Chesterfield College: ensuring your curriculum offer is Wolf compliant

Summary

When planning an approach to curriculum planning within a learning provider common sense dictates that getting everyone involved and looking at all the information in a timely manner is the best approach. In reality using big data and co-ordinating different parts of an organisation can be extremely difficult. However Chesterfield College has successfully built on an existing culture of cross-college working with a move to a bespoke curriculum software solution, instead of a very large Excel Spreadsheet, to meet the curriculum requirements for 2013/14 as outlined by the new funding regime of Wolf study programmes.

About Chesterfield College

Chesterfield College is a highly successful and vibrant College based in North Derbyshire with excellent pass rates and high student success levels. Its location is key to its success in attracting students from north and south Derbyshire, Buxton, Derby and South Yorkshire and Sheffield. Chesterfield College is a highly accessible and affordable choice for over 8,000 full, part time or HE students every year.

The challenge

Learning providers no longer have the luxury of simply rolling-over their curriculum offer from one year to the next. Government priorities, curriculum developments and external accountability ensure that no organisation can stand still.

Effective curriculum planning and modelling is essential in ensuring that budgets are balanced and targets are met. Weakness in this area can not only have a significant impact on the organisation’s finances but also on overall success rates.

The curriculum review process had undergone considerable change at Chesterfield College (see this case study from Spring 2012) and was working extremely well.
However the funding implications of the Wolf Review, with a greater focus on retention and employability, a bigger emphasis on teaching maths and English, along with a switch from funding based on the standard learner number (SLN) to study programmes was a “game changer” that meant the approach taken by the College required considerable modification.

Two of the key recommendations of the Wolf report were:

- incentivising young people to take the most valuable vocational qualifications pre-16, while removing incentives to take large numbers of vocational qualifications to the detriment of core academic study;

- introducing principles to develop study programmes for young people on vocational routes post-16 that ensure they are gaining skills which will lead to progression into a variety of jobs or further learning, in particular, to ensure that those who have not secured a good pass in English and mathematics GCSE continue to study those subjects.

Debra Gray, Assistant Principal Curriculum at Chesterfield College, has blogged about the impact of the Wolf Report in detail in this Jisc Blog post. She summarises that “the FE and Skills Sector has never been so challenging in terms of funding, competition and reform. The only constant is change at the moment”.

The challenge was therefore to adapt the curriculum planning model to meet the new requirements.

**The activity**

**Audit**

The first step for the College was to do an audit of their existing curriculum to find out the average teaching hours per study programme, and to see how each programme compared to the 540 minimum required by Wolf.

The College was slightly surprised to find that a small number of programmes fell under the 540 minimum teaching hours. On closer inspection it was found that for some learners the high levels of personalisation that had been developed for curriculum areas meant that a learner could pick options with different learning activities that ended up with teaching hours below the new threshold.

The College knew it therefore needed to re-develop its curriculum offer to meet the new Wolf criteria, needing to find a way to deliver the same high quality skill set in fewer hours. Rather than 700 hours from the SLN funding criteria, curriculum offers now needed to be between the minimum 540 hours and 600 hours, the maximum that the College is funded for.
**CPD/Knowledge**

The next step was for the Senior Management Team (SMT) to gain a greater involvement in understanding the Wolf curriculum model. The Assistant Principal for Curriculum therefore attended several sector events about the new funding model in late Summer and Autumn 2012.

**Planning cycle**

Armed with the new knowledge the College started the planning cycle in December 2012, which was almost two months earlier than in 2011/12, and had been identified as a lesson to learn from the previous academic year. It was also designed to tie in to the College budgeting and business planning cycle.

