




Transforming Education in Norfolk



*“We’re now actively trying to stop
wheel-reinventing across seven
institutions.”*



Dick Palmer
Group Chief Executive
Officer, Transforming
Education in Norfolk

Introduction

Overview and background to the project

To talk about the ‘redefining of an educational landscape’ and the creation of a ‘federation of education providers’ is to debate a region’s education system at the highest level. In 2011, for Dick Palmer and his team at City College Norwich, this discussion became a vision and then a reality with the help of the Association of Colleges (AoC) and a grant from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA).

Now a year on from the initial case study on the TEN Group (Transforming Education in Norfolk)¹, we return to look at how plans are progressing, and what impact they’re having on the communities of Norfolk. So where do you start when trying to assess impact on such a large scale? For Dick Palmer and his team, this was an easy question to answer as it was at the very core of their mission.

Development

Progress since November 2012

The project began when the College became the sponsor of a local failing secondary school as it transferred to Academy status. The initial vision was straightforward enough: to remove from staff the work and concerns associated with running ‘the business’. Teachers and senior managers needed the singular focus of pupils, the curriculum and quality improvement, uncluttered by the distractions of everything else.

To achieve this, the school bought in its non-teaching related services from the new partnership built around the College, focused itself on its key improvement mission, and passed re-inspection with a healthy Ofsted endorsement in 2011. Last year’s case study shows in detail how the partnership developed and grew in ambition, together with the mechanics of its federal structure¹.

If part one of the mission was to improve focus and quality, then part two was to realise ever-important savings on behalf of the partnership. The original plan was to share the cost of services between the College, two Academies, and a planned University Technical College, on track to open in 2014. On returning to the TEN Group for this case study in autumn 2013, however, it’s clear that plans have moved on. In addition to the four institutions above, the group has now added a commercial training provider, two further secondary school academies, and plans are underway for a primary academy to join at the beginning of 2014.

The Vision was straightforward enough: to remove from staff the work and concerns associated with running ‘the business’

¹ Davis. T (2012) City College Norwich: Transforming Education in Norfolk. AoC. Available at http://www.aoc.co.uk/shared_services/material/city_college_norwich_federation_development.cfm

“We’re not putting a final number on the size of the partners,” says Dick, “but there’s a limit beyond which it doesn’t make financial sense to grow, as you start to lose all of the efficiencies you’ve gained. The likelihood is that we wouldn’t go beyond 8 to 10 secondary academies, but we are having some discussions with local Colleges with a view to some sort of associate status where they might be able to get some services from us.”

The TEN Group’s federation structure may well be the only one of its kind in the UK, and once the primary school has joined the group, Dick suspects it may be unique internationally: “A formal partnership that goes from Key Stage 1 to degree level all within the same group.” However, while the team is clearly keen to branch out into other relationships, Dick is clear that their mission is exclusively for the benefit of the Norfolk communities.

Outcomes

Delivery model

The complex group structure of an overarching Trust – the TEN Group federation – and the wholly-owned shared services company – Norfolk Educational Services (NES) – was arrived at by steering a path through the regulations and requirements of key stakeholders, such as the Norfolk Local Government Pension Scheme. While it may not be the right model for all regional provider partnerships, Dick Palmer feels that with hindsight it was not only the best solution available at the time, but he’s yet to discover anything that would have suited them better. In terms of benefits for the rest of the sector, Dick Palmer states: “We’ve paid the extensive legal research costs for our model, so anyone else who would like to replicate it can simply get it off the shelf and tailor it to their needs.” This work is covered in detail in the ‘Federation & Shared Services Development Report’¹.

Impact on the organisation, staff and students

Over the first 15 months of operation, the TEN Group has firmly established itself as a key brand in the region’s education and business landscape. Hot-footing it from the launch of a new International Aviation Academy in Norwich, Dick Palmer was keen to point out that whilst in the past the partner would undoubtedly have been City College Norwich, now it is the TEN Group on behalf of the partnership.

The mounting positive and practical impact on partners is now also clear. “We’re more genuinely collegiate, which was an unexpected outcome,” says Dick Palmer “and we’re starting to share more: from whole-lesson observation systems to aspects of teaching and learning, and even teaching resources. We’d love to get to the stage where we could even share the production of lesson plans.”

For Dick Palmer and the teams, this is all a welcome bonus as the extent of the good practice sharing wasn’t envisaged at the outset as the group is made up of partners

¹ TEN Group City College Norwich: Federation & Shared Services Development. AoC. Available at http://www.aoc.co.uk/shared-services/material/city_college_norwich_federation_development.

from different educational settings.

