



Personalising Further Education: Developing a Vision

A submission from the Association of Colleges
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Introduction

AoC (the Association of Colleges) is the representative body for colleges of further education, including general FE colleges, sixth form colleges and specialist colleges in England, Wales (through our association with *fforum*) and Northern Ireland (through our association with ANIC). AoC was established in 1996 by the colleges themselves to provide a voice for further education at national and regional levels. Some 98% of the 415 plus general FE colleges, sixth form colleges and specialist colleges in the three countries are in membership. These colleges are the largest providers of post-16 general and vocational education and training in the UK. They serve over 4 million of the 6 million learners participating in post-statutory education and training, offering lifelong learning opportunities for school leavers and adults over a vast range of academic and vocational qualifications. Levels of study range from the basic skills needed to remedy disadvantage, through to professional qualifications and higher education degrees.

The key role played by the sector and its 250,000 staff in raising the level of skills and competitiveness of the nation's workforce make colleges central to the Government's national and regional agenda for economic prosperity and social inclusion. AoC services to member college corporations include information, professional development and support in all aspects of institutional management, governance, curriculum development, quality, employment, business development and funding. AoC also works in close partnership with the government and all other key national and regional agencies to assist policy development, continuously to improve quality and to secure the best possible provision for post-16 education and training.

AoC NILTA

AoC NILTA is a wholly owned subsidiary of AoC. Formed in the late 1980's NILTA provided a voice of the post-16 sector in all aspects of ILT (ICT and e-learning). NILTA merged with AoC in 2004 to form AoC NILTA. AoC NILTA is now the representative body for our joint memberships in all aspects of ICT and e-learning. Our primary role is to represent our members views to key sector senior managers with regard to the development of policy, strategy and implementation planning in all aspects of ICT and e-learning, ensuring that the issues and concerns of the membership of AoC and AoC NILTA are heard, understood and taken into account. In addition we provide a range of services to our members including a comprehensive communications programme to facilitate consultation, discussion, debate and dissemination. With a focus on learners, AoC NILTA is passionate about the potential of technology to enhance and transform learning experiences for all learners and we are committed to the strategic development of technology as a fundamental enabler for the success of the sector.

Summary and AoC comment

In the White Paper, *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances*, the DfES sets out a range of changes in order to strengthen personalisation in FE and make a reality of the 14 – 19 and Skills strategies. This document outlines a definition of personalisation, the rationale for its development and methods for measuring the benefits and strategies for supporting the delivery. Personalisation in an educational setting is defined as working in partnership with the learner and employer to tailor their learner experience and pathways, according to their needs and personal objectives, in a way which delivers success.

Although the consultation does acknowledge that there is existing good practice, the AoC feels that this perhaps understates the case for most colleges who have fully embraced student centred learning and have comprehensive tutorial processes which are based on individual learning planning and review. It is accepted however that this is patchy across the sector and there are areas specified in the document where the needs of the learner are not being met and the principles of personalisation might have impact. These are: learners on longer courses in Construction and ICT where success is around 50%; black learners who have a 59% chance of success as compared to the national average of 74%; only 67% of learners are very or extremely satisfied with their learning experience; only 40% of learners gave a high rating when asked whether their teachers know how they like to learn; 1 in 8 learners said that more than a quarter of their lesson time was wasted; across the system, it is unusual for learners' views to be sought routinely to help individual teachers/trainers improve their methods and quality assurance systems rarely follow a learner's journey from point of enrolment to progression or a week in the life of a learner to really understand a learner's experience so that improvements can be made.

The focus in this consultation paper is on the learner journey from outreach and enquiry to progression. It identifies the stages in becoming an "expert learner" and the processes needed to ensure that learners become active participants in their learning experiences. The rationale for the initiative is that personalisation will lead to improvement. A tailored approach to learner has synergy with the demand-led focus in the Leitch report and the key performance indicators of responsiveness in the LSC's *Framework for Excellence*, currently also in consultation phase. Benefits identified are improved retention and achievement, a more responsive, better-skilled and informed workforce, more expert and independent learners, greater social inclusion and better economic productivity. The publication proposes that existing, strong measurement tools already exist within the sector such as Ofsted's *Common Inspection Framework* and LSC's *National Learner Satisfaction Survey* and the planned *Framework for Excellence*. AoC commends the preferred approach to work with existing mechanisms.