The College adopted a strict and timely planning cycle:

- Away Day for all curriculum specialists with a full-scale introduction to Wolf (December 2012)
- Each of the 10 Directorate held their own planning days (January 2013)
- Directorates liaise with the MIS (Management Information System) department about their curriculum offers until a week before their "pitch". (January/February 2013)
- Each Directorate pitched their curriculum offer to SMT for “purchase” by the College, with each Curriculum Manager explaining what the offer was, why it had been chosen, triangulating applications to date with historical trends and describing the financial contribution the courses would make to the College. (March 2013)

**Review**

The College has already installed a rigorous review mechanism for monitoring performance of each curriculum area. Each Curriculum Manager is asked to review their curriculum performance on an on-going basis, which is matched by continuous review and monitoring by the Assistant Principal.

The Assistant Principal also holds one-to-one meetings every 10 days with Heads of Learning to look at the data and take remedial action where necessary. SMT also conduct directorate performance reviews each quarter.

**Technology**

In 2011/12 the College had developed a relatively simple but extremely detailed approach, using Excel spreadsheets integrated with MIS databases.

The changes to how the funding was calculated by the Wolf study programmes meant that considerable work was needed to the existing spreadsheet. Whilst this would have been possible the College decided to revisit what commercial products were available.

An initial search of the market did not prove fruitful, with many of the big name providers of MIS software either not offering a curriculum planning product or
offering one that did not give the level of detail and accuracy required by the College.

The College then discovered a re-launched SQL software package called 4cast, which had been completely re-written for 2013/14 funding criteria and was available to a limited number of learning providers. After a demo and discussions the College chose to switch from its Excel spreadsheet to this system in mid-December 2012.

4cast is a client-based, centralised system that allows multiple users to work on curriculum data that is linked to the LARA (Learning Aim Reference Application) spreadsheet held by the MIS team. The College purchased a site-wide licence and users have full and free access to live data for either, the whole College, Directorate or Curriculum Area, depending on the permission level of the user.

The support from the software supplier has been good and included in the purchase was a free day of training for the Curriculum Managers.

With the data being visible, staff are able to use the software to plan ahead for the different courses and types of learners that it expects to recruit in the future. This is based on data from previous years, labour market intelligence, demographics, and employer consultation. The detailed financial information shows the breakdown in a simple to follow style, making use of visual charts and traffic lights (Red/Amber/Green).
The outcomes

As part of the initial staff away day it was recognised that there was greater **commonality of some course provision**, e.g. employability studies, health and safety, across the College than previously thought. To maximise efficiencies it was decided to bring these commonalities into cross-college provision. In order for this to work the College is “purchasing” and timetabling this first before doing work at Directorate level.

With the greater emphasis on **English and mathematics GCSEs**, Wolf requires that learners have a good pass in them both, the College decided to revamp the way in which they were taught. Learners will now stay in their Directorate for these subjects, to get a more relevant application to their “home” subject, as the College was experiencing problems with learners not engaging in the Sixth Form Centre, where learners from various vocational subjects were taught alongside those doing stand-alone GCSEs.

In the new model **responsibility** and **accountability** are clearly defined and delegated through to Curriculum Managers. They are able to see the data in 4cast and change their curriculum content/offer. The model also ensures transparency and visibility of curriculum data to those with responsibility for review.

This year has seen the **MIS team** have an even **greater involvement** in the curriculum planning process, particularly with regard to more involved work around curriculum offers rather than focusing on the details of the spreadsheet that was used previously and the process for ensuring that people were working on the correct version.
Staff feedback

Paul Maude, Curriculum Manager for Catering & Hospitality

“The curriculum planning process ensures that we have courses that are fit for learners and fit for employers.

“4cast allows me to see how our programmes fit together; going away for planning is brilliant; then when we sit down with SMT it feels good when we get their stamp of approval when they purchase our offer.

“Attendance and retention is drilled into us all with a team meeting every Monday where we review the data. It has highlighted to us where we need to go in terms of retention and cost savings, for example showing where we can use an assessor or instructor rather than a lecturer.

“All the team now have responsibility to ensure we survive the tough times in the sector. Staff are more switched on to looking for new opportunities, such as starting a Barista course.

“As we get more familiar with the process teaching staff are having more input into the curriculum planning and also opening up progression possibilities for themselves.”