“We’re now actively trying to stop wheel-reinventing across seven institutions,” continues Dick. “We’ve got working groups around gifted and talented, Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, data tracking and progress monitoring, parental engagement... It will take a bit of time to make a material change, but the seeds are there and I’m really pleased with how it’s all developing.”

The structural changes are also beginning to have a positive impact on learner progression and the College bottom line. In September 2013, the College exceeded its target for 16 to 19 enrolments by 200 students, due in large part to joint careers events and subsequent increased progression from the new pyramid.

For curriculum leads too, there are significant benefits to be had. In many Colleges, heads of curriculum areas are responsible for, and too often distracted by, not just all of the curriculum work, but also the HR work, staffing budgets, room utilization and minutia such as the cost of photocopying contracts, etc. In the new model adopted by City College Norwich, however, the twenty-five curriculum leads are all free to focus on the business end of provision – the quality of learners’ educational experience – as five programme managers, at the same level as the curriculum leads, look after back-office concerns and performance management. This strategy has also been replicated in the partner academies.

Savings

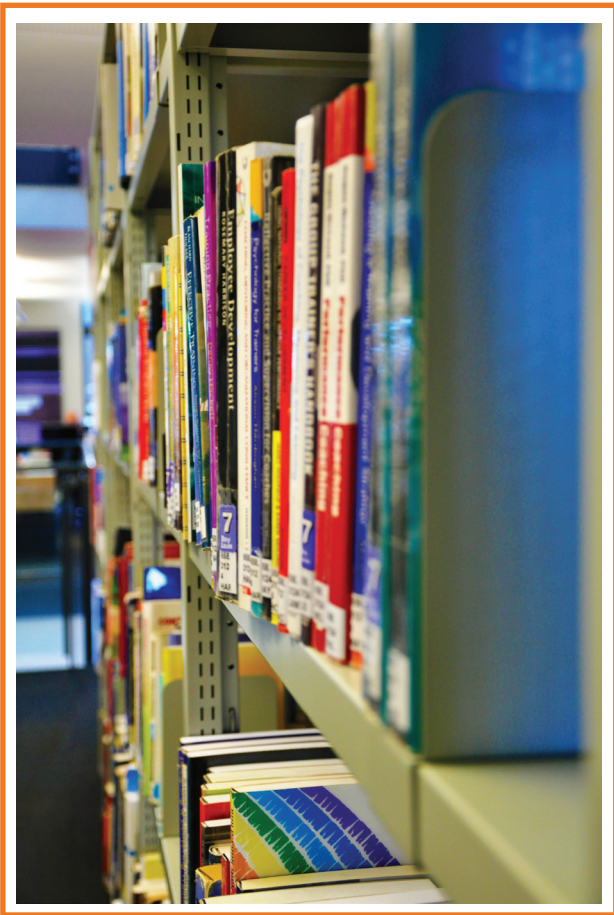
The savings targets reported in the last case study remain current, with around £1 million saved within the funding period and a forecast of a further £3.5 million over the first five years. As ever, though, with large-scale change projects, there are many variables, from the number of institutions to natural staff turnover and changes in government funding, making precise calculations on financial impact difficult. Positive changes too, such as the significant increase in learner numbers in the College, make the financial picture a complex one.

“For those Colleges who are looking for a partnership model and wanting to improve both the quality, sustainability and the mission to serve the local community with coherent progression routes, we think our model is fantastic.”

Dick Palmer, Group Chief Executive Officer, TEN Group.

Sustainability and expected longer-term impact

Without sustainability, new initiatives don’t last long enough to become custom and practice. A significant test for the stability and strength of any organisation is how well it can withstand the shock of adverse changes to the funding methodology. Dick Palmer is clear that its ability to absorb the deep cuts in the adult budget last year (2012) was due largely to the efficiency gains achieved through its shared service agenda. With the sharing bringing such immediately tangible boosts of increased enrolments, the College and wider partnership not only feel secure, but also emboldened about their future.

