

Working Journeys

An evaluation of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust's Skills Passport Employability Programme

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An evaluation of the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust's Skills Passport Employability Programme

'If I can put a smile on someone's face I'll be putting something back into the community. Most people go into hospital at some stage in their life...that's why I want to work for the NHS, to put something back.'

SKILLS PASSPORT PARTICIPANT

The Skills Passport Employability Programme at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

‘It’s obviously a tremendous advantage to us to have local people delivering services to local people.’

CLIFF SMITH, HEAD, SHEFFIELD TEACHING HOSPITALS HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE ACADEMY

Introducing the Programme

This is an evaluation of the Skills Passport Employability Pilot at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

Following from, and building on, a successful Yorkshire Forward/ NHS funded Employability pilot, the Trust was in 2008 awarded £43,000 by the Sheffield Work and Skills Board (convened under Sheffield First’s Work and Skills Partnership) to develop a National Open College Network (NOCN) employability pilot at levels 1 and 2, which recruited its first participants in January 2009.¹

The Skills Passport as such is not an initiative confined to Sheffield, although it originated in that city through both the Work and Skills Board and the City Council’s City Strategy Pathfinder (a Department for Work and Pensions funded initiative to tackle worklessness in the UK’s most deprived communities).²

The Skills Passport model, in which the NOCN Qualifications for Progression is used to package together the generic employability units needed to prove to prospective employers that successful

candidates are ‘job ready,’ was picked up by the Work and Skills Boards of Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham, and the programme overall recast as the South Yorkshire Skills Passport.³

As with the Yorkshire Forward/NHS Regional Employability pilot, the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust Skills Passport initiative is specifically targeting entry level general staff working in areas such as administration, laundry, catering, and portering where there are established difficulties recruiting work ready staff. The Skills Passport pilot, though, is more than simply an effective and innovative recruitment tool. Its focus on the people of Sheffield, and initially specifically on people within the walk to work catchment of the Sheffield Northern General Hospital, intrinsically links the programme to the Trust’s Corporate Social Responsibility agenda.

The pilot, which was expected to involve a cohort of 20 students recruited from the Trust’s partner, Sheffield City College, might broadly be described as having two phases, which can be categorised by their NOCN levels.



Phase 1 (NOCN Level 1)

The target was 20 students recruited at LLN Entry Levels 1 literacy and 3 numeracy, with phase 1 being made up of a five week programme, with two and a half days a week. Participants would develop generic skills (i.e. interview skills, time management, team building) and other skills (such as work ethic and confidentiality) that, although themselves generic, to an extent reflected some of the specific needs of the Trust. One half day each week was to be dedicated to numeracy and literacy. The programme was expected to be delivered by tutors from both Sheffield Teaching Hospitals and the College. At the end of Phase 1, students were to be interviewed by prospective workplace managers in the areas of laundry, portering, hospitality and catering, cleaning and administration.

Phase 2 (NOCN Level 2)

Successful students were to go through a further five weeks of the pilot, with two days classroom based learning each week, and two days in a relevant work placement, a model that reflected the successful Yorkshire Forward/NHS funded Employability pilot. A Certificate of Progression will be awarded to those students who complete the programme, which will lead to a permanent employment offer after successful completion.

There have been five cohorts of students recruited to the Skills Passport since January 2009, with a total of 67 people who have passed through the programme, and 16 currently enrolled. Of the 67 past participants, 32 (47.8%) have secured jobs within the Trust in Portering, Domestic Services, Laundry, and Catering; some have also secured

administrative roles in Ophthalmology. Some students seeking administrative jobs have been referred through to the Trust's Admin Assessment Centre, where they are currently on the waiting list.

Evaluation method

As part of this evaluation, we have gathered evidence from three separate group interviews involving participants from the first and third cohorts of the Skills Passport programme. These were supplemented by one-to-one interviews and story-telling sessions with eight individual members across both cohorts. These interviews formed the basis for the case studies included in this report, and also for the accompanying DVD.

Interview subjects included 11 women and 5 men, with a representative range of ages and ethnicities. Interviews were recorded either through digital tape or video, and the transcripts of these conversations have been fed back to form the evidence base of the evaluation. Although data were coded against the indicators specified by the Sheffield Work and Skills Board, coding was left open to make sure that all themes were captured as they emerged.

