on a weekly basis. The sessions were run both during the day and during the evening. For the evening sessions learners were given time back by their employers during the day to compensate for this.

The Bootcamp model was not only overwhelming popular with learners. It gave them clarity and focus so they could concentrate on areas of weakness and give clear and definite deadlines to achievement. Some learner feedback is as follows.

“I really enjoyed the short, intensive style of my Functional Skills Maths course. It focused on exactly what I needed to learn without wasting time on things I already knew. My tutor was incredibly friendly and patient, which made the learning experience so much better!”

“The best part about my Maths course was how it was tailored to my needs. I have never been good at fractions and percentages. My tutor was very supportive throughout my sessions, especially when I was struggling. Her teaching style suited me very well. The remote format was super convenient because of commitments to my role and apprenticeship.”

“I appreciate how my English Functional Skills focus on the areas I need to develop. It was important I improve my grammar, because it is needed in my job role. I also learned different writing styles too. The remote learning format worked perfectly, and I was pleased I had sessions that were one-on-one.”

“The intensive nature of the maths was perfect for me. It was great to focus only on the areas I needed to work on. The tutor was very understanding and made the remote sessions engaging. Going through the practice tests together was incredibly helpful; I have now finally passed maths, I’m so pleased.”

“I love the focused approach of my Functional Skills course in Maths and English. The tutor is friendly and patient, which makes learning easy. Since my school days, I have struggled with some areas of English and Maths. Firstly, the remote format was a big plus, and concentrating on the areas that I need to develop with my tutor means I can build confidence in the areas that I lack. I am now working through practice tests with the tutor, which really boosts my confidence in sitting the exams.”

Learner Focus groups – Seren Skills Network Ltd Case Study

Three focus groups were carried out with learners during this project. The purpose was to determine what barriers they faced in the delivery of, learning and more importantly passing functional skills English and maths. During the focus the AWD resources were shared and discussed.

The vast majority of learners were over the age of 18 (due to the nature of the enrolment patterns of the partners) and there was a diverse mix of ethnicity and geographical spread.

Age

19-25 – 40%

26-35 – 32%

35-50 – 17%

50+ - 11%

Ethnicity

UK White – 65%

UK Nonwhite – 30%

Non UK – 5%

Geographical Region

Northwest – 25%

North East – 6%

Midlands – 13%

South West – 38%

South East – 18%

Other regions – 0%

All learners in the focus groups were attending functional skills classes in some way shape or form (albeit not always regularly).

When asked if they considered functional skills important English was considered by all to be an important skill, maths was considered much less important by a large minority. In all focus groups maths became the focal point due to having more barriers.

The reasons for this appeared multiple, if maybe not unsurprising. Typical views were that

- 'I've never been good at maths but I'm doing OK'
- 'I don't see how maths is relevant to what I do'
- 'I can get someone else to do that for me'
- 'I hate(d) maths'
- 'I can't remember anything I learnt at GCSE / O level and haven't needed it anyway'

The Skill Scan was seen by some as a way of breaking down a few of these barriers although the 'phobia' of the subject was not diminished for everyone. For many there was a 'fear of failure' in a subject they hadn't enjoyed or been successful in the past, although many appreciated the efforts from their functional skills tutors in helping them improve.

Many felt that their functional skills session had 'sat apart' from their apprentice and felt like a bolt on rather than an integral part of the programme. The Skill Scan was felt by many to help bridge that gap and if that led to a more joined up approach to delivery that would be well received. Linking the skills to actual potential work place activities was viewed positively.

The delivery in shorter, more concentrated 'bootcamp' styles sessions was also viewed positively, especially by those who had already gone through it. The idea that it could 'got out of the way' early was an attractive idea for many.

Those who had used the Skill Scan found them useful although the timescale of the project meant that very few had revisited it with their tutors to measure progress.

Other questions posed were around the assessment methods of the test itself which drew criticism, especially for those who have tried and failed the test (or been using test questions in lessons). These broadly fell into 4 areas:

1. Diversity – While there was no opposition to multiculturalism and diversity it was felt by a minority that the diverse use of names (some of which they didn't always realise were actually names) were a distraction which took their focus on the question to be answered. These views were expressed from all ethnic groups.
2. Following on from that, the contextualisation of questions was equally considered to be as much a hinderance as a help. When learners could relate to the contextualisation (usually involving money or interpreting graphs) they felt comfortable, but when the questions related to more abstract situations (often involving areas, volume and ratio) they became confused and found it difficult to relate the situations to the mathematics being tested. The relationship between the context and the actual mathematical operations was a source of annoyance and frustration.
3. This leads to the next point. Learners found that understanding the question (i.e. interpreting the English into mathematical calculations) was as much as a barrier (if not more so) than doing the actual calculations themselves. This was particularly the case for more complex questions that required two, three or more separate calculations to arrive at the answer.
4. Another bugbear was the need to do the test online and use IT software to input answers. Almost all learners had not had experience of doing this before the test and therefore struggled to convert their 'paper and pen' calculations effectively into the software provided for the test. There was pretty much unanimous agreement that a paper-based test for maths was preferable (in contrast English was considered to be fine to be done online).

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