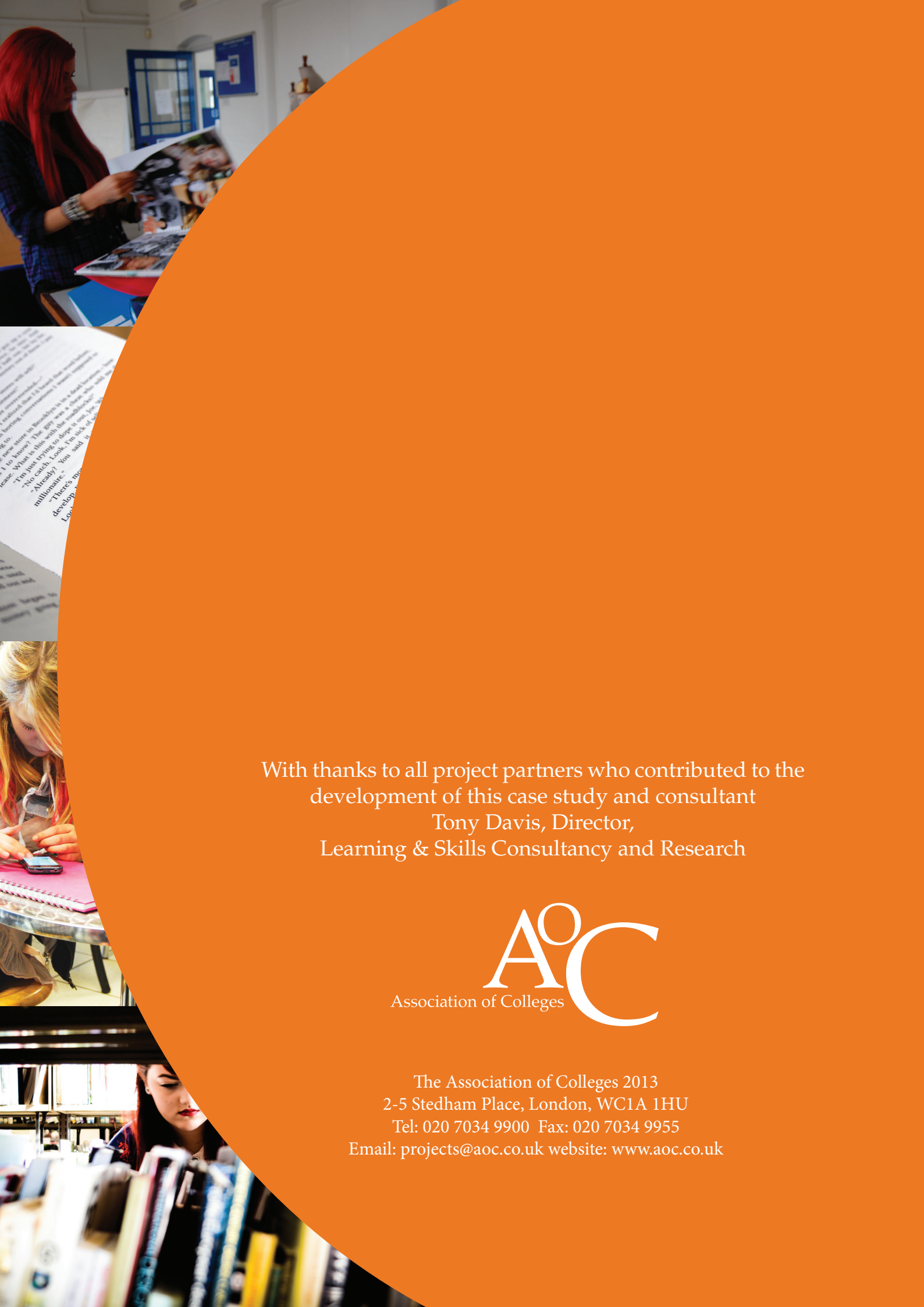


Replicability for the wider FE sector

As mentioned earlier in the case study, Dick Palmer is quick to point out that his team would not claim that its structure will suit the needs of every consortium, but: “For those Colleges who are looking for a partnership model and wanting to improve both the quality, sustainability and the mission to serve the local community with coherent progression routes, we think our model is fantastic,” says Dick.

To help other project teams evaluate this strategy, the College has published a comprehensive guide, *Federation and Shared Services Development Report*, which, along with its 19 annexes and 15 appendices, should answer even the most detailed of questions.





With thanks to all project partners who contributed to the development of this case study and consultant
Tony Davis, Director,
Learning & Skills Consultancy and Research

A^oC
Association of Colleges

The Association of Colleges 2013
2-5 Stedham Place, London, WC1A 1HU
Tel: 020 7034 9900 Fax: 020 7034 9955
Email: projects@aoc.co.uk website: www.aoc.co.uk