An appreciative inquiry approach has been taken towards the evaluation, which hinges on the role of the evaluator as a critical friend (a role that relies on a constructive relationship between the evaluators and their subjects, who in this case are the participants of the Skills Passport). As a result, the evaluation becomes a journey in itself, and this report is from many points of view the story of that journey.

Outcomes of the Evaluation: What Makes the Skills Passport Work?

'I don't think that ten weeks of training to get a job in the NHS is bad, I think that is bloody good, to be honest with you, it's bloody good.'

SKILLS PASSPORT PARTICIPANT

Responding to the needs of local communities

It is clear that the Skills Passport pilot programme at the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust was a response to the problems of long-term unemployment and economic deprivation in Sheffield, and as such it has been driven by the Trust's Corporate Social Responsibility agenda as much as by the material advantages of the Passport programme as an effective recruitment mechanism.

The sense of social responsibility that runs through the Skills Passport pilot also manifests itself through the programme's participants, who frequently talked about advertising the initiative more widely, particularly with respect to hard-to-reach groups such as people with learning difficulties or the long-term unemployed.

It is a fact that there is a powerful commonality and sense of community that runs through the pilot as a whole, with many references to 'team spirit' and a close and appreciative relationship between participants and course tutors and administrators.

The Skills Passport pilot has also shown itself to be sufficiently flexible to respond to changing economic factors. Although the pilot never solely targeted the long-term unemployed, the challenges of working towards employability with people who have experienced the economic and health and wellbeing impacts of deprivation lie at its very heart. Even so, as Sheffield's economy suffered in line with other major conurbations through the recession of 2009, the Skills Passport pilot showed itself to be as relevant for people with good employment histories as it is for others with longer periods of economic inactivity.

Relationships with local communities

Community partnerships have clearly been central to much of the early development of the Skills Passport pilot, which was the subject of discussions between the Trust and Burngreave New Deal for Communities before the development of the pilot itself.

Much of Burngreave falls within the Northern General's walk to work catchment, and as an area with high levels of economic deprivation and in many cases two or even three generations of worklessness, it formed an ideal

target for the Skills Passport as part of the Teaching Hospital Foundation Trust's Corporate Social Responsibility agenda.

Although the demands of the Skills Passport in terms of recruits outstripped its supply from Burngreave, and the decision was taken to broaden the catchment to include most of northern Sheffield, the relationship between the programme and its local communities remains an important one.

CASE STUDY: Kay

Kay had recently been made redundant before starting on the Skills Passport, an experience she found traumatic. "I started off in telesales, and I worked my way up to being office supervisor. I did that for eight years, then I had a baby, went off on maternity leave, came back to the same role, luckily, and I just cut my hours to thirty hours.

"Then I got made redundant, which was a real blow. I never want to be in that position again."

Most of the available admin roles for Kay were full-time, which might have conflicted with her childcare responsibilities. However, her daughter's grandparents, who look after her during the day, persuaded Kay to go for a full-time post anyway. "I went for it, and got the job," she said, "so the only downfall for me is obviously I'm leaving my daughter more, which I didn't particularly want to do, but I'm going to stick the six months period out, initially, see how I go with it, and hopefully with a view that my supervisor will then drop my hours again."

Integrating jobs and training

There is considerable evidence running through this evaluation that one of the main attractions of the Skills Passport is the way it builds work experience and a real chance of a job into its curriculum. From some points of view, the main beneficiary from this is the Trust itself, which gains through reduced recruitment and training costs, and through increased retention rates. The most pronounced impact, however, is on the participants themselves, who expressed a feeling of 'belonging' and community, a by-product of the reality of the programme's offering.

Partnership working

Successful partnership working forms a cornerstone for the Skills Passport pilot: partnerships between the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and the City Council; partnership with the Work and Skills Board and City Strategy Pathfinder; and lastly and most crucially, partnership with Sheffield City College.

There was some suggestion that emerged from the evaluation that partnership working with Job Centre Plus might perhaps be stronger, with a consistent theme that JCP's employment advisors were not as familiar with the programme as they might have been.

Partnerships have been formalised at a senior level in all the organisations involved in making the Skills Passport pilot a success. In the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, that is at Chief Executive Officer level.

