



Case Study

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Summary

Heart of Worcestershire College is a large multi-site general Further Education college. It operates from three sites in Worcester and a centre in Malvern that made up the former Worcester College of Technology together with further main sites in Bromsgrove and Redditch following a merger in 2014. Currently the college employs around 800 staff serving just fewer than 20,000 students.

The implementation of an online learning element into courses across the whole college began in 2011. Its goal was to give learners the skills, motivation and self-reliance to meet the demands of the new digital world in which they will live and work.

In four years of successful operation it has met and exceeded the FELTAG 10% goal, student outcomes have risen by 12% and the college continues to deliver net cost savings of £250,000 each year.

In 2014 Heart of Worcestershire College's achievement was recognised in winning both the AoC Beacon Award for the Effective Use of Technology in FE and the TES Outstanding Use of Technology Award.

The Drivers for Change

1. Learners

Governors at Heart of Worcestershire College have a genuine passion for enabling learners to progress in life – to develop digital natives who see the digital world as a platform for learning. They welcomed and supported the vision of the incoming Principal:

"We are working in the 21st century with young people whose future will be with technology" Stuart Laverick, Principal

A big driver is independent learning/ control over your own learning – genuine student centredness that extends beyond their time at Heart of Worcestershire College:

- learners owning their own learning
- equipping learners for the future, motivating, helping them to progress to the next stage in their learning or employment
- building an inclusive environment

"Five years ago budget cuts led to a reduction in technology – people were ducking change. But the Heart of Worcestershire College programme began before cost pressures came into place. The key driver was the belief that you must empower learners to be independent, future-proofed digital natives. The means to the end really matters in this case"

2. Learner outcomes

Providing resources/assets to enhance classroom learning (which will always be there) and to continually improve outcomes

Further **impetus** has since come from BTEC changes which mean that students cannot make multiple attempts to submit assignments for formal assessment, but can resubmit once only. The blended learning programme enables a learner to revisit skills and knowledge they are

unsure of in their own time and at their own pace which results in better outcomes.

3. Cost

Change to funding methodology

"We can't afford to deliver 540 plus hours by classroom delivery."

Drivers in perspective

"You will save money – no doubt about that. But if you look at it from a learning perspective you will also recognise that ILT provides a powerful environment for learners to build the skills for learning for themselves, helping them to learn. This will get them ready to meet the challenges of the next step in their learning, be that in employment, in Higher Education or wherever they go on to. Cost saving is not the driver."

"The goal of the college is genuine student centredness"

Points to ponder

What are the particular strategic goals driving increasing use of technology for learning in your college?

How much interest is there is for increasing the use of technology

How else might these aims be achieved?

Do you feel there is a preference in your college for non-technology solutions and if so, why is this?

From Vision to Plan

"The Governing body was always onside; The Principal's vision was understood and supported. Their concern was how it would be implemented."

The foundations to build upon were in place already. The college was ready to go down this route with:

- support from Governors
- a track record of good practice with ILT
- a core group of capable and committed people in place.

What was being done before an institution-wide approach was taken did not amount to a coherent proposition.

"The implementation seemed wrong. It was an add on, not integrated. It needed bold decisions around structure, staffing and process"

To make it work within the funding envelope and for learners we needed to make sustained change, to make ILT a core structural element, fully integrated into learning college-wide.

There were to be no exclusions, no exceptions: people would be supported but had to make the best of it

"If it was right to do it, we had to do it right"

First steps

The pilot implementation in 2011 was a programme called Personally Accountable Learning (PAL). This was a move towards getting students to take greater ownership of their own learning. Face to face contact on full-time courses was reduced by 15% across the board. Course teams were asked to deliver the 15% online as *anytime, anywhere* learning. Sessions were not timetabled and no remission was given to staff to support the programme. The programme met with mixed success. The lessons learned shaped an adapted model, Scheduled Online Learning and Assessment (SOLA). This features:

- a focus on regular assessment
- sessions of online learning which are scheduled into the student's timetable (hence the name)
- remission for teaching staff to improve engagement

We have no plans to change remission. Experience has led us to conclude that it is essential to allow 12 hours per group at Level 2 and 18 hours per group at Level 3. The ongoing success of the SOLA programme has confirmed to us that we were right.

