

# Forth Valley College

## Thought leadership interview with Dr Ken Thomson, principal and chief executive (January 2017)

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“Everything works when it is joined together and interconnected – it’s an eco-system”

Ken became associate principal in 2005 at the then newly merged **Forth Valley College**. In 2007, he took up the role of deputy principal with strategic responsibility for the curriculum before becoming principal and chief executive in 2013. His watchword for the college as it moves into the digital age is ‘interconnectedness’. Only when everything is working in harmony can you achieve truly creative learning and teaching.

## Tell us about your college

Forth Valley College became the first regional college in Scotland when Falkirk College merged with Clackmannan College in 2005. With campuses in Alloa, Stirling and Falkirk, our catchment extends across a broad area of central Scotland, and our provision is correspondingly diverse.

We offer full-time and part-time courses from access to degree level in creative industries, hospitality and tourism, business and STEM subjects as well as care and sport. The three campuses focus on different curriculum areas relating to the local industry but with around 13 and 17 miles between them it is possible for students to reach the specialism of their choice.

Of our 14,500 enrolments, 1500 are apprentices. 650 of these are in engineering because we are the largest provider of modern apprenticeship engineering courses in Scotland. We also work in close partnership with local schools as well as businesses and industry in the Forth Valley area.

We achieved 19 good practice points in our 2016 Education Scotland review (Ofsted equivalent) and were the winner of the 2016 Best Teaching and Learning Initiative Award at the Times Educational Supplement (TES) UK Further Education (FE) Awards. In 2014, we also won the Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Award for Innovation in FE. But what I am really passionate about is that our students and staff are recognised for their achievements in winning the awards. I want students to come out with great qualifications but also for the college to be recognised for what it’s doing and achieving.

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

As a Scottish further education college, we weren't directly involved in FELTAG. The report and the action group that produced it were funded by the English government, but now that I have read the FELTAG recommendations, I can see we have worked along very similar lines. However, there is something very important to add to the mix, and that is the need to have interconnectedness in all your objectives. It's like a web. Everything is totally interdependent. The only way you can achieve the goal of transforming learning and teaching is to ensure that all the underlying component parts are working in harmony.

When I became principal four years ago, I developed a four-year plan for the college – the Forth Valley Strategic Plan 2014-2018. Its six objectives were:

- Creating a superb environment for learning
- Cultivating a vibrant organisation in which learners develop skills and qualifications valued by industry so they progress seamlessly
- Instilling energy and passion for our people and celebrating success and innovation
- Leading as a business that is a champion for governance, financial control and balanced risk taking
- Enhancing our position as a business and community partner of choice
- Delivering a whole system approach

All of these objectives were united around one mission statement: making learning work. This mission has permeated the organisation like writing in a stick of rock. Everyone knows we are here 'to make learning work'. That message, combined with our business transformation model, has allowed us to move on to the strategy we are currently working on – our Creative Learning and Technology Strategy 2017-2022.

But what did we do first? We started with a business transformation strategy that took us from a plethora of software tools to accessing our information from one single platform, SharePoint. This is now our intranet and the springboard to our information management systems (MIS). We use **Capita UNIT-e** for student records and HR. We use a linked custom built IT system for curriculum planning, attendance recording, results recording and we use **CELCAT** for timetabling. We warehouse and report on our data through IBM®'s **Cognos Analytics**, which is accessed through **SharePoint**®. Achieving a single platform has enabled us to have uniform access to information and services across all our campuses – and that has given us a solid, digital foundation for our strategy going forward. Everything we need for decision making is now available on the screen, which means paper chasing is a thing of the past. That makes time for other things.

Then we focused on our people to ensure that our learning and teaching goals follow through from the appraisal process to continuing professional development (CPD). Staff have to be supported in what you are asking them

to do. You also have to make sure the finances are in place to cover the next three to five years as well as what is happening now. We are investing heavily in the college's IT but we still need a replacement and maintenance schedule. Then there's marketing and communication to explain to the public, industry and schools what we are doing.

Finally, there is that all-important link between the learning and teaching strategy and the IT strategy. These used to be separate at Forth Valley College but are coming together in our emerging Creative Learning and Technology Strategy. If the two are not joined up, IT resources can be out of line with commitments made for learning and teaching.

It's like an eco-system or a fine Swiss watch. Each cog is important individually but even more important is how it links into the others. By recognising the interconnectivity in everything we do, I think we are getting into a much stronger position. When I look back now, I realise how far we have come.

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

Digital is underpinning all our plans for the future. The effective use of technology in learning is no longer an option; our student body expect this to be a central feature of their learning. We have already set things in motion with our Creative Learning Leadership Group which includes representatives from management, teachers, support staff and students. Their work won the college the TES Further Education award for Learning and Teaching initiative in 2016.

Getting the information management systems right has enabled us to focus on the kind of creative, project-based learning that won the college the award. Because the basics are in place, we have freed up time to enable staff to innovate. For example, registers are now available in real time, we have a school portal for applications, our timetabling links with curriculum planning, and we can give real-time feedback from employers to apprentices. Having those routine elements managed by information systems frees up energy for what staff do best, which is creating exciting learning opportunities for their students.

The next stage of our transformational journey will bring an even sharper focus on the role of technology in enhancing and extending learning. Our stakeholders expect it. Employers are looking for applicants who are completely rounded individuals, digitally skilled and confident as well as trained in specific skill-sets.

To achieve these goals, we have been on a three-year journey during which teaching staff have been moving away from a 40-hour modular curriculum to a more creative, project-based approach. This means bringing staff together from different areas to discuss how they could support each other to breathe life into their teaching, to make it more real.

As an example, our construction team got together with the make-up department to do something about a dull PowerPoint assignment about the importance of protective clothing and equipment. At the same time, the make-up department needed to show their students there is more to make-up artistry than working on a film set. So they made up the construction students to look as if they had suffered accidents as a result of not wearing the right gear. It was gruesome stuff, but the learning was effective and something both sets of students enthused about! This kind of cross-departmental learning and teaching can be captured on video for future students, so it isn't just a one-off event. Digital and creativity go hand in hand.

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

You can be so caught up in the drive for digital, creative learning that staff can get stressed by the changes they have to make. We are saying very clearly that not everyone is at the same level of expertise and we will provide support to those that need it. The **idea** of creative digital learning and teaching is fully embedded across the college, but the practice isn't, so we still have a bit of work to do. What we have done is give staff permission to try. They know they will get support, they know we are all on a journey, but they also know that this is a road we are totally committed to.

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

In a word: confidence. I said to staff two years ago when we started the drive for more creative learning and teaching that I was taking the responsibility for what happened. This meant they were free to experiment without blame. Someone told me afterwards that this one single thing had given them the confidence to go forward and take risks.

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

I would say to other college leaders: have a vision, have a plan, resource it, support it then review and evaluate it. We could be better at doing the latter, but we are moving forward here because we are pulling everything together to make learning work.

## More information

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