Sharing Innovative Approaches to Delivering 16-19 Study Programmes

Strode College
“Study Programmes have been introduced strategically at Strode College, where we have balanced the best interests of students with careful planning of the resources necessary for them to succeed.”

James Staniforth, Principal

About the college

Strode College is a tertiary college located in Street in central Somerset, serving the educational and training needs of six small towns and the surrounding rural areas. In September 2013 the college enrolled 1,500 16-18 year olds on college-based programmes of study, as well as working with 200 16-18 apprentices. 16-18 year olds account for more than 80% of the work as measured by FTEs, although the college works with over 2,000 adult students each year and a small number of 14-16 year olds.

Study programmes

The college offers 16-18 Study Programmes from Entry Level to Level 3, but the college is predominantly the sixth form for central Somerset and therefore 85% of students are studying advanced level courses. Around 750 students are studying from the choice of 40 AS/A Levels, with around 550 studying 17 vocational courses, mostly BTEC Extended Diplomas. The college was graded as ‘Good with Outstanding Features’ in October 2008 by Ofsted. In May 2012 Ofsted carried out a Focused Monitoring Visit and concluded that in all areas the college had made ‘Significant Progress’ since the previous inspection in 2008. Student achievement at all levels is very high, with exceptional value-added on AS/A Level and BTEC Extended Diplomas as measured by ALPS and the DfE progress measure.

Balancing effectiveness and efficiency

The college’s SLN ratio was 1.267 in 2012-13, providing an average of 570 hours per student, or exactly the number of hours on which the full-time rate was based. In planning for Study Programmes, the senior curriculum team’s starting point was that there were enough hours of teaching already allocated to ensure all students were full-time, although an audit was required to ensure that all full-time programmes were above 540 hours. In some cases this meant moving a small number of hours within curriculum areas. For example, Level 3 Beauty Therapy was being delivered in 570 hours, but Level 2 Beauty Therapy was being delivered in 525 hours, so the hours were initially redistributed so that both courses were above 540 hours and full-time.
The audit did reveal anomalies. Efficiency savings had been sought as a response to the funding cut to entitlement applied from 2011-12. One approach had been to reduce the hours of delivery for qualifications where the number of students enrolled was small and uneconomic. The teaching and learning rationale for the reduction was that the small numbers of students would mean that the pace of delivery, practical skills development and consolidation would all take less time. The alternative would be to withdraw a planned course. One of the consequences of being a rural tertiary college is that if we do not offer particular elements of provision, other providers will not fill the gap (the school sixth forms within fifteen miles duplicate parts of our A Level provision only) and the type of students who wish to access certain types of provision are less likely to engage with the other colleges who are more than twenty miles away.

Level 2 Sport was one course where efficiency savings were made in 2011-12 and in 2012-13. There had been a decline in numbers over the previous three years as schools had increasingly offered BTEC Sport, so that instead of the college running one group of 16-20 students, numbers were more commonly 8-12. In 2012-13 the group consisted of 8 students. This course was delivered in 390 hours, or 11 hours a week, including tutorial. With a college day from 9.00-4.30 these students were studying on their main programme for less than two full days in terms of hours, and the actual delivery was spread over only three days. It was anticipated that the group of students studying the course would all be full-time because of other elements of their programme. Seven of the eight students were studying English and/or maths GCSE of Functional Skills, but only two were engaged in any enrichment activities. When this was investigated, it was because they were condensing their overall programme onto three days to fit in with part-time jobs, not unreasonably because we had placed their core programme on only three days.

The result was that no student was full-time and one student was actually in Band 3, with the other seven being in Band 2. The new Study Programme requirements meant that all students had to be full-time. The philosophical and educational decision was how Sport students in 2013-14 would become full-time. One approach would have been to find additional qualifications to increase the core programme but which the students had not chosen to study. Study Programmes had removed the focus on qualifications as building blocks of funding, however, which meant that a more creative solution could be found. A second approach would have been to increase the number of hours allocated to the delivery of the core programme – but unless the numbers of students increased significantly, this was demonstrably not required and would therefore be wasting students’ and staff time. It would also have been possible simply to carefully monitor all students and ensure that they were studying English and maths and participating in two enrichment activities, but this third approach was dependent on students needing to study both English and maths; if they did not need to study both then they would have to be compelled to engage in more enrichment.
Instead, the starting point was what the course needed to provide. Students who had taken the course in previous years had graduated without developing the range of social and interpersonal skills required to progress to advanced level or to be successful in the sports industry, without the breadth of experience of opportunities within the industry and without a love and enthusiasm for sport and personal development which educationally we would have wanted to promote. Therefore, the full-time course was developed on the basis of the qualification and the deficits we had identified over the previous two or three years. All students would continue to study the BTEC qualification units, but with no more hours. In addition, they would collectively participate in a rolling programme of multi-sports activities and a fitness session to introduce them to a wider range of activities than the curriculum required.

Sports leadership was integrated into the course – in term 1 the students would work in college on team challenges to develop the skills they would then use in terms 2 and 3 in a local primary school, where they would gain hands-on experience with the children and develop their skills and confidence further. Finally, two separate one week work experience placements have been timetabled, although the hours in these weeks are part of, rather than in addition to, the planned hours. As a consequence, students now have a core Study Programme of 504 hours, and as all require English and/or maths GCSE or Functional Skills, they have a meaningful full-time programme of 560-692 hours. This means they are timetabled on five days, and therefore all are also engaging in the college’s enrichment programme.

In determining that educational requirements would drive curriculum modelling for Study Programmes, decisions were taken which would potentially have funding implications. Increasing provision on L2 Sport meant that students would receive a better educational experience, but the course would require more resources. The SLN ratio from 2012-13 was a guide that the college could offer 570 hours to each student, but as all AS students study at least 4 AS Levels, 450 students have programmes of study of more than 600 hours. Conversely, a group of students needed to have their hours increased to 540+.

**Governor involvement**

The overall picture meant that it was critically important that the Board of Governors was fully informed about the implications of Study Programmes for curriculum planning and resourcing. The implementation of these new programmes encapsulated the twin responsibilities of Governors – ensuring the educational character of the college in line with the mission and ensuring the financial stability of the college. The Board of Governors discussed Study Programmes at the college Strategy Day in March 2013, as part of the
consideration of the new Three Year Strategic Development Plan. Senior curriculum staff briefed Governors on the programme’s requirements, challenges and proposed implementations, using case studies of individual students. The college Finance Director briefed them on the financial implications. The outcome of the strategy event was that Governors approved the new college Three Year Strategic Development Plan with a confidence in the educational programmes which underpinned 16-18 study and the financial position that would result.

The Governors had been able to make informed decisions and reject two extreme positions which may have been superficially attractive: large, financially unviable Study Programmes, for example with five AS Levels as the norm; or programmes of 540 hours maximum designed for financial value rather than with the best educational interests of students in mind, in which AS students may have studied 3 AS Levels plus non-qualification hours to reach the Band 1 threshold. They also agreed that the best way of implementing the requirements for English and maths was to boldly introduce them in full in September 2013 and accept that the new requirements may bring teething problems, in the knowledge that they would be solved for 2014-15 when they became a requirement. The Study Programmes reforms therefore have been implemented with the full support of the Board of Governors and form a key part of the college’s curriculum strategy as part of the Strategic Development Plan for 2013-16.