Points to ponder

How prepared is your college for a shift to increased reliance upon technology for learning?

You may find it helpful in answering this to look at some self-assessment tools developed specifically for governors by projects in the Learning Futures programme delivered by the following lead organisations:

1. Association of Colleges in the Eastern Region (ACER)
2. FE Sussex

These can be found on the Excellence Gateway website:

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/>

A more in-depth institutional self-assessment tool, *The Learning Technologies Self-Assessment Tool*, was commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation for leaders and managers.

A documented version of the questions in this online tool can be found here: <http://rcultd.co.uk/survey/coralesce/Survey%20Questionnaire.pdf>

The Edtech Assess website <http://www.edtech-assess.com/> will take you to:

- The latest online version of the tool
- A separate Digital Literacy self-assessment tool for individuals to identify their skill levels and training needs
- Details of benchmarking and other services

Implementation

What they did

The learning and teaching model

The concept of a study programme with a certain number of hours provided a core and a guide.

The challenge

SFA funding regulations require that all hours need to be part of the college's working pattern and attendance evidenced for a mandated number of hours, e.g. a minimum of 540 hours for full time courses.

The solution

A blended learning approach which mixes face to face (classroom) sessions with learning delivered online by technology. The college took the view that "*To make the income work the online component has to be conducted in college hours.*" This led to a programme of Scheduled Online Learning and Assessment referred to by its acronym, SOLA.

Scheduled Online Learning and Assessment (SOLA)

It is constructed as a Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE) course with:

- learning activities through Moodle tools e.g. forums, glossaries, journals, databases etc)
- assessment through Moodle tools :quiz and assignment
- learning outcomes that are clearly defined,
- designed around the course syllabus,
- built into teachers' Schemes of Work to ensure integration with the other elements of the learning programme
- well defined structure and clear instructions for learners
- a range of learning resources, text, interactive and video, making use of content that is freely available wherever possible, e.g. National Learning Network, YouTube, Slideshare, Open Educational Resources etc

You can see examples of SOLA courses and content at Heart of Worcestershire College's SOLA Showcase in the [additional resource](#) section. This is an open Moodle with guest access.
You can see a sample Scheme of Work in the [additional resource](#) section.

SOLA in action

Learning activity in the SOLA programme is split between:
scheduled classroom sessions with a subject specialist teacher
scheduled sessions in a Learning Centre overseen by Learning Centre staff

Learning Centres can accommodate up to 5 classes/groups of learners overseen by a single member of support staff.

Getting the right blend: A learner-centred approach

"It is about a blend that varies by level. Needs differ significantly by age, qualification and skills. The question we asked is: "***what is a suitable amount of learning online for a learner?***

This question put the learner at the centre of the decision, not cost. We did not start (or end) with questions such as what is the best way to save £X or what is the best way to cut costs/how many teaching hours can we chop."

Delivery model for online learning

After extensive debate and consultation and following their experience of the predecessor PAL programme, senior managers agreed that:
1 hour per week of online learning is suitable for a Level 2 learner
2 hours per week of online learning is suitable for a Level 3 learner
They also agreed that this should not be tried with Level 1 learners at this stage. The college further judged that each 30 hours of online learning in a course requires 12 hours of support by a fully qualified teacher.

Organisation and staffing

The main changes to the organisation saw:
Creation of an ILT team led by a Director, Peter Kilcoyne.
This consisted of:

- ILT Director, overall strategy, managing budgets, liaising with Senior and Curriculum Managers.
- Blended Learning Team Leader, leading the SOLA team, day to day management of SOLA – the Job Description can be seen in the [additional resource](#) section.
- Blended Learning Advisors, working with a SOLA Co-ordinator in each curriculum area to build SOLA packs – the Job Description can be seen in the [additional resource](#) section.

Preparing Staff

Learning centre staff were trained and further developed into the role of Learning Advisor to support students and staff. There has been no increase in the number - and therefore cost - of Learning Centre staff as a result of introducing SOLA or its predecessor. The Learning Advisor Job Description can be seen in the [additional resource](#) section.

Preparing Teachers

SOLA is built into the course planning process and embedded in a written Scheme of Work (an example is available in the [additional resource](#) section) which is integral to the course.

