



ReSeCo

RETAIL SECTOR COMPETENCIES



Working Paper 10

Retail sector competencies project: English experiences

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Introduction

This paper draws on the findings from empirical research conducted as part of a European project on Retail Sector Competencies (ReSeCo). The project was funded by the European Commission and it aimed to enhance the personal and social competencies of young people in the retail sector. The project involved partners from Germany (University of Cologne), the UK (University of Southampton), Italy (University of Bergamo) and Poland (The Pedagogical University of Cracow). A central feature of the project was the implementation of teaching materials that were originally devised for German retail vocational education. The teaching materials were focussed on the four competencies, namely, 'team competency', 'dealing with criticism', 'time management', and 'self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses'. The project required that these standardised teaching materials were taught in at least three institutions in each of the participating countries. This paper highlights the experiences of implementation and evaluation of these teaching materials in the UK. The paper specifically highlights the views and perceptions of the tutors who took part in the project.

Background

The project required the teaching materials to be delivered to students pursuing retail vocational education. A number of Further Education colleges were approached to seek their participation in the project. Four colleges took part in the implementation stage of the project, which required the colleges to deliver the teaching materials on their retail courses. These colleges were geographically dispersed and each college implemented the materials on different types of retail vocational courses. The details of the colleges that took part in the project and the courses on which these materials were taught are outlined as under:

College A was a London-based college that had a limited retail provision. The teaching materials were delivered to students pursuing a BTEC Retail Level 1 award-combined with ESOL (English Language course). The duration of the course was four months and after the successful completion of the course, students could earn a Retail award as well as an OCR (Oxford Cambridge and RSA) qualification in English- Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. As part of the course, retail and English classes were delivered in parallel so that retail could be taught for two days and English for

one day every week. The students on the course had high English language needs and required notable levels of support with their English.

The course generally attracted migrants from overseas and the students were described to be mostly adults between the age group 25 to 45. The average class size was of 10 students. The course was designed as a part time course because a majority of the students were described to be on income related government support and benefits, which implied that the students could not study for more than 15 hours every week.

College B was located in the English midlands and it was an established provider of retail education in the region. The college was part of the National Skills Academy in Retail and also provided apprenticeships in retail, together with a range of other full-time and part-time short term and longer term courses. The College incorporated the teaching materials on two different courses. One of these was a course titled as a Sector Based Work Academy programme, which involved the local City Council. The local City Council had approached the college because the council wanted to recruit 20 apprentices. The course was highlighted to be similar to pre-apprenticeship programmes.

As part of this Sector Based Work Academy programme, students were preparing for a Work Skills Qualification which was focussed on preparing students (who were noted to be on Job Seekers Allowance) to get 'ready for work' and developing their employability skills. The successful completion of the course secured a guaranteed interview for the student. The duration of the programme was five weeks on a full-time basis. The class size was 18 students and students were described to be young learners between the age group of 18-24.

College B also implemented the teaching material as part of a pre-employment course in Retail. This BTEC Level 1 course was geared towards providing a basic understanding of retail knowledge to the students. The students on the course were unemployed people and they all wanted to secure employment in retail. It was a 3 week intensive course and the students were either referred by the job centre or they joined themselves to gain some basic understanding of retail and to gather some confidence to apply for jobs. The class size was 5 students and the age range was 19-45. The course was part-time and required an average commitment of 16 hours per week from the students.

College C was situated in Northern England and it was also a well-known provider of retail education in the local area. The college offered a number of apprenticeships in retail at Level 2/3 through the Skills Shop. The teaching materials were taught to students pursuing a pre-employment course

combined with Level 2 of the Technical Certificate in retail. The students were noted to be on benefits and they were directed from the Job Centre to study the course.

The duration of the course was six weeks, of which the first 3 weeks was a pre-employment course, and the latter 3 weeks were dedicated to the completion of the technical certificate in retail, a level 2 qualification offered by City and Guilds. The seventh week of work placement and studying planning for progression unit enabled the student to secure an Award in Employability and Personal Development from City and Guilds. The students were between 17 and 25 years of age

College D was based in Southern England and it was also a recognised provider of retail vocational education. The college offered classroom based courses as well as apprenticeships in retail. The teaching materials were piloted with two groups in the college, namely, Level 2 and Level 3 Fashion Retail students. They were both full time courses, and level 2 students were between 16 and 19 years of age, whereas level 3 students were in the 17-22 age group.