Trevor Burton, Head of Learning – Engineering

“The new process means that we are not just doing the same curriculum planning every year. It is under continual review, and we can see direct comparisons against historic data on a live basis.

“In the new one-stop package not only do we have a better understanding of the big picture, we can analyse everything we want to make sure that our courses met learner needs and employer needs. We want to make our learners more and more employable.

“So when we go to SMT with our offer it is a fair challenge when they ask “Why are you putting that course on?”. If you were a supermarket then you wouldn’t stock your shelves with things that didn’t sell! But as the data is so visible we have our ammunition ready for discussion.”

John Powell, Curriculum Manager for Mechanical Engineering

“The new tool is better than the spreadsheet we were using. It gives a good analysis, particular when we are looking at costings for materials and consumables, which can be expensive for a curriculum area like Engineering. It gives us the autonomy and confidence to go to SMT with a business case for new equipment that is being used in industry, if we can show how it ties into our course provision.
“Overall it has opened my eyes and helped given me a deeper analysis of what’s going on across my curriculum area and the whole College.”

**The impact**

Further ‘whole college’ culture change has taken place in 2012/13, with continuity and development of the curriculum purchase approach.

Jisc RSC East Midlands Advisor, Stuart Jones, who has been working with the College summarises, “Learning providers need to know that data is their friend. Curriculum staff need to adopt the philosophy that they have a responsibility to manage the Curriculum as well as teach. The work that Chesterfield College has done is exemplary, and they are leading the field in adopting this philosophy.”

Debra Gray, Assistant Principal says that the approach at the College is all about accountability,

“The Heads of Directorate and Curriculum Managers know that I will hold them to account for the quality and structure of their curriculum offer. They have the responsibility for their curriculum areas and by having a robust process and a tool that makes the data easily visible and manageable; it gives them the empowerment they need to run their own curriculum areas for the benefit of their learners. They welcome and thrive on this challenge becoming more business aware, more data savvy and ready to face the challenges the sector has to offer.”
The approach to curriculum planning at Chesterfield College was recognised with an AoC Beacon Award for Innovation in FE in November 2012.

From left to right: Dan Stimpson (Student), Danielle Spiers (Student), Trevor Clay (Principal), Debra Gray (Assistant Principal Curriculum), Matthew Hancock MP Minister for Skills and Sian Pentin (Student)

The College had its Curriculum offer in place by Easter 2013, which is 6-8 weeks earlier than normal. Whilst the full impact of the new Wolf compliant study programmes is yet to be realised the College is happy that their curriculum offer is robust, exceptionally well planned and made the best use of cross college expertise in MIS, finance and business development.

The lessons learned

A really important part of why the change happened at the College was a focus on staff development. There was a need for curriculum managers to become more business savvy and comfortable with finance and MIS data, so courses were run in “Finance for non-specialists”, “Data for non-specialists”, “Using Labour Market Intelligence” and “Planning” as part of the curriculum cycle.

Some of the “lock-down” deadlines for curriculum staff to have completed their submission were missed. The deadlines were a week before the “pitch” to SMT in order to allow time for checking of data by MIS staff, review by SMT and collation of materials for the meeting. However in many cases changes were being made by curriculum staff up to the day before the meeting, so some flexibility needs to be built into the process.

The College believes the changes that have been made can be adopted by other providers and that “the change may not be quick, but it should be easy”.
The future

In response to the changing curriculum the College is piloting the technique of flipped learning in 2013/14, and if successful will implement a planned roll-out for 2014/15. Flipped learning is a reversed teaching model that delivers instruction at home through interactive, teacher-created multi-media resources and learning objects and moves “homework” to the classroom.

The College is also looking at online learning for some of the cross-college programmes to ensure consistency of delivery and to achieve efficiencies.

Useful links

Wolf Review

Debra Gray’s blog post on the Jisc website about Wolf

4cast – curriculum planning software

Chesterfield College website

Jisc RSC East Midlands website

“Making your course provision viable” workshop presentation

Flipped learning – blog article

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