Support, training and development of teachers is provided by:

- An ongoing CPD programme throughout the year
- SOLA Co-ordinators in each curriculum area
- Blended Learning Advisors in the ILT Directorate who help to find, tailor or create content and support teachers creating their own resources.
In general there is one full time Blended Learning Advisor for every five subject sector areas. (e.g sport, health and beauty etc)

Preparing Learners

Preparing learners is essential if the programme is to replace any significant part of face to face learning and to improve outcomes.

The college acknowledged that schools are already doing some online learning so there is a certain degree of preparedness, but not enough.

An induction process utilising specialist tutors introduces SOLA and includes study skills, etiquette etc. A link to this is available in the [additional resource](#) section on Heart of Worcestershire College's SOLA Showcase.

*"Learners get the concept quickly and want to get on with it. **SOLA begins from Week 1**, so it is part of the normal routine, timetabled right from the very start".*

Points to ponder

What information would you like to see as a Governor about each of the following groups?:

- learners
 - teaching staff
 - employers
 - other stakeholders
- a. during implementation of college-wide increase in the use of technology for learning
b. after implementation

The cost model

What it costs

These calculations are based upon the **Delivery model for online learning**

Cost of classroom learning

Treated as the hourly rate for a basic grade lecturer and a 30 week year.

Calculating the cost of online learning

- each **Level 2** course has an online component of 1 hour per week x 30 weeks = 30 hours online
- each **Level 3** course has an online component of 2 hours per week x 30 weeks = 60 hours online

Each 30 hour course delivered online requires 12 hours of fully qualified teacher support, a net saving of direct staff time:

- each **Level 2** course has an online component of 30 hours supported by 12 hours of teacher time, giving a net direct staff time saving of 18 hours per course
- each **Level 3** course has an online component of 60 hours online supported by 12 hours of teacher time, giving a net direct staff time saving of 36 hours per course

The savings become more meaningful when grossed up across Directorates or the college as a whole. 10 Level 3 courses, for example require 120 hours of teacher support, with a net saving of 360 hours.

Some of this then goes towards funding SOLA structure, leaving a net saving over and above all additional costs which Heart of Worcestershire College currently estimates at around £250,000 per year.

Alternative cost models

1. The Kirklees College model uses a different approach to calculating the cost
2. The FE Sussex Learning Futures project, which can be found on the Excellence Gateway website <http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/> created a spreadsheet to identify the reduction in direct cost arising from different levels of replacement of face to face teaching with online learning.

Points to ponder

What are your expectations or concerns about the impact on costs?
Where will costs be incurred, where will savings come from, and over what timescale?

Quality

A recognised risk/challenge was to ensure that online learning is:

- A **high quality experience for learners** : enjoyable, purposeful, productive
- With **outcomes at least as good as were achieved before** the SOLA programme. Given the college's commitment to continuous improvement, this meant in practice that the rate of improvement should continue – **outcomes should be better**

Governors were reassured by:

1. Existing college practice:

"The foundation to build upon was demonstrably excellent already. To make it work within the funding envelope and for learners we needed to make sustained change."

The college had a track record of success in using technology with learners and was:

- a longstanding expert user of the Moodle learning system (VLE), with a significant body of content and course materials already in place
- in the national top 10 most prolific users of existing online learning materials, such as the government-funded NLN materials (top user in 2011)
- Successful in attracting project funding for a number of competitive bids

2. Successful practice elsewhere

"This was not a leap of faith, but understanding how other organisations have made it work. "

3. The nature of the delivery model for online learning

Commitment to learners and learner-centredness was built into the delivery model, providing practical reassurance that this was not a hollow cost-cutting exercise.

- Teacher time was budgeted to support online learning
- Online activity was scheduled and supervised in college
- Appropriate levels of support were in place

4. Preparation of staff and learners

"To justify the investment in technology you need staff with different skills, whether they be teachers, learning centre staff or managers'

- ***Staff were trained, prepared and resourced for the new skills required, including planning and managing online learning***

- Staff were supported in creating and finding content
- Learners have a carefully structured induction, together with learning packs.

The **SOLA induction course for students** can be seen on the showcase Moodle (shown in the [additional resource](#) section). It introduces students to what SOLA is about and gives them experience of using the main Moodle tools.

