

Digitally Future-Proofing Further Education



A Collabco White Paper

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Adapting to Change

Students aged 19+ in further education generate an additional £70 billion for the economy over their lifetimes.

[The Association of Colleges key facts 2015-16]

It's a tumultuous time for the 371* FE colleges in the UK. Funding pressures from government mean that many colleges are looking to make savings and efficiencies by merging together in civic geographies to create larger more connected and resourceful institutions. The change is rapid too – 2016 will see more mergers than in the last decade, and it seems likely the trend will continue as the FE sector strives to adapt to the pressures it's under.

Colleges are quite simply the bedrock of high quality technical and professional education and training for young people, adults and employers in the UK. They prepare approximately three million students per annum with valuable, employable skills. The average college trains around 1,200 apprentices each year with the sector being responsible for preparing half of all construction apprentices in the UK. As a result, UK Plc. benefits by an additional £70 billion over the lifetime of each student.

However, the reality is that mergers are only the start of the need to work smarter and leaner. Digitisation is one area where colleges are currently failing to make the grade, mainly due to fear of the cost of investment. FE is not alone, universities face the same challenges, and examples of failures to digitise in other sectors are numerous. Our high streets and large newspaper outlets have seen huge decline and even extinction due to failure to digitise fast enough. FE must recognise the return on investment in technology - bringing together students, campuses, teachers and potential employers and making learning more seamless whilst futureproofing the sector as a whole.

Let's not forget that students are also changing. The millennial generation are more digitally savvy, own smartphones, tablets and wearable technology and use social media and apps almost ubiquitously. They have high expectations that technology will provide benefits associated with remote working and the ability to collaborate with colleagues, teachers, friends and potential employers from anywhere. Quite simply, they expect their learning experience to mirror life outside college.

If FE colleges are to continue to prepare students for the world of employment, the importance of a delivery mechanism and as part of the curriculum in order to meet student expectations. In this white paper we consider the challenges and opportunities facing further education and how digitisation can help to reform the sector.

[* as at September 2016]

The Challenges

At their most recent Ofsted inspection, 82% of colleges were judged good or outstanding for their overall effectiveness.

[Association of Colleges key facts 2015-16]

There's always room for improvement and for the foreseeable future, efficiency savings will drive the agenda in FE. Digitisation offers further education both the greatest challenges and the biggest opportunities in the history of education so far and requires a top down holistic approach and cultural change. It's the enabler to level up the playing field between those colleges that are on the brink of financial ruin and those that are keeping their heads above water – and delivers a mechanism for newly merged super colleges and those willing to invest in technology to go a step further and excel. Removing duplication, sharing resources between colleges, driving efficiencies, collaboration and delivering measurable outcomes will spur institutions on to build next generation IT infrastructure. This in turn will support the delivery of smart digital services in order to enhance student engagement, innovation and productivity, whilst helping to reduce costs and meet some of the sector's distinct challenges.

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Supporting Diversity

Colleges are known for their diversity. Students learn in a wide range of places, including college campuses, workplaces and private training providers and they offer very niche courses tailored to particular skills. The students often come from disadvantaged backgrounds and challenging circumstances, may not have achieved highly at school or had a successful academic career to date, often have English as a second or additional language and represent a cross section of all ages – from 16 to 60+ years old. 15% of students in colleges have a learning difficulty and/or disability, whilst 230,000 unemployed people undertake education and training in colleges; 97% of colleges recruit via Jobcentre Plus.

Technology provides the glue to bring people from differing backgrounds with differing abilities and challenges together as one community regardless of where they physically study or the challenges they personally face.

The digital campus can support this diversity by removing physical barriers to learning whilst building new online resources that provide help, cohesion and direction for all.

Big data provides the backbone to decision making when looking for these efficiencies and improvements and is essentially becoming integral to urban planning in the 21st century.

As a consequence of such a project, the university at the heart of the project gains too. It will grow its reputation as a knowledge centre for urban planning and smart city development, and will continue to attract student talent based upon their interest in such subjects, whilst developing degree programs to reflect the projects they play a central role in.

Personalised learning

One of the greatest challenges for educators is how to personalise the learning experience for students based upon whatever diverse section of the student population they represent. Digitisation provides the ability to do this, helping to improve student chances by assisting everyone to reach their learning potential.

Probably the most talked about area of personalisation is flipped learning where students complete and submit much of their work online up front which allows teachers to track results and analyse them to a higher level of specificity than if they were using more traditional teaching methods. This information can then be fed back to the physical classroom allowing the teacher to tailor resources and content in to the specific needs of each individual student – flipping homework to the front of the process, before classroom teaching.

Of course, online teaching also allows an in-depth analysis of individual performance. Data collected from students' digital footprints means that teachers can identify the subject's students are struggling with, allowing targeted intervention. It's possible to predict with a degree of certainty, which students will succeed via their attendance and digital interaction, and to step in to correct issues with those that are on a collision course. This all works towards higher student retention rates and greater overall success.

The digital campus has the ability to help both students and teachers bring about real change to traditional learning practices, blending both on and offline teaching, whilst delivering a personalised learning experience to a traditionally diverse student population.

Since colleges provide higher education for local people from non-traditional backgrounds - 70% of college higher education students live within 25 miles of the campus (compared with less than 40% in universities), it's clear that they have a well-defined catchment population – much like a school. The delivery of the digital campus is therefore less about competing with other.

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Driving up Standards

Competition exists only to attract students to further their studies, rather than lose them directly to the workplace or the unemployment queue – so in that way, they must still strive to deliver a ‘competitive’ solution that attracts students to further study.

The digital campus also aids employment prospects for students. Technology is used right across every avenue of the business world, and even those students learning traditional ‘trades’ must have matching commercial skills and acumen – technology is the corner stone of business enablement. Being able to effectively and efficiently use mobile, online apps and software is a fundamental skill sought after by employers right across all sectors and industries and a basic requirement for any student’s CV.

Teaching the use of technology in the context of learning and education as opposed to only in a student’s social engagements is therefore crucial to delivering real world skills that are attractive to future employers and the continued relevance of further education.

And let’s not forget the teachers too. Where staff can easily analyse student data, it’s possible to critically assess their own personal development. It’s much easier to see how their teaching develops students’ skills over time and how changing teaching methods based upon this knowledge can deliver increased student success. Technology has the ability to help the sector drive up teaching standards as well as successful outcomes for students, future-proofing the sector.



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