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Association of Colleges

Adult Enterprise

New approach, new framework

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are all the same,
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Christina Conroy OBE

Chief Executive
Adult Enterprise



Matt Atkinson

Principal
City of Bath College and
Chair of Adult Enterprise

Introduction

A provocative maxim that began to take hold in the latter half of the twentieth century was that ‘the careers for which the education sector needs to prepare our young people have yet to be invented’. Arguably, one of the outcomes of this thinking is the current strong emphasis on teaching learners how to learn, building entrepreneurial skills and an independence of, rather than a dependence on, their teachers.

While in the more conservative quarters of Further Education (FE) thinking there is a desire to reduce the number of qualifications available and return to traditional ‘core’ subjects, progressive thinkers are heading in the opposite direction.

“Since the recession”, says Christina Conroy, Chief Executive of Adult Enterprise Ltd, “adults have needed a solution to train as entrepreneurs”, but the national qualification framework didn’t have anything in place that was suitable for them. “Adults were looking for small units of learning, but the only things available were big courses for youngsters.” By her company’s calculations there could be anything up to 12 million adults in the UK wanting to run a business or be self employed, all without access to the progressive learning programmes they need to succeed. “Adult learning has been a poor sister in FE for a long time”, states Christina Conroy, “and now we’re moving to a completely new era”.

How the journey began

When Christina Conroy was Principal of Richmond Adult Community College she became consumed with a passion for progressive innovation; not just for the learners whose needs were not being met, but for the UK economy as a whole. Christina Conroy also knew that the shake-up required was radical and challenging, and that she would need a unique set of partners to pull off the transformation. As with the building of all effective partnerships, the prerequisite would have to be “trust and shared values”. Each partner should bring a unique standpoint and skillset to the table: “Christina Conroy states “if your partners are all the same, you’re not going to be very innovative. We wanted partners that were not in the FE sector.”

The partnership

What was key was that each partner recognised the impact on their own business of the lack of entrepreneur-focused provision. With like minds assembled, Christina was ready to choreograph a ‘co-created’ solution to the problem, so giving each partner intimate buy-in and ownership of the initiative, the partners for the project were:

- Richmond Adult Community College (RACC)
- PayPal
- Social Enterprise London
- Open College Network London
- City of Bath College
- Morley College
- HOLEX
- Tower Hamlets College
- Community Links
- WCL

The final enabling partner is Association of Colleges (AoC), which has managed the Collaboration and Shared Services Grant Fund monies provided by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

The journey so far

The project team employed a curriculum manager/editor to coordinate ten curriculum writers and ensure all content was written to a common standard, pitched at the right level, and designed to make the most of blended learning – a mixture of face-to-face and distance learning approaches.

Along with the new qualifications framework, the team has also produced:

- a comprehensive blended learning curriculum that integrates offline and online materials
- a centrally hosted learning platform and learner management system
- a train-the-trainer course for teaching staff using the blended learning curriculum, including materials and lecturer notes
- centrally developed and maintained marketing materials
- access to a network of specialists in adult enterprise through the social enterprise hub
- a standardised student record system to enable a destination analysis survey to take place, to allow providers to track their outcomes and compare results across England
- a business model, and
- a quality management system, to quickly solve issues and roll solutions out to all participating organisations.

The framework starts at Level 2, with 'First Steps to Enterprise', then continues at Level 3 with a logical flow of study in discrete awards that follow the pathway of the entrepreneurial journey:

- Creating a business
- Launching a business
- Growing and sustaining a business
- Creating, launching and growing a social enterprise

The scale of the project has increased in line with both the confidence of the developers and the interest from the sector. With nine Level 2 and 3 qualifications now all approved by Ofqual, the rollout and testing of the new curriculum began in earnest in July 2012.

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Shared Services model and legal structure

As with many of the other Efficiency and Innovation Fund (EIF) and Collaboration and Shared Services Grant Fund projects, finding the right legal model has not been easy. “I don’t think it’s right to go into these projects from day one talking about vehicles (for collaboration)”, says Matt Atkinson, Principal of the City of Bath College. “You need to develop the relationships; you need to get the vision. But you will actually hit the point where you say, ‘what vehicle do we need to sustain this work’.” The team’s chosen model has been to create a joint venture company, Adult Enterprise Ltd, limited by guarantee, specifically “as a social enterprise with a social purpose”, states Christina Conroy, Chief Executive of Adult Enterprise Ltd

Many such joint venture companies, when formed to share services, go on to seek charitable status. However, for Matt Atkinson, this decision isn’t clear cut: “There’s a downside to charitable status as it can actually limit what you can do.” The project team’s aim is that Adult Enterprise Ltd will generate surpluses which can be reinvested in the continued development of new materials to further their mission which is to advance entrepreneurial education.



Leadership

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“A really effectively led project is about engaging with people”, states Christina Conroy, “ I think where a lot of projects fall down is that they hire project managers who don’t understand the people relationships; projects are messy and people are messy.” To ensure the team’s collective eye never lost sight of the outcome, Christina Conroy relinquished her role as Principal of RACC to become the Chief Executive of Adult Enterprise Ltd and to continue managing the project.

Outcomes for the project

It's never easy to be firm about outcomes for projects that are still in their implementation phase, but early signs are good, with around £385,000 worth of savings made within the funding period alone. The project estimates that with savings on teaching costs made possible by blended learning, shared development of the curriculum, centrally-produced resources, shared awarding body fees and assessment support, and shared marketing and promotion, could net savings anywhere up to £12 million when compared to the partners going it alone to provide similar provision.

With an energetic programme of roadshows, a new information website (www.adultenterprise.com), and PayPal's commitment to promote the Adult Enterprise brand, the project is attracting interest from across the College sector, and the social enterprise began its nationwide roll out in Autumn 2012. By early 2013, 34 Colleges and Adult Learning Services across the country had joined the partnership to share curriculum and deliver Adult Enterprise qualifications.



Outcomes for the Sector - Shared Curriculum Guide

All projects funded through AoC have committed to sharing their learning through the production of a series of resources. The Adult Enterprise Project has produced a guide to shared curriculum development covering the areas below. It can be downloaded from the shared services section on the AoC website: (www.aoc.co.uk/shared-services/shared-curriculum)

- New models of leadership and direction for project innovation
- Using the Innovation Code
- Co-creation of curriculum through partnerships
- Blended learning and 'flipping' the classroom
- Guidelines for subject content writers
- eLearnification
- Creating and supporting a shared learning platform
- Providing a shared learner management system
- Managing a virtual team
- Brand development in a shared environment
- Models for generating networks, for sharing and sustainability



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