5. Monitoring, reporting and feedback

All online activity is carried out through the Moodle VLE by learners who are identified by their log in. This allows monitoring and reporting at the level of:

- the individual learner
- Course
- Department
- College as a whole

Reports are created and circulated by the ILT Directorate to teaching Directorates and to Senior Managers. You can see an example in the [additional resource](#) section. SOLA coordinators (person in curriculum team with responsibility for SOLA) and Personal Tutors are expected to regularly check on their student's participation.

In addition to this the SOLA team do a full SOLA census for one week every half term, in this they look at all SOLA courses and check the number of learners who have participated in the last 7 days. These figures are put into a spreadsheet at the course level and sent to all Curriculum Managers and relevant Senior Managers. All courses with less than 70% participation go into extended support for the next 4 weeks. This involves checking the courses each week for overall participation and

identifying which students are not participating. This information is shared with Curriculum Managers, SOLA Coordinators and Personal Tutors

In the early stages of the implementation programme these reports provided evidence of where it was working and where additional support was required. There was total commitment from the Principal to success, which reassured managers and staff of the importance of the programme. **This monitoring is used to keep Governors regularly informed and in touch. Senior managers and Governors are '*more than comfortable with the levels and validity of monitoring to ensure outcomes*'.**

Outcomes

Overall, learners like the opportunity to undertake online learning and value the skills and independence they acquire.

It is a mistake to think that enjoyment of digital gaming and social media transfers smoothly to learning.

The Learner Voice shows that not all students like it; "... *some of them prefer a passive lifestyle*"

Over the four years that the SOLA blended learning programme has run success rates across the college have shown a 12% increase.

Points to ponder

How will the quality of learning be maintained and improved if your college shifts to increasing use of technology to deliver learning programmes:

- in terms of learning outcomes
- in terms of learner experience

IT and Learning infrastructure

SOLA is planned into Learning Centres, which means an increased demand for PCs. Resources are carefully husbanded to ensure high usage rates throughout the day, but "*the challenge is to provide enough PCs and bandwidth to meet the scheduled demand.*"

It soon became clear that encouraging 16-19 year old learners to bring and use their own laptop and tablet devices, could not be relied upon.

"Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) doesn't work - students don't want to risk their most precious possessions. They bring their phones with them but there are restrictions to what you can do with mobile learning."

IT infrastructure

1. The dedicated SOLA learning areas/IT classrooms have up to date specification PC's with 19" TFT monitors which are more than capable of handling SOLA requirements. All PC's come with a 5 year on site replacement warranty and the college looks to utilise individual units for at least 4 years.

"We believe that at the operational level where the student interacts with the PC, the need to keep updating equipment is slowing down, partly because the minimum base level of functionality and performance is generally very good."

The main challenge arises from students wanting to bring their own devices such as iPads, Notebooks and in particular Smartphones in order to access college learning systems. The college actively encourages students to Bring Your Own Device and have taken steps to make sure it works well, but it has not taken off amongst 16-19 year olds to any great extent, except for smartphones. Adult Learners are not only more likely to bring their own kit, they are very enthusiastic about using it. From an IT

perspective, learning systems must be made technically accessible to student devices, whether it is 10,000 that want it or only a handful.

" I think the future for us will be a growing emphasis on learning from non-traditional locations utilising notepads, smartphones and other mobile devices"

What implications has SOLA had for broadband

"Because we schedule SOLA into college learning centres, most of the classes can be satisfied from within the internal network. We also have an existing 1Gb broadband connection."

Taken together these two factors have meant that the bandwidth demands of SOLA can be accommodated without significant problem. The number of students and staff using the system at home or elsewhere out of college has risen, but not as much as if all online learning were carried out off-site.

There is a robust wireless infrastructure, but in some parts of the college estate the quality of wireless service would present a problem due to the construction of the actual buildings. This is not a problem in practice except insofar as it determines the best locations for Learning Centres and other high network traffic activities.

Learning infrastructure

The learning infrastructure is built around a Moodle virtual learning environment. This is the main delivery platform for online learning. The cornerstone of its value to the college lies in its ability to deliver a wide range of high quality learning content in structured form with instructions, guidance and feedback. Students quickly learn how to work with it and subject specialists soon develop the basic skills necessary to create, upload and manage content, including assessment. ***It is a mission-critical element of SOLA because each learner has a personal account and that makes it possible to confirm when they have logged into the system. Their progress can be tracked by their tutors through performance in assessed activities.*** The central ILT team produces reports at course, Department and college level to enable managers to keep on track.

