

Staff-student partnership programmes in the Further Education and Training (FE) sector

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Abstract

This case study will examine the value staff-student partnership programmes have in driving change in the Further Education and Training sector and will present the benefits such a collaboration is likely to generate with both learners and practitioners. This case study also comprises some extracts taken directly from previous publications, in order to give a more holistic view of the author's progress in developing partnership opportunities.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the value staff-student partnership programmes have in driving change in the Further Education and Training (FE) sector and to present the benefits such a collaboration is likely to generate with both learners and practitioners. In the first section, we shall set out a picture of the FE sector – as the reader may not be familiar with what it entails – both in terms of scale and scope, as well as discuss the impact new technology advances have had on pedagogic approaches. The second section will give an overview of the impact two past staff-student partnership programmes have had within an organisation. The third section will give the rationale for extending such a partnership model at a national level and examine the logistics for the FE organisations to roll out a similar scheme in the future.

Context

While most decision and policy makers understand primary and secondary schools and have a grasp of higher education institutions because they have experienced them, they often have an imprecise idea of how the FE sector works. This sector unfortunately is often misunderstood as it is broad, complex and diverse (see Figures 1 and 2) and is not part of the standard education progression route. Its remit is essentially vocational education, as well as giving a second or third chance for education. The learners it attracts have often been let down by the system and can be disillusioned and disengaged.

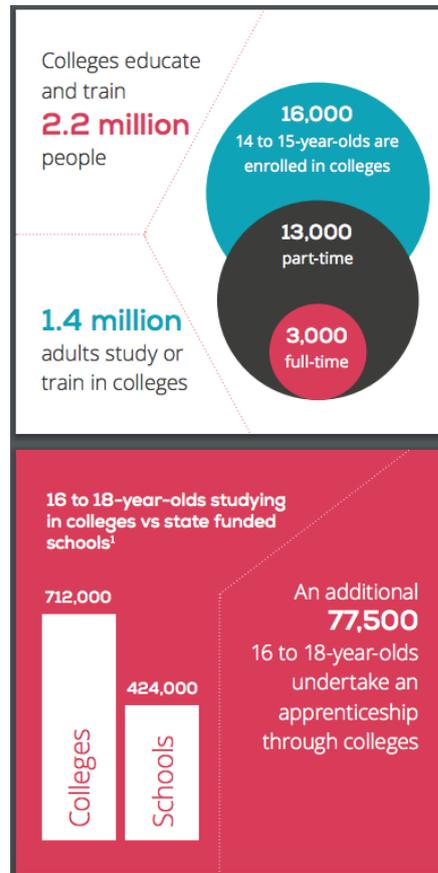
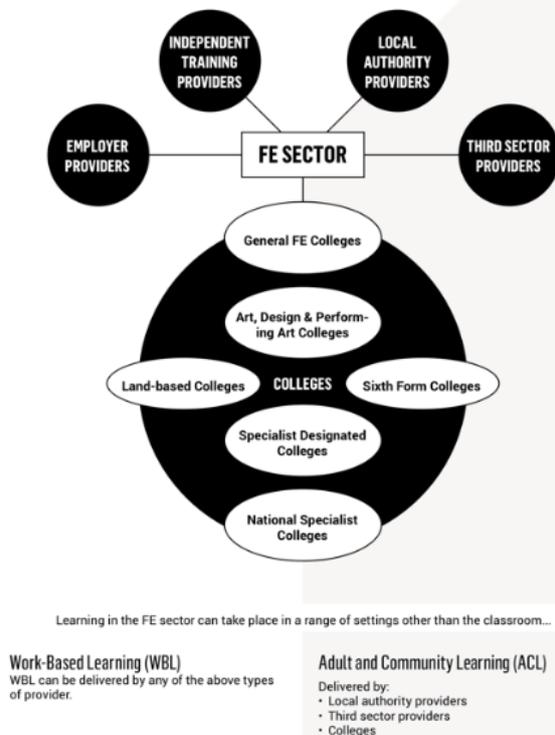
The 269 colleges in the sector “prepare each year 2.2 million students with valuable employability skills, helping to develop their career opportunities while sixth form colleges (SFC) provide high-quality academic education to 16 to 18-year-olds enabling them to progress to university or higher-level vocational education.” (Association of Colleges, 2017).¹

