

Working co-operatively

As the funding squeeze begins to take effect, colleges will be looking to see how effective partnership and/or collaborative working can bring efficient delivery of provision. A different approach will be required to ensure that the quality of provision is not affected and that available funding benefits as many learners as possible.

Working cooperatively is being trialled by local authorities in England through Total Place and in Scotland the Community Planning Partnerships usually involve colleges in delivery of a range of services that are rooted in a local context. However, colleges might consider how educational institutions within a local authority area or region can combine to deliver provision that maximises the learning opportunities available to existing and potential learners.

There are some examples of institutions, both in the UK and in Australia and the US working cooperatively on specific tasks such as initial teaching training¹. Different regions of the UK have been looking at cooperative working partnerships from different perspectives.

Universities South-west (URL: <http://www.universitiessouthwest.ac.uk/aboutus.aspx>) was established in 1999 to bring the regions universities together to champion higher education and generate high-calibre graduates who would go on to have a positive impact on the region's economy, culture and communities in the south-west. There are currently thirteen tertiary institutions signed up to the group who make up the strategy board, executive committee and the management and professional groups. A permanent executive team is located in Exeter.

The group's strategic plan is written to complement the region's eleven economic priorities and the forum aims to exploit the opportunities that arise in the sector in the south-west. The forum also deals with the strategic issues facing the sector together so that they speak with one voice.

The Welsh Assembly announced in February 2010 that it was making more than £110 m available to 'transform the opportunities and prospects for young people, local residents and businesses in the Heads of the Valleys region'. There are three major projects: UHOVI, a partnership between the University of Glamorgan and the University of Wales at Newport; the Merthyr Tydfil Learning Quarter and the Blaenau Gwent Learning Works. The aim is to bring new learning and skills opportunities to the region so that better local facilities emerge and new jobs can be attracted to the Valleys.

The UHOVI and the Merthyr Tydfil Learning Quarter projects are working with the Welsh FE sector (Merthyr Tydfil College and Coleg Gwent) as well as secondary schools and training companies to offer learning opportunities at all levels across the Valleys. New learning environments will be created too with the new Merthyr Tydfil Tertiary College that will bring improved facilities for both full and part-time learners and a new University building. Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Councils are consulting with the residents of the county boroughs so that they can comment on the plans and shape the education provision that will be on offer. Improved education opportunities are being firmly linked to economic regeneration. There is more information about the plans here:

<http://www.adjudicationpanelwales.org.uk/news/latest/100205uhovi;jsessionid=L6mwLnjdpK6L3JgQk3pvbNLSQtF7V2wpyQyNXzctGrGGBRGh24Qf!-764344044?lang=en>

From 2000 to 2007, FE+ (URL: <http://www.feplus.co.uk/index.htm>) was a partnership of six general FE colleges² in the Tees Valley in the north-east of England. The Principals from each institution

¹ Brunel University, West London carried out a literature review of current research, theory and practice in partnership working in relation to ITT partnerships and some of their findings can be extrapolated to apply to other kinds of working partnerships eg. School/college; school/HEI. The literature review can be accessed at this URL: <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/4132/1/T35416%20Literature%20Review%20-%20final%20draft%20-%20pzm%20-%20February%202010.pdf>

formed the Board of FE+, which met regularly to discuss strategic issues affecting the further education sector in that region. As the six colleges spoke with one voice, FE+ came to be regarded as 'a consultative forum, a communication channel and a body that represents the collective interest of the general further education colleges in the Tees Valley'. The small FE+ Operations Team based in Hartlepool College of Further Education performed the day-to-day operations. There were also seven sub-committees of the Board who assisted in the delivery of the Board's strategic plan.

FE+ worked with primary and secondary schools to engage young people in making informed 'next steps career decisions'. There were open days, taster sessions and work placements in various college departments. College teaching staff also visited schools to demonstrate some of the subjects on offer in the participating colleges. All these activities are very similar to what we do in Scotland for our school-college partnership programmes.

Co-operative working does not necessarily have to be for purely academic reasons. In Ohio, The University of Findlay, Brown Mackie College, Hancock County Schools, The Black Heritage Library and Multicultural Centre, GreaterFindlay Inc and Unity Christian Ministries have come together to form the Cultural Diversity Education Coalition to address diversity concerns in the area (http://www.findlay.edu/newsevents/news/newsreleases/2009/02/diversitycoalition_feb09.htm). The coalition's mission is to 'provide multicultural education to our community giving our students and citizens a healthy place to learn, work and live whereby a spirit of open respect is established in regards to cultural sensitivity including but not limited to ethnicity, religion, age, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and mental/physical disabilities'.

Other sectors

In 2005, the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres (bassac) commissioned a research piece³ on collaborative working and sharing back office support in recognition of the fact that the voluntary sector was increasingly going to be asked to do more with less. The research explored some of the approaches to sharing back office support functions and infrastructures. Much of the report will be familiar to college staff but some of the findings bear repetition. Firstly, user needs combined with the organisations' mission and strategic plans need to mesh. Secondly, the drive to deliver mission and strategy must not be at the expense of innovation and development – a difficult thing to deliver.

Among the many models of possible collaborative working that bassac considered, the issue of outsourcing was raised. This is not unknown in the Scottish college sector: there is joint procurement for example; catering is provided by contracted companies. Other options such as cloud computing are being explored and there is scope for sharing other operational services such as HR and IT. Outsourcing does however bring a practical challenge: many college support functions are not discrete as staff multi-task. The issue is then what can be realistically packaged for outsourcing and how much of a cost-saving can be obtained.

Another collaborative working method that is gaining popularity is clustering – of buildings, spaces, services and incubators. This is not just the geographical closeness of institutions, their suppliers, business partners and service providers but also about the relationships and interactions of people and their organisations on formal and informal levels. Shared spaces can lead to shared services and thus provide excellent opportunities for other organisations to grow such as incubator companies.

Working together brings advantages but there are a few lessons to keep in mind. Whether collaborations are formal or informal, the parties involved need to have open minds in order to

² Cleveland College of Art & Design, Darlington College, Hartlepool College of Further Education, Middlesbrough College, Redcar & Cleveland College, Stockton Riverside College

³ *Sharing without merging*, 2005. Available from URL: <http://www.bassac.org.uk/node/244/> accessed 20 April 2010.

make changes and manage risk. Further, collaborative partners must have equal ownership of the structure, process and intended outcomes so that the mission and vision can be sold to all the people involved. Finally, each organisation should have the opportunity to achieve the collective objective without losing its identity in the process.