A majority of Level 3 students in fashion retail were employed in the retail sector. Most of them had managed to secure jobs after they had started their course. There were 9 students in the Level 2 group and 10 students in the Level 3 group. The presence of the college in an attractive shopping centre was inspirational for students to secure jobs whilst they were studying.

Significance of personal and social competencies in retail

All the tutors who took part in the study rated the personal and social competencies to be vital for employment in the retail sector. They argued that such competencies are extremely valuable in retail because the roles require people to work collaboratively in a team and to liaise with customers. Owing to the nature of the roles in retail which require high levels of interaction with the customers, all tutors perceived that being presentable and effective communication was a vital component of preparing students for retail work.

Retail is about customer service. You can't do customer service without having communication skills....The background is customer service, everything else revolves around being able to offer the right service. So, the social skills, the interpersonal skills, being able to work with each other, being able to communicate with colleagues and customers are essential. (Tutor 2, College B)

The tutor at College A highlighted that the communication skills were even more significant for her learners because they did not have the necessary language skills for working in the retail sector. She

further highlighted that cultures and practices followed in the home countries of the migrants strongly influenced their personal and social skills. She emphasised this strongly in relation to time management competency.

If we did something on being late as part of time management.....depending on where they are coming from, it's not perceived as a bad thing. I mean you have turned up and you are here, why are you having a heart attack because I am two minutes late. What's your issue, why are you so stressed out?....so the way they would be viewed in the UK is very different to where you are coming from. (Tutor 1, College A)

She further highlighted that the most important personal and social competence for retail was highlighted to be the right 'attitude to work'. Young people from Britain were particularly criticised by the tutor for not having the right attitude to work. For instance, the tutor commented that young people only want to do things that are strictly part of their jobs but they are not keen to fulfil other responsibilities which may also be essential to allow the workplace to be more efficient (such as, cleaning the floor, if needed). On the other hand, she also perceived that, in general, migrants have a better attitude to work because they value their jobs more than the value placed on their jobs by young people in Britain.

A lack of the 'right attitude to work' was also emphasised by a tutor at College B. He argued that employers in retail often express dissatisfaction because young people are not viewed to be 'ready for work', they struggle to get to work on time and they do not value their work. This tutor from the college in the Midlands also highlighted the necessity for being multi-skilled, as retail roles are not about customer services alone, but they also require fulfilling remedial tasks, such as, maintaining cleanliness in the shop.

Tutor perceptions of retail education in England

Whilst all the interviewees felt that personal and social competencies are crucial for work in the retail sector, they also felt that these skills are not adequately embedded in the English curriculum. The tutors felt that embedding social skills in the curriculum is overlooked both at the school level as well as in vocational education. A tutor at College B pointed out that although the schools attempt to develop these skills, there are other external influences, such as, unemployment, poverty that can negate the work done by the schools. In relation to the work done at the colleges, he emphasised that despite recognising the significance of embedding social and personal skills, colleges have other priorities that are deemed to be more important.

The difficulties can be sometimes that the focus is on achieving other targets and other objectives and I think that sometimes gets in the way of delivering what you want to deliver to the learners. There is assessment, there is targets, there is percentages, there is results.....the skills that you are trying to get through to the learners are kind of forgotten along the way sometimes. (Tutor 3, College B)

Another respondent at College D perceived that vocational education was better than school education in terms of embedding some of these social and personal skills because these skills are essential for employment. He argued that owing to the work related nature of the education, students have to modify their behaviour in order to be able to secure and maintain their jobs.

As noted earlier, a majority of courses at the participating colleges were short courses focussed on preparing the students for employment in the retail sector. Another tutor at College B, who taught students on a preparatory course for employment, perceived that a possible lack of social and work skills amongst young people, combined with the competitiveness in obtaining retail jobs and the poor image of the retail industry makes it very challenging for young people to find work in retail. He highlighted that the job market in retail suffers from a bad reputation owing to the scarcity of jobs in retail, combined with the low pay which he argued has characterised retail work for some time in the UK.