The working conditions in FE have deteriorated. *The Guardian* said that “staffing levels in Further Education have slumped by 20,000 since 2010, according to figures that have led to further claims of a crisis in the classroom.” (Savage, 2018). This fact was also acknowledged by *The Institute for Fiscal Studies* in its September 2018 report, which found that “funding for

¹ Since the writing of this article, further developments have affected the landscape of the sector and, owing to recent mergers, the number of colleges has been reduced to 248. The full list is available on the AoC website: <https://www.aoc.co.uk/about-colleges/research-and-stats/key-further-education-statistics>

16 to 18-year-olds and for general further education has been cut much more sharply than funding for schools, pre-school or higher education” (Belfield et al., 2018).

The Different Types of Provider Involved in Delivering FE



Figures 1 and 2. The FE and Training Sector Landscape

While funding cuts have severely hit the sector, other factors such as time and increased workload have also impeded the ability of the practitioner to keep up with change. The dual specialism raised by Fazaeli (2009) is still relevant, with trainers having even less time than before to keep up to date, not only with their specialism but also with the new pedagogic approaches and opportunities that technology advances offer. It is also fair to recognise that, as opposed to schools, the FE sector employs many part-time practitioners who may not be able to attend scheduled continuing professional development (CPD) events.

‘Rock-bottom morale’ in turn leads to poor staff retention, often referred to as the FE ‘revolving doors’. The Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, claims: *“There are no great schools without great teachers and I want us to recruit and retain brilliant teachers who are fairly rewarded for the vital work they do.”* (FE News, 2018). Despite this, David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, added: *“The median pay for teachers in colleges is currently £30,000 - £7,000 less than their counterparts in schools. As a result, colleges are struggling to retain and recruit teachers, particularly in science, engineering and maths – areas vital for the successful delivery of the country’s industrial strategy and to ensure economic prosperity.”* (FE News, 2018).

The FE sector is where learners need the most stability to lift their self-esteem, rebuild their confidence and soft skills, to re-engage with education and relearn how to learn.

Change

Technology is the key change driver of the twenty-first century and harnessing technologies will enable providers to streamline processes, become more agile, share effective practice across their organisations and upskill their staff in a way that is both time- and cost-effective. In turn, their staff will build confidence, employability skills and feel empowered, while better engaging their learners by offering more dynamic, accessible and personalised learning, thereby meeting their students' changing needs and raised expectations.

For anyone living in the twenty-first century, fast-paced adaptation will continue to be necessary and we can expect non-linear change to continue to occur at an exponential rate. Traditional pedagogical approaches must be adjusted, considering the following:

- the growing omnipresence of mobile devices, with individuals constantly connected;
- the rise of the 'personal cloud' of information from anywhere, at any time;
- the change of expectations with access and immediacy as the norm;
- scarcer time as a resource versus increased productivity;
- facilitation of more collaborative and efficient ways of working with crowd platforms, social networking, media sharing, gaming, virtual environments;
- a more diverse and complex information and multimedia landscape;
- increasingly, a more holistic life, work and study environment where previous divisions (learning provider/home and work/leisure) are becoming more fluid.

What does it mean?

- Digital literacy is a necessary component of a twenty-first century education and employability;
- Mobile technology is increasingly central to young people's lives outside college;
- The teaching and learning landscape is becoming more complex;
- Formal and informal learning are becoming more interlaced;
- Adaptable soft skills are required to 'navigate' – and operate in – this new environment (including: critical analysis, communication and collaboration, problem solving and creativity, safeguarding, and digital literacy).

