Chesterfield College: a new approach to curriculum planning

Summary

Chesterfield College developed a new model for its curriculum planning to tackle inefficiencies and a course portfolio which did not fully integrate current labour market intelligence and innovation. It did this by creating a new, highly detailed Excel spreadsheet integrating to other databases; instigating an organisational culture change; and overhauling its staff development of Curriculum managers. This has given them greater ownership of their curriculum areas, allowed the course portfolio to be updated and generated an estimated £2m saving while enhancing quality and increasing success rates.

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

Chesterfield College needed a curriculum that was ‘fit for purpose’ in the light of the economic downturn and Government funding constraints.

External consultants had undertaken a comprehensive curriculum review (using 2009/10 data). The report showed several areas for concern:

Remission allocations were escalating;
- Some courses were being over-taught;
- Staff utilisation and room utilisation rates were below par;
- Strong emphasis on quality and curriculum but less priority being paid to costing, efficiency and staffing; and
- Much of the curriculum was based on replicas of previous years as opposed to the development of future needs.
An internal financial analysis of profit and loss statements on each curriculum area showed some curriculum areas were in a deficit position in terms of their overall contributions to the college.

The College needed to make some urgent changes or the situation would only become more acute.

**The activity**

A new holistic approach to curriculum planning was adopted. Traditionally staff from curriculum and quality had priority over curriculum planning, but for the first time staff from MIS (Management Information Systems) and Finance were fully involved and their extensive expertise utilised in a comprehensive partnership of skills.

The MIS manager, Joe Fojut, was tasked with providing a more robust data model for curriculum planning.

Joe spent an intense fortnight compiling a new, highly detailed spreadsheet for this purpose.

The spreadsheet is based on:

- A data extract of the current year’s provision from the College’s MIS (EBS);
- A link to a LARA (Learning Aim Reference Application) spreadsheet regularly updated via an automated extract;
- The ability to identify fundability and availability of proposed aims for 16-18 and 19+ learners;
- A calculation of efficiency of delivery (based on planned delivery hours vs funded hours);
- A calculation of assumed tuition fee for funded provision;
- A comparison to the previous year’s data at the same point in the recruitment cycle.

For further technical details of the spreadsheet set-up see Appendix A.

Target learner recruitment data is then input by the curriculum manager/team and the spreadsheet shows the consequences and viability. There are also some “what-if” scenarios available.

The final version of the spreadsheet was replicated into a single spreadsheet for each of the 34 curriculum areas in the College to work with.

**The outcomes**

The new curriculum evaluation and planning model was launched at a Staff Development away day for Curriculum Managers in early 2012.
Each curriculum manager then presented their forthcoming needs (2012/13 cycle) to a panel made up of Senior Management Team, Finance and MIS.

Curriculum managers were required to ‘pitch’ their suite of provision to the panel who then decided whether to purchase, ask for further information, or decline the provision. Broad targets were set at 10% efficiency, maximised SLN (standard learner numbers) and a minimum 40% contribution.

The panel gave a supportive yet tough evaluation of the presentations particularly where insufficient income was being generated. It provided an opportunity for SMT to review the curriculum offer and efficiency on a line-by-line basis and only purchase what was in the best interests of the learners and the college’s strategic priorities.

Curriculum Managers had some initial scepticism of the new approach but were won over by the freedom and new information that it gave them. Here are a couple of their responses:

“We had a new, and what appeared to be complicated, process dropped on us at short notice to ‘help make Curriculum more efficient and its planning more effective’. As you can probably gather from my opening statement I was not looking forward to this process!

“My initial, sceptical, opinion was soon quashed as I began to explore the document and I found just how powerful this spreadsheet was.

“All of my Curriculum in one place, with all the associated information with it; dates, numbers of learners, qualification aims, funding, material costs and a wealth of information to assist me in consolidating the Curriculum. Most importantly, we can actually see how our courses perform financially and ensure that we are a viable area.

“Humble pie tastes quite good when it is a simple to swallow as this was!”

Nick Rudkin – Curriculum Manager, Carpentry and Joinery

“The holistic process of the new curriculum planning & purchase process has not only underlined our existing contribution but has allowed me to make an informed decision to allow efficiency savings without affecting quality.

“The opportunity to share best practice across not only within directorates, but college-wide was a fantastic opportunity to share and embed other approaches to curriculum planning. Allowing me to future proof my provision in an informed way across many variables.”

Steve Everton – Curriculum Manager, Brickwork

The impact
The curriculum planning at Chesterfield College has changed from a “top-down” to a “feed-up” approach. There is a more effective relationship between different departments and a mutual appreciation of each other’s role.

One benefit is a predicted £2m saving, against a £37m budget for the 2012/13 planning cycle.

The curriculum managers now have ownership over what is being delivered, giving them freedom and flexibility, as well as accountability.

Remission hours, which had been steadily climbing in previous years, were examined in detail as part of the curriculum planning. Where no impact evidence was available a remission activity was stopped. Due to this effective management the overall number of hours has been brought down from 11,000 to 3,500.

The impact on the budget planning process and staffing analysis was also significant. Allowing more detailed and timely financial profiling and staff management.

JISC RSC East Midlands Advisor, Stuart Jones, who has been working with the College summarises, “The technology side of what Chesterfield College has achieved is relatively simple, using Excel spreadsheets integrated with MIS databases, but it is extremely detailed. The far bigger achievement has been in the culture change.”

Debra Gray, Assistant Principal - Curriculum Development and Delivery, who led the change, adds “we were aiming to get curriculum managers to think beyond what they’d always done. The aim was to make the process business-focussed but not business-driven.

“The learners are at the heart of everything we do and our offer needs to serve them. Our job is to provide a curriculum that is outstanding in terms of learner experience, employer engagement and delivers high success. We believe we have done this. We’re not the same college we were 12 months ago!”

The backing of the senior management team was crucial to the process too. Julie Richards, Deputy Principal - Enterprise, Engagement and Innovation concludes “giving ownership to the Directorates to plan and understand their own provision so thoroughly has enhanced their skills in managing their area and in analysing and planning their provision. The experience of working with senior managers in purchasing the curriculum offer has been an invaluable experience for everyone concerned”.

The lessons learned

A really important part of why the change happened at the College was down to staff development. It needed to help its curriculum managers become more business savvy and comfortable with finance and MIS data.
More importantly it needed to find the people who could act as the “bridges” between curriculum and business support. These were the key individuals who could offer a rounded perspective.

As this is the first year using this approach it is perhaps not surprising to note that the timing was extremely tight. The College plans to revise the time schedules for 2012/13, starting earlier to ensure that deadlines are not as squeezed as this year.

It also hopes to incorporate better profiling for the employer responsiveness courses.

**Useful links**

- [Chesterfield College website](#)
- “[Making your course provision viable” workshop presentation](#)
- [Jisc RSC East Midlands website](#)

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