

Delivering the EDSQ at New City College

Serving around 26,000 students, New City College is one of the UK's largest college groups and has campuses across East London. With a core value of addressing the digital divide and skills gap, the college sought a partner to deliver the new Essential Digital Skills Qualification (EDSQ). This would give the college the opportunity to enhance the employability and life chances of adults who were disengaged from digital technologies.

New City College recognises that digital skills play an important role in education. For students to get the most out of study, a firm grounding in digital skills is necessary. In addition, digital skills improve employment prospects and help staff do a better job. The EDSQ delivers exactly the sort of training required to progress both with study and on to employment. Since the EDSQ is a fully funded legal entitlement, New City College has an opportunity to support a huge number of adults. Moreover, as remote learning and remote working are major topics in the national conversation, the college has an opportunity to capitalise on this.

Andy Greaves, the Deputy Curriculum Director, Creative and Digital at New City College comments: "We first looked at the EDSQ in terms of the opportunities that this presented, and one of the main opportunities here is the core value of the qualification and it's something we really believe in. It's about enhancing the employability and life chances of adults through essential digital skills training. It's really timely at the moment. There's a chance to address the digital divide and skills gap. So as an organisation we decided that this is something we wanted to do as widely as possible with our adults that need these skills to prepare them for employment and life."

Gateway Qualifications helped New City College develop a flexible way of delivering the EDSQ that considers the content and timings of the vocational courses that students are following and gives them valuable skills that they can apply over many aspects of their lives. Sharing New City College's belief in education for all, Gateway Qualifications was the first awarding organisation to pass Ofqual's technical evaluation in EDSQ, it was the obvious choice as a partner.

Greaves continues: "It's always nice to be an early adopter of a new funding entitlement and it's exciting to be at the forefront of that. I feel like Gateway has given us a voice in how it's shaped, and we've really enjoyed having that relationship."

Big Challenges

Before the rollout could begin, a series of challenges had to be addressed, and the first thing the college had to come to terms with was thinking big. There were a lot of adults who needed the skills and they wanted to help as many as possible, so planning on a grand scale was crucial.

Consistent learning experience

It was important that delivery of the training be consistent regardless of the department.

Greaves comments: "We needed to ensure a consistent experience across the college, but we needed to make sure that it was flexible, and the learning was contextualised for the area it was in. For example, if we're working with our health and social care adults, we contextualise the digital skills learning relevant to their needs in the workplace, or for their course assembly."

Access for all

Another consideration was that some students may not have the hardware necessary to learn and practise their new digital skills. In certain cases, digital hardware might be limited to a smartphone or tablet that is shared among family members.

Also, some learners simply wouldn't be ready for Entry 3 and Level 1 which are the two courses that have the full legal entitlement. Greaves explains: "In such cases it was about planning an appropriate progression route. For example, we've got some ESOL adults that will be doing entry one and entry two digital skills for life. So, for learners that aren't ready to access the Entry 3 and Level 1, we have a provision in place."

Staff buy-in

This was another big challenge. For delivery to be successful, it was important that staff get behind the initiative. On top of that, training and induction would need to be given to staff, and standardisation across the group would need to be ensured. Furthermore, as the college was planning for short delivery on some of its courses, it was necessary to consider the most efficient way to deploy staff.

Marketing and recruitment

Like many forward-thinking organisations, the college does a lot of its marketing digitally. According to Greaves, this was something of an obstacle: "Advertising digitally to those who are not digitally engaged is a real challenge. So, we're looking at how we can market to learners through some non-traditional means or, and some non-digital means, certainly."

Big Solutions

To overcome these challenges, New City College took a strategic whole-college approach.

In the first instance, the college created a management position with the responsibility of the rollout and delivery of the qualification across the organisation. In consultation with curriculum directors from every department, the college evaluated the current provision and looked at areas where it could embed and grow the qualification.

Greaves comments: "Some of the things that worked really well in those early discussion with the curriculum directors was showing them some of the sample assessment materials from Gateway. It meant they could see the actual skills that they would have to use as part of the assessment process. That can be something of a confidence booster and they can relate to how that might be useful in their areas. We worked with those curriculum directors, to see how we could embed it and there are places where you can have your quick wins, where it's easy to embed and there might be some longer-term strategies once you've piloted in some areas."

Flexible offering

Having considered the range of needs of learners, New City College is delivering the EDSQ as either a standalone or additional model.

Additionality is for learners who come to the college to study a vocational qualification and would also benefit from EDSQ as an add-on to their course of study. Depending on the vocational qualification being undertaken, the EDSQ may be delivered ahead of the vocational component or in parallel.

On the other hand, standalone courses are ideal for those learners who come to the college purely to learn digital skills.

Upskilling staff

The college concluded that there was no need to recruit IT professionals to deliver the EDSQ. Instead, existing staff underwent assessment to ascertain confidence levels and skills gaps. Armed with this information, the college was able to provide the training they needed. External resources from the Education Training Foundation and the Good Things Foundation were found to be helpful

in this respect. In addition, the college has built a community of EDSQ deliverers so that staff can get together to share resources and ideas for good practice.

To deal with the marketing challenge, the college liaised with a range of external partners including community organisations, local councils, and schools to help find adults that might be digitally disengaged.

Measuring success

The college has close to 100% retention with a pass rate in the 90s. But in the main, it measures success by progression and access. Many of its students would not have been able to access other courses because they lacked the digital skills and there are those who want to use the skills to progress on to employment, so there are different ways of measuring success.

To date, New City College has put around fifty learners through the assessment process. Here is what just a few of them had to say about their experience.

“As an adult, you lose confidence in things when you aren’t using them regularly. To be honest, I was scared of breaking the computer, but now I am more confident to try more things online and get back into work. I have really surprised myself.” – Jo

“The course has really helped with all the ‘twiddly’ bits of using a computer – the things you need to know but only when things go wrong.” – Peter

“Being a student here is amazing! The digital skills course has helped improved my IT knowledge and raised my future expectations. I like the flexibility of the course.” – Fabier

Each adult needs to undergo an initial assessment as it is an audit requirement for funding. Prospective learners can do this in different ways, but Gateway Qualifications has a particularly good offering on its website. It can be run online or downloaded and used offline.

Gerry McDonald, CEO & Principal, New City College: “Our colleagues at Gateway Qualifications have been fantastic to work with to get the EDSQ up and running. This has been about a partnership between New City College and Gateway Qualifications. Without that partnership, we wouldn’t have been able to take this forward as quickly as we’ve been able to.”