

Our Pathfinder Journey

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Coventry University & Warwickshire College

Our Pathfinder Journey

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The Way We Were

Coventry University has always operated in partnership with further education colleges to extend the reach of its higher education offerings. The original form and aim of this collaboration was to extend the number of specialist programmes it offered. For example, the well-known equine studies undergraduate degree programme delivered at the Warwickshire College of Agriculture (now part of Warwickshire College) was designed to make use of the specialist facilities and staff at the college whilst also depending on the experience of the University in delivering higher education. Later the predominant model of collaboration with further education was a star network with the University at the centre and further education colleges across the Midlands at the points delivering fairly standard university programmes such as the HNC and HND. In a business sense the HND partnerships were a major engine of growth for the University. Later still, as further education colleges were able to offer their own HND programmes, the emphasis switched to a more sub-regional focus. In this case collaboration was driven by the widening participation agenda and extending access to higher education.

Warwickshire College was formed out of a series of mergers. As it grew it extended its higher education activity. It developed partnerships with many universities, not just Coventry. The partnership between Coventry University and Warwickshire College suffered a number of difficult years for various reasons, not least the fact that each other wanted to work with numerous partners. While the partnership was a difficult one for a period of time this is probably not atypical of what was going on in FE/HE relationships across the country. More recently both partners have realised that there is potentially a great deal of benefit to be gained from working together, but not necessarily working with each other exclusively.

The University and the College signed a Memorandum of Co-operation and to cement this appointed a joint partnership manager. The role of the partnership manager was to get the partnership working across a number of different levels and in different areas, in short give substance to the memorandum. One potential area of collaboration was e-learning. When calls for the pilot Benchmarking Programme were issued we decided to

submit a joint bid. At the pilot phase bidders were asked to provide reasons while they might be able to represent sector-wide issues, and the potential to generate added value from benchmarking their own particular experience. We suggested that our joint selling point would be a focus on collaboration. The pilot Benchmarking call occurred when both partners were making a renewed push in e-learning. The partnership manager had just begun her work and the moment seemed appropriate to a joint bid.

At the outset of the benchmarking programme the aim was to produce a single consolidated report on our activities. This rapidly proved to be impossible within the benchmarking timescales. It was obvious that the two institutions were very different culturally, organisationally, historically and so on. Given the short timescale it would have taken much of the available time to agree the nature and format of a joint benchmarking report. So we decided to submit two institutional reports, although the process of all producing those reports was a mutually supportive one, and submit a further shorter joint benchmarking report on collaboration. This fitted well with the OBHE benchmarking methodology as one of the eight key focus areas was collaboration with others in e-learning.

The joint report on collaboration was honest but disappointing. It was obvious that there was little happening in collaboration beyond the partnership agreement. The few points of touch which did exist were in specific areas, for example motorsport engineering. There were also limited areas of contact in the e-learning arena. It was also the case that most of those areas of touch existed because of personal contacts rather than any institutional arrangements. These limited points of contact perhaps also reflected in the reality that relatively few students transferred from Warwickshire College to Coventry University, even though large numbers of Warwickshire College students go into HE.

Within the University we had reached a major crossroads in e-learning development. In the late 1990s we were one of the first universities to develop an institutional VLE and its use had penetrated all parts of the University. However in qualitative terms, what we actually did with the VLE, success was questionable. In 2005 we had a new vice-chancellor, we needed to reinvest in new learning infrastructure and there was a feeling

that we were falling behind in e-learning world. A new Director of e-Learning had been appointed with the remit of developing a strategy for e-learning in the university, setting up a unit to support its development and leading the way forward. The pilot benchmarking call came at just the right time since it provided a means of re-launching e-learning in the University. The external involvement of consultants and other universities on a group basis gave the benchmarking activity the structure and internal credibility that was needed for it to be successful.