Technology advances – and, more specifically, the internet – facilitate a “*shift from thinking about teaching as providing information to thinking of learning and creating learning environments.*” (Orrill, 2001). This in turn creates a relationship shift between teachers and learners, as the teacher is no longer the sole information holder, and promotes an “*evolution toward inquiry-based learning and toward the development of a learner-centred environment.*” (Orrill, *op.cit.*, p.15). The teacher's role is becoming one of coach and facilitator, guiding learners to take ownership of learning, through enquiries, interpretations, correlations and understanding. Learners no longer need mere access to information; they must also develop the skills to interact with it (Liogier, 2018a).

Staff-student partnership programme

A middle-sized FE generalist college – Epping Forest College (EFC) – appointed the author in July 2009 as Head of eLearning & Innovation, with the remit to support all staff and students in their use of new technologies to enhance teaching, learning and assessment.

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The role's scale and scope were challenging, as she had no team, technology limited to a virtual learning environment (VLE) and hardly any budget to work with. Her consequent research into funding opportunities led, in October 2009, to the successful award of £168,000 by MoLeNET (LSN). She now had a team and access to technology.

The project focus was to raise discrimination awareness through the use of mobile technology as well as embedding educational technology (EdTech) in teaching, learning and assessment. An integral part of the project support framework was the set-up of a student-staff partnership.

The scheme was based on a 2007 Phase1 MoLeNET Project at Oaklands College, initiated by Richard Everett. The idea was to link the pedagogical viewpoint of the teacher with the pragmatic approach and technical ability of the student. Since mobile technology was becoming ubiquitous among the 14-19 group, it made sense to leverage this to provide enhanced learning opportunities.

The programme proved highly beneficial, both to the participating staff and to the students. Some of the videoed feedback collected are cited below:

eMentoring programme from a learner's viewpoint

Five students talk about their experience as eMentors at EFC. The scheme was piloted this year as part of our MoLeNET project to enhance the use of new technologies for teaching and learning (Interviews with five eMentors, 2010). Student eMentors also discuss delivering their first eLearning training to staff at EFC in December 2009 (*eLearning CPD at EFC*, 2010).

eMentoring programme from a teacher's viewpoint

EFC teachers talk about their experience of the eMentoring scheme and what it brings to the classroom (*eMentoring from a teacher perspective*, 2010). Teachers also give their views on eMentoring and eLearning (*eMentoring and eLearning*, 2010) and explain how the scheme has developed eLearning skills and just-in-time support in the classroom (*The eMentoring Scheme*, 2010). One teacher even believed that "*...there are not many schemes that benefit the learner and the tutors equally and everybody wins in that*" (*The eMentoring scheme*, 2010).

What are the key steps to run such a programme?

Communication

A good promotional mix, including effective and targeted communication through a range a communication channels, is essential to the recruitment both of staff and student participants. Our chosen channels for recruitment were:

- for staff – the VLE, email, staff newsletters, team meetings and posters and fliers in staff rooms and common areas;
- for students – student newsletters, class reps' meetings, the Student Union, Learner Voice, Facebook and pastoral networks.

Recruitment process

The students expressed their interest by posting a job application on the VLE – where the voluntary programme was clearly explained and the programme documents were accessible. Documents included a job description and the reward scheme built into the programme. Both provided important information to manage participants' expectations and motivation. A number of face-to-face briefing events also took place.

The shortlisted students were interviewed and, once recruited, were given an appointment letter (as formal agreement of their weekly commitment to the programme – two hours per week) and a briefing pack. They were inducted and trained in mentoring/coaching skills; they also developed the digital skills needed for applying the basic college technologies – for example, to build up a course on the VLE and use and troubleshoot interactive whiteboards.

Reward process

Rewards and incentives were built into the programme to thank the students for their participation and the time and support they dedicated to the scheme. These usually consisted of a gift voucher, provided that they kept a record of the work they did and met the targets set out in their appointment letter.

At the end of each year, learner participants were awarded a certificate of participation as well as a letter of recommendation. The best eMentor was nominated for a cross-college award and received a device of her/his choice up to the value of £300. All UCAS applicants were also encouraged to refer to their volunteering work in their motivation letter and a testimonial was sent directly to their tutors for insertion in their college reference.