Impact on participants' perceptions of the NHS

The participants we spoke to were, of course, members of Sheffield's public as well as beneficiaries of an innovative employability pilot. From this perspective the way that their experiences on the pilot shaped their views of the NHS is interesting.

The biggest surprise for participants was the sheer size of the NHS in Sheffield. People expressed a variety of responses to this, including an element of initially being bewildered, and of amazement at the range of job types and activities that are available.

Although working for a caring organisation was a powerful attractant for many people, some had not really thought of the scheme as leading to this until they had actually started on it.

Equally, another theme that emerged clearly was people's surprise at the further development opportunities that working for the NHS will bring, with many participants having already formulated plans for additional learning and career progression. The stability of working for the NHS also appealed.



Participants are aware that entry level employment in the NHS is comparatively low-paid, something that for most is countered by the opportunities for further study and career progression. There will always be a chance of losing a small number of participants to more highly paid jobs outside the scheme, something particularly likely where individuals have been accustomed to higher levels of income in the recent past.

Publicity for the programme

Any need for wider levels of publicity for the Skills Passport pilot must be balanced against the currently high level of management of the quality of entrants onto the scheme. However, people are currently recruited primarily through their course tutors at Sheffield City College, with only a small number of applicants discovering the Skills Passport through other means, such as Job Centre Plus, the Shaw Trust or generally distributed leaflets.

The entry gateway for the Skills Passport

It is impossible to separate the success of the Skills Passport entirely from the high quality of its entrants, as one of its features has been the skilful way in which the programme's organisers have maintained a

consistency in the standards of entry qualification demanded. In part this is a natural outcome of the English and Maths requirements, which were discussed at length by the participants themselves. It also, however, reflects a personalised approach by the programme's administrator, who put considerable effort into following up enquiries on an individual basis, and into working with applicants to ensure their suitability as well as practical issues, such as intervention with Job Centre Plus.

One of the features of this high level of management of entry onto the pilot is the equally high level of commitment felt by participants to their place on the scheme, and to the opportunities it will bring them.

Developing social networks through the Skills Passport

Another feature of the Skill Passport is the powerful interaction between participants, and the sense of 'team' that has developed within the separate cohorts.

CASE STUDY: Edjna

For Edjna, who hadn't worked since arriving in the UK from her native Brazil, the concept of training to seek work was alien. "I didn't know what to do. I was completely lost, so just some people gave me some advice," she remembered, "like my GP, told me, actually, he lead me, you know, what I could do, for my future, first of all, to work in this country you need to have certificate."

Following her GP's advice, Edjna signed up as a full-time student at Castle College in Sheffield, and it was there that she was given a leaflet about the Skills Passport programme.

Like some of her co-participants, Edjna feels the Skills Passport has made her appreciate the skills she already possesses. "I didn't know I had these already, they'd show me," she said, "they just told me I had these skills, and I was surprised because I didn't know much people here, how come I have these skills, team work skills, communication, how to express myself?"

Edjna would like to work towards forensic science as a way of supporting herself and her son. "I want to build a career in the Trust, that's my main point, and hopefully I will be successful." She already has a place on a Science Access course, and wants to study forensic science at Sheffield Hallam University.

The training itself

Participants were consistently complimentary about both the quality and quantity of training they received through their two five-week blocks, complaining if anything that there might have been more of it, and perhaps that it might have explored some subject areas in greater depth.

The units that most impressed were those that focused clearly on the process of interview and application, perhaps reflecting the fact that the main attractant for most was the prospect of getting a job. Interview skills and CVs are mentioned repeatedly from this perspective.

People were impressed and even surprised by the range of skills that were needed for them to be prepared for employment at the Trust, citing equality and diversity and customer service as examples.

Participants did not want to see any substantial changes in the Skills Passport itself, other than perhaps some form of more general guidance in terms of the resources available to support them through the processes of completing the course and successfully taking an interview.

The high quality of the course's tutors came through as an important feature of the training, both from the perspective of the learning itself, and additionally as catalysts for the development of the team and group spirit that participants talked about so highly.

