LEARNING FUTURES PROGRAMME

FINAL REPORT

FIT Governance

Worker's Educational Association

PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

NIACE

Contents

Project title
FIT Governance

Name of lead organisation
Workers Educational Association (WEA)

Project summary
Building on the Digital Diversity project, the FIT Governance Project involved trustees and other governance roles within the WEA to explore the role of strategic decision making and leadership in driving forward the use of technologies in learning, and in the management of learning. The FIT Governance project created links with the Leadership and Management strand of the Digital Diversity Project, but has a distinct set of outcomes and outputs related to governance roles in leadership, scrutiny, strategy and decision making. A joint technology and leadership day was held, with representatives from the Senior Management Team and the Board of Trustees. The event also included tutors and educational staff, ensuring that trustees were hearing first hand about some of the examples of good practice and barriers experienced at a local level.

Who should read this report and why
- Adult and community learning providers.
- Governors, trustees and those in a governance role at different levels of adult education organisations.
- Senior Managers and Clerks of Governors

CPD resources developed
- Using technology to support effective governance ELearning module.
- Principles and questions to inform decisions in the use of technologies in learning.

Project lead contact details
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About the Workers' Educational Association

Founded in 1903, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) is a charity and the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education. In 2013/14 we delivered 9,700 part-time courses for over 70,000 students in England and Scotland with classes in almost every local authority area and our work in England was assessed in 2014 as 'Good' by Ofsted. With the support of nearly 400 local branches, 3,000 volunteers, 2,000 part-time tutors and our active membership, the WEA provides high quality, student-centred and tutor-led education for adults from all walks of life. We bring education into the heart of communities, helping people learn whatever they want – from maths, English and skills for employment, through health and wellbeing courses, to cultural studies that help students broaden their horizons and community engagement programmes that encourage active citizenship. We also have a special mission to reach those who want to improve their lives and communities. Education is a beautiful and powerful tool for tackling economic and social disadvantage because it raises aspirations and helps people create their own change.

For more information about WEA visit: http://www.wea.org.uk/home

Members of partnership

We have worked closely with NIACE and JISC as part of the advisory group for this project, acting as critical friends and helping us to reflect on the learning and identify next steps.

NIACE supported us to deliver a webinar as part of the project, and are also working with us on the dissemination of the project outcomes and resources.

What the project set out to do and why

The project focused on the role of governance in strategic decision making processes around the use of technologies within learning and within the management of learning. Through the project, trustees and other governance roles would have an opportunity to consider ways in which the WEA can respond to the FELTAG report, increasing the use of technologies within face to face teaching sessions, as well as increasing online and blended learning provision. An important part of this process was for trustees to work alongside senior managers and staff to explore ambitions and potential barriers and agree a set of guiding principles to take the work forward. A key aspect of the work was a focus on trustees own use of, and skills in new technologies, and how these could be piloted and modelled as part of governance meetings and processes. It was also important that the principles and approaches developed reflect the diverse range of course provision delivered within the WEA, addressing issues of disadvantage, rural isolation and social exclusion. The WEA takes learning into the heart of local communities, but this means it is sometimes difficult for tutors to have access to a range of new technologies and connectivity.

The process

It was important for the FIT Governance project to work alongside the Digital Diversity project to ensure that the learning from the tutor pilots informed the guiding principles and approaches being developed with trustees.

The following activities were carried out as part of the project:

- The SMT champion acted as a link between the FIT governance project and the Digital Diversity project.
- Representatives from the Board of Trustees attended a joint meeting with members of the Senior Management Team and Extended Senior Management Team.
- Modules and resources were developed as a result of discussions with trustees and senior managers, including ways of scaling up successful pilots and investing in our tutors.
- The WEA project team worked closely with other projects funded through the Governance Strand, in particular Heart of Worcestershire College. This included attending a meeting to discuss the Governance Capability Framework.
- The resources were peer-reviewed by Holex members and the feedback considered as part of development.
- A webinar was held, attended by 38 people – some internal to the WEA including in governance roles and some from external organisations. NIACE hosted the webinar using Adobe Connect and helped to facilitate on the day. We also had support from Heart of Worcestershire College, with Bob Powell as one of the speakers at the event.

The results

Challenges overcome

The challenges for the WEA are partly rooted in our structures and course delivery processes. Being a large geographically dispersed organisation means that we often need to identify different solutions, to encourage more use of technologies within learning. We are not a buildings based college, and have very few of our own learning centres with ICT suites. Solutions need to include a focus on students and tutors using their own technology, recognising that for some of our students, the computers they have access to are likely to be smart phones rather than desktops or laptops. The WEA sees value in exploring ways that technology can support efficiency, but the key driver remains focused on improving effectiveness. This came out as one of the main drivers when discussing guiding principles.