Development plan

The teachers who expressed an interest in the programme developed, with the author, an 'EdTech Development Action Plan' (Liogier, 2018b). The plan was personalised and informed by a review of where they were in using technology to enhance teaching, learning and assessment and where they would like to be by the end of the year. Teachers and students were then matched and action plans were shared.

Review

When we reviewed our 2009-10 partnership programme, we identified that the most successful partnerships were the ones where teacher and student joined the scheme together as a team. The partnership ethos took longer to develop in other cases – it is not always easy to admit what one does not know, especially in a role-reversal situation.

The scheme started with ten student eMentors in 2009-10 and soon grew to seventy-four in 2011-2012, with at least two student eMentors per curriculum area, providing just-in-time support to teachers in the classroom as well as supporting curriculum teams with their use of EdTech – working closely with the Curriculum Area Manager and the Staff eLearning Coach (twelve had been appointed).

There was a real buzz at the time, around the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning and assessment, with twenty-six ePilots taking place, best practices shared monthly and the clear message that our VLE was not just a repository, but an ideal pedagogical tool

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– for a student-centred mode of delivery – that encouraged collaborative learning both in and out of class.

In July 2012, the VLE was restructured, redesigned and rebranded. The change project team included a number of staff and students from the partnership programme and the scheme was instrumental in cascading a cross-college consultation to choose the new branding name and logo for the VLE: 'ERIC' – Electronic Resources In College. In February 2012, we doubled our VLE disk space and extended to 200GB to allow for growth. Use of the VLE also increased by forty per cent in nineteen months, from 3,000 activities in July 2009 to over 120,000 in March 2011.

An Ofsted inspector, during a monitoring visit, met with five of the student eMentors and awarded eLearning at the college with a 'significant progress' grade and commented that *"the College is planning and implementing the use of learning technologies very successfully. A clear strategy is raising the profile of information and learning technologies (ILT) effectively across all aspects of the college's work."*

This model proved highly successful at EFC until summer 2014, when the college went through a restructure. The eLearning, Learner Voice and the Learning Resource Centre services were merged under the new 'Digital Literacy Voice and Innovation' service. Additionally, academic staff had so developed their digital skills, knowledge and confidence in using technology to enhance learning, teaching and assessment that the original partnership model was no longer fit for purpose – the students now needed to be redirected, as their support was needed less than it had been.

The latest IT developments presented (and still present) a huge opportunity for Learning Resource Centres (LRCs) to deliver more efficient and effective services to support and encourage learning and teaching. Our LRC was redesigned to offer a broader range of channels to access and interact with information, while providing a variety of learning spaces to fulfil its users' learning needs (Liogier, 2015). The new 'Staff-Student Partnership' scheme was placed at the heart of it and the programme was rebranded: 'Digital Voice Xpert' or 'DVX'.

Re-focused scheme

The key role of the student DVXs was no longer only to mentor and support peers and staff, but to drive digital literacy by innovating, inspiring and disseminating good practice. The LRC was rebranded 'The Learning Lounge' and its motto was: 'iConnect, iLearn, iCreate'. The DVX programme was instrumental in driving the vision and mission of the new service: 'Inspiring and empowering learners and staff in becoming 21st century digital citizens so that they make creative, practical and informed use of technology safely and responsibly' (Liogier, 2016).

There are resources showcasing ePractice and student partnership from the programme (Digital Voice Xpert Programme Epping Forest College, 2016), as well as student Digital Voice Xperts talking about the experiences (Our Student DVXs Talk about the Programme, 2016).

The DVX more effectively utilised communications and dissemination channels to raise awareness of EdTech possibilities. Social media were also well utilised (see

#DigitalVoiceXpert² and #DigitalEFC). The DVX role of one of the students was assigned to managing the college social media. In January 2017, EFC came first on EduRank for its digital activity across all FE colleges in the United Kingdom. This included brand awareness, performance, social media profile, search, buzz or website (EduRank, 2017).

The partnership profile was raised with a Jisc best practice case study (Smith, 2016). The DVXs have been invited to a number of events and conferences to share best practice (Forsyth and Liogier, 2017), including *Jisc Change Agent Network (CAN)* events.