These perceptions were mirrored in the comments provided by the tutor at the London based college. She commented that the vocational education in England continues to be perceived as 'second class'. More specifically, she commented that retail was historically 'the last remaining alternative' for those who had poor educational attainment.

In the old days, if you did really badly at school and you got nothing, you could always work in Woolworths or you could work in your local retail store. So, it was a place where losers went to or people who couldn't make it. (Tutor 1, College A)

This was also reinforced by the views of the tutor at the College D (in the Northern England) who argued that jobs in retail suffer from a perception that they are 'not really seen as jobs'.

One might have done it because the kids are now going to school, mum's got a shop job, aah, it's not really a job....a number of young people start up as a Saturday job, oh it's some income support whilst at university. They don't view it as a career, it's always been a stop gap. (Tutor 4, College C)

This tutor further argued that a majority of young people do not really know what retail is about. He pointed out from his experience of open events in schools that the students had a better

understanding of other areas, such as, catering and travel and tourism, however, retail meant an 'ordinary shop window or stacking cans' and there was no understanding of concepts such as visual merchandising, for instance.

This perception of a lack of understanding of career choices in retail amongst students was shared by a tutor at the college in the Midlands (Tutor 2, College B). He too highlighted that a number of students choose to study retail without an understanding of their career choices, they are unable to make proper decisions about the sector they wish to work in and they drift into retail without necessarily wanting to develop a career in retail.

The lack of certainty or an aspiration to build a career in retail was common to students on a majority of the courses that were included in the project. Whilst the tutor at college A enforced that her students were really not keen to develop a career in retail. They were using the four month course as a 'stop gap' qualification to either obtain an English qualification whilst they learn the language or simply as a stepping stone for other qualifications. She felt that these migrants were sometimes high achievers from their home countries and they wanted to work in retail till they realised their 'real career goals'.

Likewise, students on pre-employment courses at the College D and those on the Sector Based Work Academy course at College B were noted to have low aspirations and they were sometimes pursuing these courses because they had to meet the criteria for their continuing benefits. The tutor at College D argued that some of his students had probably completed similar pre-employment courses in the past.

All the respondents shared that there is an overall lack of courses available in retail. They felt that retail education was developed relatively recently in England and it is still in its developmental stages. Three of the four colleges that took part in the study were reported to be keen to expand their retail provision and retail was a developing area within these institutions. One of the tutors further added that not only are there fewer courses, the courses in retail do not accurately reflect the changing needs of the retail sector.

The NVQs, they get revamped every once in a while, it's still not keeping pace with retail. I mean retail has dramatically changed...it's more online, but there is nothing for online retail in the NVQ units, there is nothing in the classroom....you know the high street, it hasn't got the same future as it had in the past. (Tutor 2, College B)

In addition to the poor perceptions and lack of understanding of courses and careers in retail, this situation was believed to be exacerbated because of the employer perceptions of retail education.

All the respondents perceived that retail is not a subject that can be taught purely in a classroom, and that the workplace component was essential for retail. Tutors argued that both the workplace and classroom learning were important for retail education.

However, the classroom learning was believed to be less welcomed by the employers. One of the tutors (Tutor 3, College B) who had considerable experience of having worked in the retail sector felt that most employers believe that retail cannot be taught in a classroom. He argued that traditionally after securing a job in retail, employees used to stay in retail for a long time, and people developed on the jobs rather than through receiving education externally. He argued that such tradition remains alive in that the businesses develop their own training, and there is not much of formal education in retail externally.

These views were shared by the tutor from College C. He too perceived that the employers in retail do not value qualifications and they find assessors in the workplace as an 'unnecessary inconvenience'. However, he further argued that some employers placed some value in qualifications, and it varied from one company to the other.

It all depends on the key persons in the companies, if somebody is into training and development, it will happen, if somebody is not, it won't happen. The same with the store level, if the manager is into progressing their staff and making them trainable, giving them qualifications, it will happen, if they don't, it will never happen. (Tutor 4, College C)

Some positive opinions were also held by the tutors in relation to retail education in England. Whilst the tutor at College A agreed that the employers do not particularly value qualifications in retail, she was optimistic that retail qualifications will become more acceptable to the employers over a period of time. She argued that when some of the vocational qualifications, such as, BTEC were first introduced, they were not accepted by the employers and the broader society, however with the passage of time, they have become more recognised and acceptable.

