

# **Innovate to Educate: Action Learning Sets for FE Colleges: Hartpury College Midlands Action Learning Set Final Report**

## **Context**

Funded by New Engineering Foundation the overall aim of the Innovate to Educate Action Learning Sets was to encourage open innovation and to provide peer support and review, resulting in collaborative activity across the FE sector.

Four Action Learning sets were established facilitated by leaders in Knowledge Transfer and Exchange. Hartpury College's Andrew Callard Deputy Principal (Services for Business) led the Midlands set drawing on his experience of KTE at FE and HE.

## **Approach**

Action learning is a proven way of encouraging self-development and taking responsibility for learning and progress. Action learning enables the participant to study their own and their institution's actions and experience in order to improve performance as well as providing an opportunity to review and reflect on their action and the learning that has resulted. Each individual participant was encouraged to discuss their Innovation Action plan as well as using the Action Learning Set as an opportunity to discuss progress, exchange knowledge and further develop their plans. The approach recognised that colleges were at vastly different starting points in terms of developing KTE provision and therefore incorporated formal and informal input sessions in response to the knowledge and experience needed.

## **Results**

Given the nature of the sets, the proceedings were conducted on a basis of complete confidentiality. However below is a list of areas discussed which were used to create and contribute to specific action plans for individual colleges.

3 sets took place between January and April 2010 and were attended by members of Bishop Burton College, Burton College, Cirencester College, City College Birmingham, Gloucestershire College, South Devon College, Stroud College, Worcester College and Wiltshire College

Concepts discussed included:

1. The nature of knowledge exchange as a true exchange between a college and another organisation whereby both learn and have the potential to innovate rather than knowledge transfer, where the college holds expertise, which it delivers to external organisations typically through structured lessons for individual learners. Knowledge transfer is the traditional FE model yet is potentially not recognised as such. Recognising this enables some colleges to engage in consultancy and general workshops as well as training to qualifications.
2. The fit of KTE to Ofsted, Training Quality Standard and internal quality processes which initially appears contrary, but could be aligned overtly and used as a vehicle to increase the uptake of KTE. KTE is a long term process which requires the overcoming of short-term and annual barriers, can lead to quality improvement and should itself be subject to quality assurance by suitable internally agreed metrics.

3. The role of Business Development as a facilitator central to the triangular relationship between the company supervisor, the academic supervisor providing guidance and knowledge and the individual undertaking the work particularly if the latter was a student (either full-time or employer responsive). Encouragement of cross-role understanding of needs and demands including the classic split between business development and academic areas, where much is assumed in terms of understanding and motivation resulting in a blame rather than collaborative culture.
4. KTE must not be seen as a diversion from the core, but as supplementary and complementary by all groups of staff employed by the college. Knowledge Transfer sits at the intersect of infrastructure, skills and culture for colleges around which the overall college strategy is wrapped. By first gaining a general recognition of this, it could be easier to expand transfer to exchange recognising that in so doing changes would be required in infrastructure, skills and culture which may only be subtle.
5. Perceptual barriers of :
  - FE inferiority as a supplier despite feedback from the CHAINS projects, mid-term evaluation of Train to Gain and college's own systems for the employer voice.
  - the nature of competitiveness for businesses as a focus rather than innovation per se and therefore the requirement to respond to the perceived need.
  - the need to unitise KTE within the particular cultural context of each college to gain acceptance
  - knowledge and strategic choice now on offer for FE to become either 14-18 or to really challenge lifelong learning. Latter requires unfunded routes and clear leadership. Was this too big a leap for colleges and how could they address the internal politics if they were to champion KTE in this context. This includes an assessment of whether college management had the capability and desire to engage with this opportunity
  - college capability. In which areas were there easy wins internally. Conversely how to act across colleges externally in potential groupings geographically and sectorally to enable and support this development. This continues informally.
  - culture of risk v quality led by Ofsted and how this can be redefined and used to embed good practice using the identification & recording, validation, sharing, transfer, monitoring and impact assessment model. Participants looked at ways of starting this process or if started of reviewing whether it has the right scope in own college.
6. The nature of catalysts. The identification of key opinion leaders and champions within colleges and the potential to link with external visitors, who were clearly champions of innovative thoughts and approaches to provide a catalyst for learners and lecturers. This included the potential to job swap between heads of departments to freshen thought and challenge assumptions. The potential use of new curriculum areas which cut across traditional departments such as environmental technologies or opportunities provided by the philosophy of the QCF and rules of combination.
7. The focus of KTE is upon contribution which should be strategic, is likely to be financially positive with the potential for significant real margins over the full project lifetime but must be at least financially neutral to gain VP Finance approval.

8. Potential funding and links to existing projects and models including KTPs, min-KTPs, other local sector-based or RDA led projects and NEF's Industrial Fellowships.
9. The nature and fit of student projects and placements within KTE and their expansion to take advantage of funding such as KTPs. The application of KTE approaches over control and clarity of objectives which would enable early wins for the processes and enhance the potential to expand.