The use of technology for classroom-based face to face teaching and learning is equally important. Most learning spaces are equipped with a smart whiteboard with internet access, linked to the VLE and to the internet. Bookable sets of tablets, cameras and other devices and supporting equipment such as data projectors are available to support learning.

Technical Staffing

The ICT team consists of 23 staff maintaining and developing the network, and dealing with day to day queries arising via a dedicated IT support function.

The introduction of college-wide SOLA has not required any increase in ICT staffing, despite increases in the number of computers and peripheral devices available for learners.

The only noticeable impact of the SOLA implementation upon technical staffing is that the pre-existing close working relationship with the ILT team has become closer as some roles now overlap.

The Governors' view

How does the Corporation handle technology?

"The governors' role is to ensure that learning does not become static but is moving forward and to support opportunities to enhance and improve." Sue Fowler, Governor

We don't think of technology as a separate strand. We are interested in the broader issues: quality, cost, risk.

Inspirational teaching is not just with technology. It's much wider. We need to use technology to enhance, not replace. It's unlikely that all learning requirements will be met by technology. It can help to resolve a crowded curriculum, tight timetables, stressed teachers".

Governors at Heart of Worcestershire College don't tend to specialise. The Corporation does not have a member who champions or holds the brief for technology/blended learning.

Everyone gets involved:

- In technology for learning
- In using technology as a tool for effective management of business

"As governors we are now working much more smartly – using Skype etc. This cultural change in the organisation is a reflection of the notion that technology is a skill for life. I don't think it is possible to be a governor and not have these skills."

There is an Insight scheme for governors which includes, for example, observation of teaching sessions, attendance at relevant meetings, and building relationships with key staff. Governors are then able to raise the perspective with members when other issues are discussed, but such schemes do not shift responsibility for the area onto the nominated governor. Governors are determined to ensure that corporate responsibility remains intact.

Governors and the SOLA programme

Governors have been fully informed and involved in the blended learning programmes, both SOLA and its predecessor, from the outset. The initial drive came from the newly appointed Principal and was firmly supported.

"The Governing body was always onside; The Principal's vision was understood and supported."

An important part of this understanding was accepting:

- That college-wide change does not happen overnight
- That there would be resistance from some members of the college community, including some from learners accustomed to more traditional methods

The steady and continuing improvement in learner outcomes - up by 12% in four years - taken together with a reduction in the operating costs of £250,000 per year has provided sufficient evidence of success to justify the Governors' support.

National awards and college involvement in prestigious funded project and consultancy work have helped to sustain the momentum.

"Recognition is pleasing – and reassuring - particularly when it comes from your peers, but it is not the point. The real reward is in the successes of our students, their achievements when they are with us and knowing they are so much better prepared for whatever is to follow."

"The FELTAG 10% is an integrated part of the college offer. It can't be separated out for ROI calculations. It is an act of faith."

Points to ponder

What do you as a Governor feel about the proposed increase in reliance on technology for learning:

- What excites you?
- What worries you?
- What risks do you see?

What do you think are the most important actions for you as a governance body to help to ensure the early and continuing success of the programme

Points to ponder

What are the key lessons or messages for you from Heart of Worcestershire College's experience?

Resources

The following additional resources link to this case study:

What they say: short video interviews

Sue Fowler	Governor
Stuart Laverick	Principal
Peter Robinson	Director of Curriculum and Quality
Peter Kilcoyne	Director of ILT
Peter Lewis	Lecturer in Business Studies
Kay Bicklem	Student 1
Karima Bouifraden	Student 2

Selected documents

Job descriptions

Blended Learning Team Leader

Blended Learning Advisor

Learning Centre Advisor

Planning and reporting

Scheme of Work

Management progress reports for SOLA

Heart of Worcestershire College Moodle resource

SOLA Showcase

Student induction programme

Slideshow

A day in the life of Heart of Worcestershire Learning Centres

Points to ponder

All of the Points to ponder have been gathered together in the [Additional Resources](#) section with some additional guidance, links and tools.