Coleg Cambria

Thought leadership interview with David Jones OBE, DL, chief executive, Coleg Cambria (June 2018)

“A college leader who does not embrace technology is an out-of-date leader.”

In 2013, David became chief executive of Coleg Cambria, a large general FE college in north east Wales following the merger of three local colleges. As a former electrical engineering lecturer, he is committed to the pursuit of excellence in learning and teaching, and proud of the college’s early adoption of Google technologies which enabled staff in the newly merged Coleg Cambria unite around a shared vision for effective learning.

Tell us about your college

Our curriculum offer is broad; full-time, part-time and work-based courses range from pre-16 and other foundation programmes to a broad range of vocational and higher education (HE) programmes, A-levels and Welsh for adults.

That makes Cambria a very large and complex college, but we aim to achieve excellence in all we do. As a result, we recognise the need to adapt and grow. We live in challenging times offering many opportunities but equally significant challenges. You cannot stand still.

So aside from our recent investment in sixth form and higher education provision, we have built up an equally strong profile in vocational training. As Cambria is a centre of excellence for engineering, in 2018, we opened a new facility to deliver further and higher level courses for engineering, construction, wider science and technology. We have also opened a £3.5m business school on another site, and have built up close working relationships with a wide range of local businesses.

As CEO of such a large, broadly based institution, I have various roles that are external to the college. For example, I chair the Deeside Enterprise Zone Board and the CBI North Wales Committee, and am a member of the Collab Group Board and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Wales Council. These additional roles raise the profile of Cambria at a regional and national level but, most importantly, bring fresh ideas into the
Coleg Cambria college. I believe that one of the things I must do as a leader is to encourage a culture in which good ideas can take root and grow.

Our overriding priority should be delivering excellent teaching and learning which stretches, challenges and inspires learners to achieve their full potential. And for that to happen, we need to be open minded about new ideas, especially in relation to technology.

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

We started the most significant step of our digital journey in 2011 when we ran a small-scale pilot of Google Apps and Chromebooks – we ordered some of these on the very first day of their release in the UK. Previously, the college had Moodle as its sole digital platform. But we quickly found that a few tablets per class did not meet demand. Everyone wanted to use them, and then came to depend on them. Now Chromebooks are available across all sites so learners can come into any learning space, pick one up and connect to their data.

Since then, we have introduced G Suite and Google Classroom. Admittedly, that has meant a huge investment in wifi on all sites, but there are savings to be made as well. Dedicated computer suites and costly PC replacement programmes – these are things of the past for us. Similarly, we have made savings by cutting out paper-based systems and unnecessary travel; many management meetings and some of governing body meetings are now held through Chrome applications. Procurement, HR and many other business support processes at the college are all paper-free now.

Looking back, at the time of our Google Apps pilot, most of our staff were comfortable with Microsoft Office, but our learners had moved on. We needed to catch up with them to stay a digitally advanced organisation able to attract and retain young people. Now our learners have access to what they need on any device anywhere on campus, at work or at home, so they can undertake learning at any time, and in ways that suit them.

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

Before the merger took place, all staff coming together under the Coleg Cambria banner were consulted on the new college’s core values and behaviours, and what its vision and its strategic priorities should be. In this way, our staff created the college name and our governors agreed our brand values based on the overarching concepts of diversity and cohesion. Such complex consultative and collaborative processes were only made possible by technology.

Technology is an enabler of behaviour, and there is no doubt that it has helped us to create a more open and responsive culture.
As an example, we involve our learners in decision-making through regular online surveys which run alongside the usual focus groups, campus councils and the student parliament. The benefits of regularly ‘taking the temperature’ were noted in our last inspection report which recorded a high level of confidence among learners that senior staff would listen and respond to their concerns.

Then there is the upward trend we have seen in achievement rates over the last three years. How much of this is due to the college keeping pace with the technology used by learners today? It is not easy to prove a direct link but the college is in the top quartile of Welsh colleges since its adoption of cloud-based learning, and has been rated Excellent by Estyn both in its current performance and future prospects. A reason given for the latter was the college’s use of a dashboard to monitor learner performance and to plan for improvements. Again, these things aren’t possible without taking up the advantages technology offers.

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

As a Welsh college, we were not involved in the original FELTAG initiative but have nonetheless had cloud-supported systems and platforms for over six years. The impact on learning and teaching has been considerable, and through the regular surveys made possible with Google Forms, we now understand better what we are doing right and what matters to learners. These things have changed our thinking about learning and teaching.

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

As 21st century leaders, we must not only embrace technology but be seen to be doing so; our own behaviour must match what we want others to do. A good example is doing away with paper. Staff here are under no illusions about our move towards paper-free systems which means none of us can avoid going digital.

Making our staff confident about using technology in their teaching is equally important so we have focused on continuing professional development (CPD) in digital capabilities. All staff here are supported to achieve a digital literacy qualification to at least level 2. And to show that everyone needs to benchmark their digital capabilities against a qualification, I have completed it myself alongside my colleagues.

Finally, every so often, be prepared to stop and take stock of what you are doing. It’s only then you will be able to see the opportunities digital technology is creating for you.

Find out more

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