Canterbury College and East Kent College

Thought leadership interview with Graham Razey, principal (December 2016)

"We have learned as a team what makes efficient delivery across multiple sites"

Graham joined South Kent College (formerly Thanet College) after graduating from the University of Kent. After a period as vice principal at East Surrey College and Hastings College, Graham returned to Thanet College as principal and has since overseen the growth of the college over multiple sites into what is now known as East Kent College. In 2017, the college is to merge with Canterbury College.

Tell us about your college

East Kent College is a general further education college originally based in Broadstairs on the Kent coast. It took over the Folkestone and Dover campuses of the former Kent College in 2014 and is poised to merge with Canterbury College. This will make us one of the largest colleges in the south east.

In addition to these four campuses, we have branched out into specialist sites for vocational education – as examples, we have an outlet for science and technology at the Sandwich-based Discovery Park and a boutique hotel, called The Yarrow, which is owned and operated by the college to provide a unique training experience for our hospitality and catering students.

With Thanet and Margate being recognised as some of the most deprived areas in England, we also have a strong focus on improving the life chances of all young people at levels 1 and 2, and were lucky enough to receive a Beacon Award in 2015 for our Progression Curriculum – a flexible, credit-based curriculum for learners at risk of falling out of education, employment or training.

Can you give an account of the digital journey the college has been on, and where you are today?

At the moment our technology strategy is in the later stages of development as we are currently upgrading and standardising our IT infrastructure to support our growth plans. Although the end user experience should not differ from campus to campus, we do not as yet have standard backend infrastructure across all campuses and our computer stock in general needs upgrading.

As a multi-campus college, we think it is vital to have the right systems and information management procedures in place, so we have been working hard on these. What's needed is smooth, seamless access for management, teaching staff or learners, no matter where they happen to be across any of our sites.

We should be able to get the same data, for example, on learner enrolment and tracking, or the same learning resources from any of our campuses. And this is something I feel we have achieved. We have moved right away from localised sets of data and work instead with a single network and centralised information. This also means cutting down on travel between sites, which results in considerable cost savings over the year.

When it comes to teaching and learning, we avoid blanket policies in favour of particular technologies. We currently use Moodle as our virtual learning environment (VLE) but allow curriculum teams to add on what is best for their discipline. Having the autonomy to make those decisions is what I believe builds the confidence of staff when it comes to using technology. It also raises standards. For example, our hospitality and catering team make a lot of use of Facebook. Through this, they get professional chefs to critique learners' work which gives those students unparalleled exposure to the best in the industry. But motor vehicle mechanics might need something different. As managers, we follow their needs; they are the experts in what is best for their discipline.

Apart from centralised data management, we avoid whole-college policies on digital technologies. It is better the money is spent on what works for a particular curriculum area rather than making decisions centrally, and then hardly seeing a half of the potential used. Our policy is to select the best solution and combine it with other systems that meet our needs.

What benefits are you realising through the use of technology – to learners, staff and to your core business?

ProMonitor to track learners' progress has made a big difference to the way we work, and to the attainment of our learners. ProMonitor is an integrated student monitoring and support system which imports learner enrolment information from the MIS and holds in one place all on-course learner support and progress information – individual learning plans, progress reports, at-risk pages and so forth. A good tracking system that staff are keen on and find easy to use is beneficial at all levels, but especially so for the level 1 learners on our flexible progression curriculum.

On this programme, learners earn credits on a project-rather than a discipline-based curriculum. We see this as breaking down the barriers that have previously disadvantaged so many learners: if learners find motor vehicle mechanics isn't for them, they can carry any credits they have achieved forward to their next choice of discipline; if they achieve enough credits overall, they can progress to level 2 without waiting for the new academic year.

> This means learners can progress at their own pace, with ProMonitor as a tracking tool and Moodle providing the direction and supplementary resources. Digital had already provided us with the means; we just had to make it happen by creating a more flexible curriculum structure.

However, one of the biggest milestones for us has been the installation of Wi-Fi on all campuses. With Wi-Fi access everywhere, the entire college can become a learning space. Learners, almost without exception, bring smart phones with them to college so why not enable them to use their own devices for study? It does mean though that you need to install access and charging points in all communal spaces and develop e-safety and acceptable use policies to match. And where there is an exception to the rule, such as learners with high levels of need, laptops or tablets have to be available for hire. This isn't a cheap option.

What still remains to be achieved? Where do the difficulties lie?

I would say our greatest difficulty is costs. We would like to be ahead of the game in technology and, in further education, I would argue we should be. FE colleges should provide the best vocational education for the workforce of the future but we are hampered by an insufficient level of funding.

There are ways of cutting back on costs, of course, and we have made use of digital to achieve these. We have moved some of our corporate services such as human resources to the cloud and also provide learners with cloud storage via **Microsoft® OneDrive**® – this way they can access their assignments from anywhere but the system is not proving easy for all learners to use. In time, we would also like install a new VLE.

Another challenge is ensuring all users are IT competent – and confident – with the digital technologies they need to use. This is an ongoing issue for most colleges. People come and go and so does the technology, so we have to provide the time, money and space to address, not just the digital capabilities of today's staff and learners, we also have to keep abreast of new systems and tools as they come in.

Currently, our staff are engaging well with an online CPD platform called **Skillsoft**®. This has a wide range of opportunities for digital skills development and its cloud-based content delivery platform enables content to be shared with peers in a closed learning community. At the moment, the system stands alone but we would eventually like to provide access to it via a single login to Moodle.

What one thing has made the biggest difference to your college's implementation of digital technology?

I think that would have to be installing Wi-Fi hotspots in all our campuses. It was an expensive operation but one that has made the single biggest impact on the mind set of our learners – everywhere has become a learning space.

What advice would you have for other senior leaders on developing their visions for digital?

You can't plan for everything. You can't know what you are planning to achieve or avoid over the next five years because the technology you will be using hasn't been invented yet.

Planning isn't the whole answer; you have to allow yourself freedom to innovate. Don't plan your way out of innovation!

More information

Contact Graham by email: **Graham.Razey@eastkent.ac.uk**

Twitter: **@**GrahamRazey