



Funding Advice – Hallmarks

Objectives

The Hallmarks research project was set up to share best practice amongst learning providers in the east of England.

The initiative was originally conceived in 2001 by the local Learning Partnerships in the area. (Learning Partnerships aim to support collaboration work between different learning providers – such as schools, further education colleges, work-based learning and adult and community learning providers.)

More than 100 learning projects have been researched as part of the Hallmarks' initiative. Information, including summary evaluations on each project, is available for people to download from the project website – www.hallmarks.org.uk.

Although initially set up with the help of European funding, the project has been transferred to the non-profit-making Keystone Trust. The Trust is working to make the Hallmarks project self-financing – charging for formal evaluation work – but making the published research free for people to access through the website.

Where

The project is currently run from the Keystone Development Trust's office in Thetford close to Bury St. Edmunds.

How was it Achieved?

In the East of England, nine Local Learning Partnerships have been working together to look at the impact and success of local lifelong learning projects. They came up with the Hallmarks initiative to help them do this and share best practice through a database driven website.

The project was formally launched in July 2003.

The project's first newsletter, published in September 2003, explained: "Too many learning interventions are delivered without consideration of the evaluations of forerunner projects. Hallmarks aims to fill this 'knowledge gap' by researching and evaluating learning based projects.

"Although funding conditions require evaluation of Learning Partnership and European Union projects, these findings have not been widely disseminated. Hallmarks aims to rectify this by publishing evaluations online. Hallmarks overall intention is to establish, for different target areas, communities, groups, etc., the 'hallmarks' that indicate success as well as the factors that lead to potential difficulties."

The Hallmarks website went live later that year.

Originally the project was supported by four staff. However, all four have now left the initiative.

Initial European funding ran out at the end of December 2004. A local non-profit-making group, the Keystone Development Trust, then took over the hosting of the website. After examining the future potential of Hallmarks, Keystone has now taken over and re-launched the service as a not-for-profit business, and will be actively promoting it in the region once the initial redevelopment and branding has been completed.

Who Was Involved?

The project was originally set up by the nine Learning Partnerships in the East of England. It was supported by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), and funded by the European Social Fund.

Originally, Hallmarks was delivered by four staff – Mike Platten, the project manager; Hannah Archer, the evaluation research officer; Phillipa Cross, the Data Research Officer; and Iona Watterson, the Website Research Officer.

These staff have now left the project and the business is now managed by Duncan Hart, who joined the Keystone Development Trust in the summer of 2005. A key part of the new business is its partnership with The Research Centre at City College Norwich, who provide research and evaluation expertise.

What did it achieve?

The project aimed to set up a website and share best practice – and it has achieved this. It provides a searchable database to the local learning community ... and a wider global audience through the internet.

Access to the site is free of charge. Costs are now met through the project winning paid-for evaluation work, which is then, in turn, published online.

“The project in its original form was successful,” says Duncan Hart of the Trust. A formal evaluation found that Hallmarks had met or exceeded all its targets.

Keystone is now re-developing the website to reflect the move from project to business and provide a more efficient and generic online report system. This may involve adding in features to highlight the most popular reports on the home page.

Comments from people involved

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Learning Points

Those involved in the Hallmarks project cite a number of learning points:

- think about sustainability. If you start a project, are there ways to continue funding the project when initial grants come to an end?
- have a strategy in place to move forward – possibly turning your project into a self-financing business. Keystone did this for Hallmarks, but it meant staff moving on and the project stalling, albeit temporarily. “Have a business plan in place and aim for a higher degree of staff retention from the outset,” says Duncan.
- if you’re planning to use a website, set it up to support future growth. Hallmarks is now looking to re-establish its website to provide a better user experience. “We might add a feature to show which research report is flavour of the month,” says Duncan.
- think about evaluation. “Funders want to know they’re getting value for money,” says Duncan Hart. “Show them what you’ve achieved through proper evaluation.”

Evaluation

An evaluation report was published in 2005. It found Hallmarks had achieved or exceeded all its output targets:

- it was intended to achieve a website and database with links to at least nine other websites – it actually linked to 10.
- it provided at least 45 case studies of good practice.
- it provided six reports to the steering group and ran eight best practice seminars (the target in both cases was five).
- plus it met its target of talking to 225 'participants', including interviewees and focus group participants.

The evaluation document noted: “The project has resulted in the development of new tools and techniques for professionals to use in evaluating, disseminating and learning from project activity in the East of England.”

Further Information

Visit the Hallmarks website at www.hallmarks.org.uk to read about some of the learning projects in the East of England. Case studies, reports and other information can be downloaded free of charge and there’s no registration needed to use the site.

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