Technology for a change
evidence and practice

"We have said for some time now that if technology is used properly within education and training, it can help to produce a major improvement in results. This is not just in achievement, but also in involvement, attendance and the overall efficiency of the institution.

We know from independent research that the right kind of investment, backed by leadership and training, can contribute to higher standards, greater access and motivation – and greater efficiency right across the system."

Stephen Crowne
Chief Executive, Becta

Introduction

Although 25% of colleges are now classed as e-enabled – integrating technology into teaching, learning and management – pressures of policy change and expansion of student numbers make it hard to stay ahead. To achieve and sustain progress in embedding technology, colleges must have a forward-thinking and regularly updated strategy that enables the organisation to be agile in responding to change.

But the effort is worth it. The process of becoming more e-enabled will help colleges improve learner satisfaction, as learners who are more ICT competent gain confidence and are positive about the impact of technology on their learning. To achieve this, colleges need to develop their infrastructure in ways that allow maximum flexibility of use.

And with 84% of learners having home use of a computer for their college course, tutors need to think about how to structure and support learners at home effectively. Colleges also need strategies to cater for those without computer access outside – and to engage the small number who are opting out of technology use.

They also need to think creatively about how to enable more staff to participate in formal and informal training and development activities – and give them the time they need to embed what they learn into their practice. If learners are to fully benefit from the potential of e-learning, it is vital that staff have good access to technology, understand how it can support learning and are confident and creative in its use. As learners differ widely in their ICT confidence and ability, college technology strategies need to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to benefit from e-learning, and are supported in developing the skills they need.

If colleges want to increase and diversify the use of technology, e.g. more use of remote/online communication as part of blended learning solutions, the benefits must be clearly demonstrated to learners – and tutors. Therefore, college leaders need to create the environment in which technology can both enhance quality and deliver efficiency.

There are many roads to take when implementing new technology for the benefit of learners. The following case studies offer insights into journeys taken by two colleges – Gloucestershire and North Warwickshire & Hinckley. The first looks at key ICT issues when considering a college new build, while the second takes strategic vision across the college.

Sources

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Gloucestershire College
Moving with the future

Mike Skinner has three pieces of advice for anyone involved in information and learning technology developments when uprooting everything for a new college building.

"First, make the technology readily accessible," he says. "Second, make sure you train your staff to use it – and that takes a lot longer than you think. Third, make it easy to use."

Hundreds of other priorities and demands will loom large, but stick by those three maxims and you won't go far wrong, he says. The rules do not change, whether you are addressing the needs of the staff, management or learners.

For Gloucestershire College, the IT revolution coincided with a £34 million new-build programme. Greg Smith, the Principal, saw the opportunities for radical change almost a decade ago. "ICT was at the heart of our decision in 1998 to completely replace both our campuses," he says.

"As well as two fit-for-all-purposes campuses, we are now able to offer staff and students a totally 21st century learning setting. With over 2,000 computers and around 250 ActivBoards, our staff and students are enthusiastically embracing our e-enabled environment."

He says five key ingredients were needed for an effective transition to the new world of ICT – investment, leadership, learner focus, training and support.

It was down to three key IT managers, including Mike Skinner, Director of Learning Technologies, to realise the vision of a high-tech future. And, inevitably, he says, "Once you reach the future, it has moved on". But it is crucial to stick to your original vision, he insists. For example, the college wanted to go wireless three years ago but decided not to as such systems were not robust enough. Now such systems are markedly better, did Gloucestershire make a wrong move?

"Definitely not. Our original vision was to have technology in every classroom and we achieved that. The next revolution will not be around the technology and new toys but how we are using it to personalise learning. There is still a long way to go – we need to think about how people use technology in their everyday lives," he says.

Gloucestershire students are already well down that road. They show more confidence, use the IT resources more freely – including increasing access to wireless environments and laptop trolleys with machines ready charged. "The students are self-driven to learn. They pick up, borrow and use computers and other IT devices just as they once took books from the library," says Mr Skinner.

For Gloucestershire, the revolution continues. The college recently secured £150,000 to investigate how to enable students to use their own devices to access college resources. "This really is the future. If I was doing new-build now I would do serious research into this. Half my students have Wifi and a whole range of internet and other access devices. Learning should take place wherever the students happen to be."

"..we need to think about how people use technology in their everyday lives"

North Warwickshire & Hinckley College
New technology is the key to growth

Marion Plant spends ten percent of her non-pay budget on new technology. As Principal of North Warwickshire & Hinckley College, she sees this as the way to grow and develop the college – for learners, business, staff and partners.

Following the Foster and Leitch "demand-led" reforms, colleges must become more flexible and responsive to learners, whether they come as individuals or as part of a contract for training company staff. New technology makes it possible to meet more diverse demands than ever before.

Learners find that new technology makes learning "fun, exciting and dynamic," says Ms Plant. "It enables differentiation, provides opportunities to stretch the most able and, of course, supports independent learning."

Young people use ICT as part of their daily lives, but older learners also find that engaging with the technology gives them greater involvement in a changing society.

Home-based learners with chronic illnesses can be tutored using a Moodle VLE, those with mobility, visual and sensory difficulties can use software such as Optical Character Recognition to transcribe printed materials into an MP3 file, while other learners have been re-engaged through the use of CADCAM in the motor vehicle workshops.

Businesses are as diverse as learners. British businesses are high in the world table of e-readiness, and they expect their partner organisations to be so too. New technology makes for a flexible, 24/7 service in essential skills, ESOL and IT training for companies, such as Argos, Sainsbury's or the local fire station, who work shifts, or in geographically difficult places, or as far afield as India.

Partnerships save time, paper and travel through new technology when meetings, joint activity and sharing materials are done electronically. North Warwickshire & Hinckley College is involved in, amongst others, three Train to Gain consortia, two 14-19 county partnerships, several 14-19 Diploma development partnerships and two lifelong learning networks.

Such partnerships with business and other providers are at the heart of Becta's strategy for applying technology to increase effectiveness, efficiency and value for money, explained in its *Harnessing Technology Delivery Plan*.

Multi-site colleges can leave staff feeling isolated. But Marion Plant is overcoming the problems of a nine-site, 250 delivery outlet institution through a Principal's site within the VLE with access to all, a fortnightly staff bulletin, plasma screens in all public areas and all Directors using PDAs. Staff surveys have shown a significant improvement in satisfaction with communication.

Even the **environment** benefits. Information sent on-line and the use of 'tablets' in management meetings all help to save paper. And areas such as Computing and Health and Social Care are piloting electronic submission of portfolios, using mobile phones for evidence gathering, submitting assessments on-line and video-conferencing.

Becta

Millburn Hill Road
Science Park
Coventry CV4 7JJ
Tel: 024 7641 6994
Fax: 024 7641 1418
Email: becta@becta.org.uk
URL: http://www.becta.org.uk

To get involved, email **feskills@becta.org.uk**