We were also aware of the potential prize of a funded Pathfinder Project to follow on from the unfunded, but not unresourced, benchmarking programme. Whilst benchmarking yielded a number of potential areas which would have supported a valuable Pathfinder Project, we decided to stay with the partnership between Warwickshire College and Coventry University. We had learned a lot about each other and the wider issues of FE/HE collaboration through the benchmarking project and there was both a clear opportunity for us to build on what we had done and make a potential sector-wide contribution. We had also built up mutual trust. We say “potential” because we were the only FE/HE partnership in the pilot benchmarking phase and indeed Warwickshire College provided the only FE voice. It is possible, but fairly unlikely, but our experience was far from typical. However the most likely scenario was that some things might be specific to our own collaboration, for example history, whilst other dimensions might be generic, for example cultural differences. Thus, whilst the results of benchmarking revealed the potential weaknesses of our partnership they also provided plenty of areas to build on.

The Pathfinder Project Problem

Universities like Coventry are increasingly reliant on recruiting students from their host regions. Nationally the policy emphasis on progression from HE in FE colleges to HE in universities is growing, particularly as Foundation Degrees in FE are developed. Where FE colleges offer first degrees, progression to postgraduate and higher level professional

programmes also comes into play. These factors provide the business drivers for the choice of Pathfinder Project.

However the business aims can only be accomplished if collaboration serves the needs of learners. Thus we adopted two general guiding principles:

1. Collaboration should be organized so as to enhance the learning experience as the student moves around regional institutions both virtually and physically.
2. The strategic aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning is paramount.

Institutional motivation for collaboration is a strong driver in determining both the scale and scope of joint activity. Clearly there needs to be some complementarity between these motivations. Motivation can derive from institutional missions or from mutual economic self-interests such as the desire to recruit more and/or better students. Motivation will be affected by the depth of collaboration, 'Deep' collaboration involves a lasting commitment to partnership working around issues that are important for all partners, for example progression from FE to HE. "Shallow" collaboration is likely to be short-lived and be narrowly based around a specific purpose. Deep collaboration is characterized by the sharing of processes, missions and principles.

Initially our Pathfinder project was couched in fairly general terms. At a relatively early stage we realised that the core issue was transitions. Put simply the question was why aren't more Warwickshire College students transferring to Coventry University for their higher education. Why was Coventry University invisible at Warwickshire College? Indeed why were any of Warwickshire College's HE partners invisible? Does this matter? In less parochial terms the question was whether we can use e-learning to help learners make the transition from FE to HE. What would such provision look like? Can we exploit institutional technologies such as VLEs and shared technologies like e-portfolios to help students bridge the gap? Is there a role for social software in linking students together? If the answer is yes, are we able to influence such use or would that defeat the purpose?

A focus on transitions enabled us to give structure to the project. By deciding to explore issues of transition we hoped to be able to illustrate many of the wider issues that occur in HE/FE collaboration. Narrowing the project down in this way was a means of making earlier progress than might otherwise have been the case.

Why? Intended Outcomes

The intended outcomes were expressed in the bid as follows:

We expect the project to generate for the sector:

- *An organizational and IT architecture for e-learning collaboration*
- *Improved understanding of the factors which underpin successful collaboration including the role of processes, organizational arrangements and the role of e-learning as a catalyst in promoting deeper collaboration on a wider front*

And for CU and Warwickshire College:

- *Improved progression rates from Warwickshire College to CU*
- *Improved student satisfaction scores on the courses*
- *Positive quality assurance outcomes for Foundation Degrees*
- *Better recruitment to Warwickshire College Foundation Degrees and other courses which provide progression routes to CU*
- *Experience of repository development*

What has the project achieved at this stage?

Organizational and IT architecture for e-learning collaboration

At the outset the shared infrastructure issue looked to be largely solved as both institutions had adopted similar versions of the WebCT VLE. However this proved to be a red herring. It is no easier to share materials between the WebCT CE6 and WebCT Vista than it would be between two distinct VLEs. What counts in sharing materials is their underlying source, for example Word documents and PowerPoint presentations. Even though both institutions were using WebCT sharing materials would mean duplicating those materials. However there have been benefits to both sides in terms of problem solving and gaining experience with using WebCT.

At the outset of the project Warwickshire College was still making a decision on choice of e-portfolio for student use. In the event they chose to use the Blackboard portfolio system for reasons of integration with their VLE. Coventry University had adopted the PebblePad e-portfolio system much earlier, and before Blackboard and introduced their own system. This clearly raised issues of portability of e-portfolios, and these are still largely to be solved. However we have integrated PebblePad with WebCT Vista so there may be means of making transfers of content.