CASE STUDY: Jonathan

Jonathan worked in factories immediately after leaving school, before moving on to construction work, where he did a lot of labouring and semi-skilled work such as bricklaying and ground works for ten years. He found the working conditions unforgiving: "I've spent a full summer and winter working on the railways in York... the Railway Museum, well, I spent a full summer working on the railway there, and working in the summer it was way too hot, and in the winter it was terrible," he said.

One aspect of these working conditions was a tendency to suffer accidents. "I'd be carrying, lifting, fetching stuff, but I was starting to get a lot of injuries, broken fingers, my last one was a compound fracture of my little finger," he said, "I was off work for two months without pay because I was self-employed, I still have trouble with my finger, and I've had other broken bones in the past two or three years."

Part of the appeal of the Skills Passport was, perhaps predictably, the prospect of a more clement working environment. "It's a nice, clean environment, it's safe, you get holiday pay, plus there's lots of prospects in training, there's as much training as we want."

Employment through the Skills Passport

Participants did feel that more advance information about specific job opportunities would be helpful, especially details of any restrictions on part time or flexible working, something particularly important for people with childcare or other caring responsibilities. The Criminal Records Bureau checks necessary for some areas of working did not cause any serious concerns.

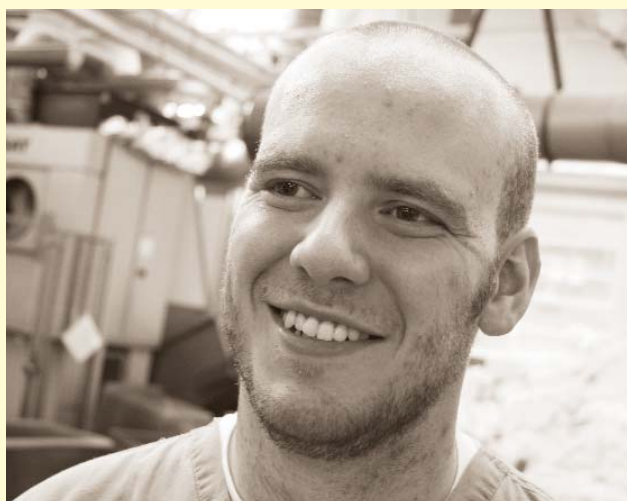
CASE STUDY: Rachel

Rachel worked in a range of dead-end jobs before discovering the Skills Passport, including hairdressing, factories, B&Q, petrol stations and nursing homes. As a single mother of four children, she wants a better life, both for her kids and for herself. "There's a lot of career moves in the NHS," she said, "Obviously you can really move up and do support work."

She found out about the Skills Passport scheme through a friend, who brought her a leaflet. Having worked in nursing homes in the past, Rachel was attracted to the caring aspect of the work, and realised that training is essential these days. "Obviously, now you've got to have training to do care work. When I was sixteen you didn't really have to, you could leave one job and get into another, and there weren't all those background checks."

Through the Skills Passport, Rachel has secured a job in Domestic. "It's just Domestic, cleaning and orderly, like serving patients cups of tea and things like that...it's not the best of jobs, but it's a start," she said.

In the longer term Rachel wants to study to be a forensic scientist, and the Skills Passport has made her appreciate the value of qualifications. "You can use your Certificate for other things as well, you know, obviously to say that we've done this course, because it does do a lot of things, like team building, communication, customer service skills."



'My children are only young, they're four and the other one's coming up to two, they don't have the understanding as to why I'm not at work. I've tried not to say too much in front of them, it's not for them to worry about.'

SKILLS PASSPORT PARTICIPANT

NOTES

- 1 Employability can be defined as the skills, competencies and attributes that allow people to find and keep paid work. Institute for Employment Studies (1998). *Employability: developing a framework for policy analysis*. DfES, London.
- 2 See, for instance, <http://www.sheffield.gov.uk/index.asp?pgid=155151&mtype=print>
- 3 The South Yorkshire Skills Passport has been evaluated by Dr Tony Gore of Sheffield Hallam University as a case study within the National Evaluation of City Strategies. This report has been released in unpublished draft form (October 2009).



'The Skills Passport Programme is part of the partnership relationship with Sheffield Teaching Hospitals...it's an innovative way of working with a major employer in the city to meet their needs directly. And it has been recognised on a national stage already as a way forward to improve the service to learners.'

JULIE BYRNE, DIRECTOR, SHEFFIELD CITY COLLEGE