Advantages of staff-student partnerships

A student-staff partnership presents a number of advantages. First, it addresses the sector's challenge of lack of funding and resources by capitalising on learners' digital capability, while strengthening the cross-college digital support framework.

It also places learners at the centre of college life, curriculum planning and digital transformation. The programme fosters culture change – valuing learners not only as customers but also as key college stakeholders.

Student participants also benefit from developing not only their digital capability, but also a range of soft and transferable skills. Their role contributes to the boosting of their confidence, performance and employability. Two of the student DVXs have now taken their role one step higher by becoming Jisc National Student Ambassadors. Their engagement in college life also benefits their peers by heightening learner voice and driving improvement to the learning experience.

Finally, teachers benefit greatly, as traditional CPD training approaches achieve little impact if they do not result in changed behaviour. The shadowing facility offered by the student partners in the classroom encourages teachers to adopt new pedagogic approaches, knowing that they can rely on just-in-time support in the classroom. The partnership promotes a more learner-centred mode of delivery, where collaborative, enquiry-based opportunities are facilitated through EdTech and where the teacher moves into a facilitator role, guiding students to research, triangulate, reflect, critique and create content.

National OTLA research programme

Developing an effective staff-student partnership can take time and valuable resources if it is to run in a sustainable manner. Avoiding pitfalls and building from best practices is key to steering clear of 'reinventing the wheel' and wasting time and resources.

In December 2018, the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) launched a national grant research programme: 'Outstanding Teaching and Learning Assessment' (OTLA) in partnership with the *Strategic Development Network* (The Education and Training

² *Digital Voice Xpert Programme Moment on Twitter*

<https://twitter.com/i/moments/886169166067138560> (Accessed: 01 February 2019).

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Foundation, 2019a). The programme is aimed at FE and skills providers, to explore how students and staff can work together in understanding and using technologies for learning.

Vikki Liogier, Head of Learning Technologies at the ETF, explained:

“One of the core training priorities, highlighted by 2,300 sector leaders and practitioners earlier this year as part of our Training Needs Analysis, was the need to use digital and new technologies more effectively within teaching and learning. This exciting pilot programme is about trialling new sustainable models – harnessing the digital capability of students to support staff in their use of technology in all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment.”

The four research projects selected to explore how students can support staff in their use of learning technologies were announced on Friday 7 December 2018. The projects commissioned through the programme are led by Bishop Auckland College, Basingstoke College of Technology, City Lit and Heart of Worcestershire College (The Education and Training Foundation, 2019b) and include fourteen FE colleges, four Adult Community Learning organisations and two independent learning providers. There are 181 direct participants in the programme: ninety-seven staff members and ninety-four students.

As is usual with OTLA projects, they will focus on developing evidence-based solutions. In this phase, the projects will explore what works and how best to build trainer/teacher skill and confidence in the development of student-staff partnerships and in the use of technology to support and enhance learning. The recently developed Digital Teaching Professional Framework (DTPF) will be used to inform staff development plans (Liogier, 2018c).

The projects will continue through to March 2019, with the final set of outputs being pulled together into a toolkit in April 2019. The toolkit will be supported by a series of practice-sharing webinars.

Conclusion

It can be difficult for an organisation to drive change through the traditional CPD/PLD mode of delivery because FE sector practitioners have a dual specialism and most are part time. Technological advances contribute to shifting the teacher's role to one of a facilitator, while promoting the adoption of innovative and collaborative pedagogic approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. These often lead to a greater learner-centred, enquiry-based mode of delivery, where the learner is encouraged to take more ownership over her/his studies and where sometimes it is not so easy for a teacher to orchestrate if unsure how to embed EdTech in the delivery.

Staff-student partnership programmes are the perfect opportunity not only to foster the development of staff but also to build the engagement of students by giving them an active role – to take more responsibility for their personal studies and also support staff and peers alike.

[Since the writing of this article, there have been further developments³.]

³ News release: <https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/news/toolkit-to-harness-students-digital-capabilities-to-support-teaching-learning-and-assessment-launched/>

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