However it has become clear that a more repository-centric approach is liable to yield most benefit. Coventry is in the process of developing an institutional repository and this will provide the means by which content which will be shared between the University and partner FE colleges. There are many advantages to doing this including the fact that the single repository can talk to any VLE system. It may also be that students can store assets in the repository which would then enable them to be transferred into whatever portfolio system they happen to be using.

A major outcome of the repository-centric approach has been a successful bidding for the Curve project, funded by JISC. This project is being led by Coventry University but Warwickshire College has a work package within it. This work package is to develop the use of the Curve repository to the benefit of partner colleges in the context of shared and linked courses.

On the organisational front collaboration in the Pathfinder project has led to a series of regular and focused meetings. These have provided the framework within which a greater understanding of how we might work together in the future. In particular this has allowed us to understand organisational differences and the varying cultures of the two organisations.

Factors underpinning successful collaboration

The major factor which will underpin successful future collaboration will be the realisation of mutual benefit. To date the major fruits of the project work have not yet been realised. Most of the funded year of the project has been engaged with problem solving and the development of e-learning tools and approaches to help aid student transitions. Given the annual cycle of FE and HE these innovations will not be fully in place until the next admissions round.

It has also become clear to us that the devil is in the detail. Detailed analysis of transition processes from the student perspective have formed a major part of the work in the past year. Undertaking such analysis not only forms the basis for designing new e-learning interventions to help transitions, but also provide a means by which we can generate deeper understanding between us and cement the collaboration.

The big catalytic effects of the project have yet to be realised. We hope these will become more obvious as tangible benefits from the project work flow in the future. It is important that we have something positive to be able to point to in order to generate wider interest in developing collaboration.

Improved progression rates

As noted above will not be seen until Autumn 2008 when the products of the project have been implemented. The full benefits will take even longer to be realised.

Improved (student) satisfaction scores

Again, we will need to wait until students have flowed through the system before we can make a judgment.

Positive quality assurance outcomes for Foundation Degrees

Events subsequent to Pathfinder project approval have diminished the immediate importance of this objective. However transitions between FDs and linked honours degrees are of particular importance and we are working closely with course teams to develop transferable e-portfolio systems and shared course content.

Improved recruitment to target courses

Again – too early to tell.

Experience of repository development

There is clear synergy between the Pathfinder project and the Curve institutional repository development project. Undoubtedly we would have bid for JISC funding to help develop our institutional repository even without having been involved in the Pathfinder project. However involvement in Pathfinder prompted us to see the advantages of using an institutional repository to help develop collaboration across the FE/HE divide and create a more seamless course offering. It is impossible to say whether the Curve bid would have been successful in the absence of the collaborative element, we can say that in our view the bid was stronger and more coherent with the collaborative element included. As Coventry University gradually moves to a more repository-centric information architecture the benefits of sharing learning objects and content across the partnership network should become more established.

What have we achieved so far?

A major early part of project work was a systematic gathering of evidence at first hand from other FE/HE partnerships. This was undertaken with two major aims in view. Firstly we wished to check that our own experience was not peculiar and that the issues we faced were common across the sector. Secondly we wanted to identify good practice

which could inform our project and also avoid unnecessarily replicating work which had previously been done elsewhere. In the event the major outcomes were that indeed most other FE/HE partnerships was facing exactly the same issues as Coventry and Warwickshire College, and secondly we were unable to identify areas of good practice which would help inform the project. Obviously we were in a sense encouraged by this since it made work potentially more valuable. The results of these investigations are currently being summarised and put into a more publishable form. However they have been available in draft form for some time on the project blog.

The project has also resulted in to the introduction of e-portfolios into Warwickshire College. Coventry University was able to help Warwickshire College develop its own e-portfolio system on the basis of experience. Obviously this was valuable to the college but it also greatly helped the university understand the uses to which e-portfolios might be put and the issues connected with the use of the e-portfolios within a lifelong learning context. The learning was therefore mutual. More specifically we have developed templates for use within the portfolios, independent of the particular portfolio system being used, which are intended to help students manage transitions by focusing some of their e-portfolio entries on to their own personal development as they moved towards HE.