Challenges identified at the project day with trustees and managers included:

- The need for a culture change within the organisation and that can change can be difficult for some people. There was recognition that there is innovation and good practice in the use of technologies within learning, and as part of governance, but that scaling this up across the whole of our provision could meet with some resistance.

- The importance of trustees and other governance roles leading by example. If we are asking out tutors and staff to review the use of technologies, then governance roles should be doing the same.
- Balancing the need for investment in technology with reducing budgets and identifying solutions to address this.

Impact identified

There is a renewed interest from trustees around how we develop future work using technologies within learning. The SMT champion provides an update at each trustee meeting, and is working with colleagues within the senior management team to develop a new digital strategy. This includes piloting more approaches to delivering online and blended learning on a larger scale, and a campaign across the WEA to Go Digital in 2016. One aspect of this strategy will be to increase the effective use of technology within regional governance processes, as part of regional business plans. These pilots will involve all nine English regions and Scotland, with a minimum of 20 pilots and participation from a minimum of 250 students, 20 tutors and 10 regional committees. The strategic lead for this work will come through the Trustees and the Educational Strategy Committee, involving eleven trustees.

The WEA is also in the process of recruiting for a Digital Technologies Quality and Curriculum Lead to help drive forward CPD with tutors and increased access to digital technologies for students. This post is an important one in helping to share good practice between regions, and learn from what has worked in other organisations.

Key learning points

One of the key learning points from this project is the importance of involving trustees and senior managers from the start, to have support and engagement in decisions guiding the work of the project, which then help to inform ongoing dialogue around the organisation's work with learning technologies. Having an SMT champion who attends governance meetings was also vital in ensuring that the dialogue could be continued beyond the formal engagement with the wider project team at the leadership and governance event.

One of the key barriers we addressed was the timescale for the implementation of the project. A longer lead in time to develop the resources would have been really beneficial, particularly to pilot and gather the examples of practice. This became evident in the feedback from Holex members when reviewing the project resources at draft stage. Although the feedback was useful in getting external perspectives and shaping our thinking, some of the points raised were already in development but at the point we needed to share the resources were not in a form that could be included. Meaningful engagement with leaders and managers needs to happen over a period of time, and not as a snap shot, and therefore takes time to establish and for discussions and strategic thinking to develop.

Working with Heart of Worcestershire was really useful in helping to develop our thinking. Learning from each other's experiences and getting an insight into what's worked and the barriers for an FE college was really important. There were probably more similarities in barriers and approaches than differences, although the WEA is working in a range of community settings rather than from a buildings-based campus and this inevitably has an impact on problems faced, solutions identified and priority areas to focus on. Holex and Heart of Worcestershire acted as critical friends throughout the project, and provided an external eye on the wording in the module. It is interesting to see how differently terminology can be defined in different contexts. For example, the term digital inclusion, which was taken by some to mean a focus on assisted technologies, is a much broader area of consideration for the WEA, with a focus on a range of facts including income/poverty, age and disability, all of which can lead to digital exclusion. For this reason, it was not always appropriate to alter our thinking in the way suggested by our critical friends, but did lead to changes in the way we presented and described the ideas we were putting forward.

We learnt a lot from doing the Webinar – how quickly the time goes, the importance of responding to people's questions in the chat box and the best ways of keeping people engaged. We found instant polls more effective than the breakout rooms, as lots of participants didn't have microphones set up. The webinar enabled us to reach staff and individuals in governance roles within the WEA who wouldn't normally have the chance to connect and work together, as they are geographically dispersed across different regions. This is something we can build on for the future, delivering more webinars, as well as using videoconferencing software such as Zoom for online meetings and less formal training sessions.

Through the whole organisation action research approach, the importance of providing forums where trustees and governance roles can come together with educational staff and tutors, to share ideas and concerns. It was important for each stakeholder group from within the WEA to hear from the perspective of others. Although there are ways that this already happens within local branches, this is partly a challenge to the WEA because of the dispersed nature of our provision, and the project benefited from having a clearly defined event where technology was the focus of discussions and plans to move forward.

Resources
Using technology to support effective governance eLearning module

This module focuses on different ways that technology can be used to support governance structures, and incorporates the idea of flipped learning, using technology to support research and preparation activities outside of meetings.

This is an eLearning module produced in Adapt. The published zip file can be uploaded to a Scorm enabled environment such as Moodle.

You can also view the module with guest access at:
http://wea.learningpool.com/course/view.php?id=74

Principles and guiding questions

This resource was developed following discussions with trustees and senior managers, and includes guiding principles to be considered when introducing new technologies and questions to consider at a strategic level.