It is notable that perceptions of the tutor at College D were slightly different from the other respondents. It must also be highlighted that unlike the courses offered at other colleges, this tutor delivered the teaching materials to full time Level 2 and Level 3 Fashion Retail students. She argued that her students were keen to develop careers in retail and some were even considering to study further, and specialise in areas, such as, visual merchandising and buying specialisms. A majority of these students were already in employment and the tutor confirmed that some of these students were pursuing the course because they had been advised by their employers to do so.

After completing Level 3, a lot of them are going to the university to do a specific topic like buying or visual merchandising within the retail sector. Some are actually told to come here by their employers and they say if you complete this course, there is a VM position for you or there is another position. (Tutor 5, College D)

Tutor perceptions about the teaching materials

The teaching materials received mixed reviews from the tutors. As noted earlier, there were four different teaching units on the four competencies- team competency, dealing with criticism, time management, and self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Some of the broader perceptions of the tutors about the content and learning methods used in these materials are highlighted in this section.

Some tutors commented that the materials were a useful resource and they were practically relevant for their learners. For instance, the tutor at College A taught three learning materials (except for team competency) and she found the materials very useful.

This stuff (from time management unit) was funny, and it was real and it was practical because they could take the lessons away and use it in their life. (Tutor 1, College A)

Another tutor from College C (who taught all the four materials) perceived that the self-evaluation materials were very useful and relevant for his learners. He confirmed that he would incorporate these materials in teaching his future groups.

It turned out that (the material) was very good. Some of the stuff we would produce it again and I would build this into our programmes. The self-evaluation, I would use it again, and again, and again. (Tutor 4, College C)

Likewise, another tutor from College D (who only taught team competency) felt that the material were very relevant. She felt that the students very much benefited from the material. It enabled them to trust their instincts and to communicate effectively when working in a team. The tutor felt that the material 'did seem childish' but it turned out to be very relevant for the learners.

Honestly, I thought it was going to be, I don't want to use the word babies, but I thought it was going to be slightly too young for both levels, if I am honest. But watching it, watching them do it, and develop, it was good for both groups. It really was, it made them think, it made them communicate. (Tutor 5, College D)

Whilst this tutor at College D felt that the materials at first did not seem to be relevant for the age group of the learners but it turned out to be really appropriate, the experiences at some of the other groups and materials were not the same. Tutors at College B and C felt that some of the materials were at a lower level and were not suitable for their learners. The tutor at College C felt that the exercises in 'Time Management' materials and 'Team Competency' materials were not taken seriously by his students, who believed that the exercises were childish and 'school-like'. Tutor 2 at College B also experienced similar issues which he attributed to the materials being at a lower level for his students.

The teaching materials were also criticised for lacking novelty. Some tutors felt that the materials were 'really not new' and the content was not very interesting. Tutor 2 at College B emphasised this very strongly.

The photo stories were not really anything that we couldn't devise ourselves, we can make a package, we can make a conversation up or tailor a conversation. I have definitely seen the scenarios before....a lot of material is the same all the time. (Tutor 2, College B)

In addition to the lack of novelty in the materials, this tutors also criticised the materials for the use of inappropriate learning methods, such as, role plays. The tutor did not prefer the role plays, he felt that the video clips or streams were better to engage students. The tutor perceived that role plays are not suitable because his students were too self-conscious to take part in a role play, whereas he believed that the videos clips allow the sessions to be more interactive without making the students nervous about taking part in the role plays. These perceptions were shared by other tutors, such as, Tutor 4 from College C who experienced significant classroom management issues in incorporating role plays into his teaching. Tutors at College A, B and C preferred the use of video clips rather than role plays for their groups.

In addition to the inappropriateness of some of the learning tools such as role plays, the materials were also criticised for the use of theories that were perceived to be irrelevant for learning. The tutors at College B and C felt that theories used in some of the materials (dealing with criticism) were not appropriate because they did not 'really contribute' towards student learning.