We have undertaken a detailed analysis, including user needs, of what VLE web spaces might look like in order to help students transfer to HE. This has resulted, after a number of iterations, in a web space design which we believe is manageable for course teams but also helpful to students. The templates are based around three key areas. Firstly why would a student to choose to go into HE and secondly if they do choose to HE how might they, in general terms, prepare themselves for the transition in order to help them become successful students. Thirdly course and subject concerns they might have. The templates allow for the first two areas to be dealt with generically and some of the course and subject areas to be designed in such a way that content can be quite quickly generated to populate web spaces. The templates also allow for a significant amount to be content to be generated by students themselves. Content designed by students for students is an important element of our work. The outcome from this will be a series of exemplar webs

which can then be showcased to course teams across the university. If take-up is substantial we will develop approaches to being able to meet demand for the generation of as many course websites as are desired in time for the autumn 2008 transition round.

We have also undertaken some survey work with students in the college and the university on the uses of social software. We now have a picture of what social software is most popular among students but what we do not know is whether or not they use such social software in making decisions about going to university. We will be undertaking some more work this year in attempt to shed some light on this question.

Where now?

The Pathfinder project has prompted us to do a number of things differently. Firstly we recognise that e-learning has a role to play in partnerships. This is not simply partnerships between FE on a local basis, but also in work with overseas institutions. Secondly the project has demonstrated to many colleagues that e-learning is not just about subject and course related content. Pathfinder has shown the importance of e-learning in other aspects of students' engagement with higher education. Thirdly the project has given impetus to the adoption of a whole life view of the student. We now recognize that university students start their journey through their higher education at a stage before they enroll and that the journey also continues afterwards. The Pathfinder project has given a route by which we can engage with students at a much earlier stage of their educational careers. Finally the project has enabled us to help get the message across to colleagues that student recruitment is not just about marketing and admissions, but that it is part of an ongoing educational process and is important in the development of students.

In terms of sustainability of the major elements will be in that attention to student transitions is good business for course teams. All course teams like to be able to recruit good students with high retention rates who are committed to the programme. If they can see that their involvement in transitional e-learning activities can help deliver this then

they will have the incentive to carry on. On the other hand we also want to make it easy for course teams to engage in the work. This is why we have adopted the approach of easy-to-use templates which can be populated with objects from Curve, our institutional repository. This will allow for a substantial re-use of well designed and fit for purpose materials and simultaneously allowing for a distinctive course webs to be developed with a subject bias.

We will know if we have been successful fairly rapidly if a number of indicators are positive. Most obviously we would like to see more students coming to the university from local FE colleges. Secondly we would hope to see greater engagement with CUOnline before students arrive in the university, that is that they actually make use of the transition webs we will be developing. At the university level we would like to see all courses having their own transition webs. In terms of Warwickshire College and other partner FE colleges we would like to see them using the materials which have been developed to help their students make choices about their futures. Lastly we would expect to see more students coming to university hoping to keep the portfolios which they have begun to develop at their FE colleges.

The Wider Context

There are two key messages for the sector. Firstly transitions can be helped by using e-learning and with relatively little investment. Secondly collaboration in e-learning can be mutually beneficial and the boundaries between HE and FE funding and policy should not get in the way of this. In terms of the HEFCE strategy for e-learning it is very tempting to locate our Pathfinder work in Strand 3 (Student support, progression and collaboration) and there are obvious links. However it is perhaps more helpful to think of it in terms of measures of success. A major measure of success in the HEFCE strategy is that “ITC is commonly accepted into all aspects of the student experience of higher education connecting areas of HE with other aspects of life and work”. This is at the core of our Pathfinder work, that ICT can be used across the boundaries between institutions and stages of a student’s development. But perhaps the most abiding element

of both the Pathfinder and Benchmarking programs for us has been that which is foreshadowed in paragraph 31 of the HEFCE strategy. We now understand our position much better and we have set ourselves higher aspirations and goals.

David Morris

October 2007