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# WORKING TOGETHER

The first apprentices from a custom-built National Express programme at South & City College Birmingham have now qualified, as engineering training manager Lee Sandford and Anshu Hayden, assistant director for employer engagement and placements, explain

**S**andford starts the story from National Express’s point of view. “Back in 2017, we realised that we weren’t getting the quality of apprentice that we wanted with our previous provider. So we started to look at the best ways of doing this ourselves, and how we could improve the throughput and the quality of apprentices that we put in and get out in the end.”

Having been longstanding partners with South & City College – as Sandford’s patch in the company is the West Midlands regional bus operation – it approached the college. Then the two started to make a plan for a new apprentice academy.

After two years of hard work, the team built a replica workshop equipped with a purpose-built pit to MOT specification, and an adjacent large area of flat hardstanding with column lifts that houses two vehicles, training rigs and equipment, as well as two classrooms in the upstairs mezzanine.

The first cohort of 10 apprentices began studying at the site, in the Bordesley Green campus, in September 2019, and since then new groups have joined at about six-monthly intervals. Following an intake of 12 apprentices in September, the programme, with 50 learners, is still

expanding, which the partners hope will reach 60.

Sandford says that from the beginning the team was planning to create something new. He explains: “One of the things we did was try to learn from the mistakes of others. For example, teaching hours. When the model moved from NVQ frameworks to apprentice standards, where most [providers] fell down was that they continued to teach the standard the same way as the NVQ, but the new standard needs a completely different viewpoint. We teach our students 38 hours per week, which is nigh on double what every other provider does, and that has played out once we got to the gateway exams, where we were having 100% first-time pass rates, which is pretty much unheard of.”

Another defining characteristic of the programme has been the close collaboration with the college, from as early in the process as initial student selection. Says Sandford: “We do assessment centres together, we do interviews together, and between us work to choose which prospective students fit the programme the best.”

Adds Anshu Hayden: “We have a good strong working partnership. That was important, that communication could be open and transparent. We

worked together to make it a success.

“At times we have butted heads, and then have had to go away, think about it and meet in the middle; that’s what we’ve done through the process, and it has worked.”

Although the four-year course, for Level 3 bus and coach engineering technician, does not guarantee a job at National Express, there are plenty of openings in its eight workshops in the West Midlands and Coventry.

The college itself educates 16,000 students at eight campuses. That means it is large enough to also house an EV workshop for light vehicles, and the bus and coach apprentices also train there. Sandford explains: “As it happens, this is one of the rare times where, apart from the physical size of the components, EV heavy and EV light [platforms] are exactly the same. We are putting our fully qualified technicians through that workshop through the qualification that is offered there, because it transfers over.”

That is an example of one way in which vehicle technician apprenticeships will need to change in future, observes Sandford, who is also co vice-chair of the trailblazer group in charge of the standard. “That is not technically part of the apprenticeship but adds pieces that are very important.” **TE**