I did get the theories but I just didn't know how the learners would see it, I didn't feel they will get anything out of it.....I didn't get the relevance of it to the students. If it was part of the retail make-up, part of their syllabus, then yes it will be there and we would already be delivering it. (Tutor 2, College B)

It may be noted that while the theories were not welcomed by the tutor, however, he also acknowledged that he would have taught the theoretical content if it related to the course curriculum. Other tutors also highlighted the level of selectivity they had exercised whilst teaching these materials. The tutors described some of the challenges in incorporating these teaching materials into their teaching. These are outlined in the following section.

Practical issues in teaching new materials

The tutors suggested that they had attempted to use the teaching materials where they fitted into their existing curriculum and teaching. The tutor at College D attempted to blend the 'self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses' into a unit titled 'planning for progression' which he was required to teach as part of the curriculum. He felt that the students benefited from the material as well as it provided him a useful resource to teach this unit which was already a part of the course that he was teaching.

Likewise, tutor 2 at College B taught a very intensive course and he had limited classroom contact with his students. Therefore, he selected 'team competency' materials that was already a topic to be covered in his course.

It (team competency) fits in very well with something I already did....because I have only got 9 days to get through the course and it is very intensive....we already talk about a number of things that you have in your schedule there. So, it fitted quite well. (Tutor 3, College B)

Most tutors made references to the challenges in incorporating new teaching materials that did not relate to their existing curriculum. The tutors argued that they work towards a prescribed curriculum, which meant that the learning outcomes or criteria are prescribed by the awarding bodies. While the tutors asserted that they develop their own teaching materials, it is challenging to introduce other material which does not relate to the assessment. This creates time constraints for the tutors as there is little or no time to use teaching materials that do not relate to the prescribed curriculum.

It's just all too prescribed. We literally know what we are delivering and it has to follow a timetable that we have already got. So, to put anything afterwards can be very challenging. (Tutor 2, College B)

In addition to fitting the materials into their existing teaching, some tutors used sessions that were assigned for additional learning. For instance, Tutor 5 at College D used the sessions assigned for PLTS to teach team competency material, she felt it was easier to incorporate new materials during

the personal development sessions and she felt that team competency was a relevant subject to teach as part of the personal skills development. Whereas Tutor 1 at College A used some of the sessions allocated for English language to incorporate the teaching materials. She managed to implement the materials in the sessions allocated for ESOL, which she felt was still relevant for the students because they were enhancing their understanding of retail alongside improving their English.

Despite these challenges in incorporating new teaching materials, most tutors suggested that retail was a developing area for their institutions and the senior management had a pro-active approach towards taking part in initiatives that provided additional resources for teaching. The tutor from College A confirmed that she would not have been able to take part in the project but she considered it because the management at the college had approached her to consider this request.

My boss was very keen to take part and they were very keen to support you in the research, it was very important for our college to take part in something like this and that message came down very strongly. They are very committed, very pro-active about supporting new learning and new initiatives, especially as this is an area where they are trying to grow, to grow the subject of retail. (Tutor 1, College A)

The management at College B was also rated to be very pro-active in incorporating newer teaching materials and resources, however, the college was challenged because of exceptional staffing issues that it was facing during that time period. The college had initially confirmed interest and promised that it would be very keen to take part in the project, however, it faced unexpected staff shortages and it was unable to incorporate all the teaching materials.

The tutor at College D suggested that she could not have taken part in the project if her line manager had not consented to the participation in the project. She pointed out that the manager's involvement and consent was very important for taking part in such projects. She commented that if the project involvement was not initiated by her manager, she would probably not have been able to take part owing to the time constraints and teaching materials that did not relate to the assessments or to the curriculum.

Conclusion

The implementation of the teaching materials was not straightforward from an English perspective. Although the tutors who teach on vocational courses in retail believe that it is important to embed some of the personal and social competencies in the curriculum, they are challenged because of the time constraints that are created because of the assessment led feature of the curriculum. It also

emerges that tutors believe that retail is an emerging area and 'newer resources' can be welcomed by the college managers. However, the teaching materials from the ReSeCo project received mixed reviews in England. Whilst some tutors found certain units to be useful, the materials were also criticised for lacking novelty and for using less appropriate content and learning methods for the students.



ReSeCo

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