The last section of the document covers the area of supporting the delivery. This refers to the 14- 19 Reform act, particularly the development of the Specialised Diploma where the principles of personalisation could make the entire learning journey coherent, the Skills Strategy and the QIA's Improvement Strategy.

Mechanisms for strengthening teaching and learning and responsiveness to individual needs are identified such as IAG processes, Nextstep and Learndirect, the use of the Matrix Standard, helping those out of work through JSA and Jobcentre Plus, improving information, improving pastoral support and the development of a Qualifications and Credit Framework through QCA.

Mechanisms for strengthening learner representation are also outlined. These are the introduction of a National Learner Panel, the development of Learner Involvement Strategies, the need to engage learners collectively and develop the learner satisfaction survey process, the support and training of learner representatives being developed through CEL and the strengthening of the role of Student Liaison Officer in colleges. The AoC welcomes the introduction of a national voice for the learner and will work with the agencies identified to continue the success of the sector. However this does not address how the vision will be put into place and whether there will be sufficient funding allocated to this initiative.

The document ends with Annex A which describes the key elements of Personalisation in the FE system covering: responding to the needs of the whole person; seeking and responding to the views of the learner; responding to the needs of the local community and employers; raising ambition of all learners; supporting every learner to become an expert; encouraging individuals to take responsibility; fostering openness and trust.

AoC NILTA Comments

This paper also outlines AoC NILTA comments and responses to the recent DfES Consultation paper 'Personalising Further Education: Developing a Vision', with reference to the paper's implicit bearing on the strategic development of ICT and e-learning.

This commentary has been developed by AoC NILTA on behalf of our members and has resulted from a full consultation with our membership focusing on the issues raised.

The AoC NILTA response is separate from, additional to, and fully supportive of the AoC formal response to the consultation paper.

Initial Comments

1. Personalised learning underpins the programme of change outlined in the recent FE White Paper. This includes emphasis on effective assessment of initial learner needs, improving pastoral support, along with developing learner 'voice and choice' through participation and representation. The intention is to improve learner engagement, achievement and progression across the board and influence the shape of future provision.

Institutions would argue that significant aspects of personalised learning is already a reality for their learners: that they already have well developed systems in place and a well developed ethos that puts learners and their individual needs at the heart of what they do.

Personalising Further Education: Developing a Vision is a DfES sector-wide consultation which seeks to develop and take forward a shared understanding of personalisation within the FE system.

This response seeks to highlight the definition of personalisation outlined in the consultation document, particularly in the context of electronic environments and to

review the proposed changes to current roles, activities and procedures.

2. AoC NILTA supports the assertion made in the document that personalising learning has an integral role in improving quality. Our vision is for the nationwide provision of learning appropriate to and accessible by every individual, that recognises individual learners' circumstances, and supports their needs and aspirations. We believe that this cannot be achieved without strategic development of technological solutions in all aspects of an institution's engagement with the learner, including: recruitment, enrolment, monitoring, support, tutoring, learning and teaching, advice and guidance, assessment and reporting and progression.
3. We regret the lack of emphasis on how ILT will support the aims outlined in the personalisation strategy. Although the use of technology is clearly understood to play a role in the systemic changes necessary to support widespread personalisation, we do not believe that the document recognises the extent to which the exploitation and application of ICT will be necessary to support personalisation. We would be keen to explore the range of ways technology, particularly collaborative and user content-creation tools can be used to support the personalisation agenda and the specific areas identified by the document. We would expect the personalisation agenda to rely on and further support the embedding of ICT and e-learning across all aspects of educational provision and facilitation.
4. We would refer to the recent report of the Gilbert Committee '2020 vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning 2020 Review Group' which identifies ways in which technology might contribute to personalised learning. We believe that there are many benefits that are generic to learners and therefore consistent across sectors. We encourage the colleagues within the Department to work in partnership across the sectors in developing strategy.
5. We are committed to working with the Department and its partners in the delivery of this strategy to ensure that e-strategy is embedded into relevant delivery strategies and projects, and to ensure that the views and needs of the post-16 sector are recognised and accounted for. The deployment of technologies within the context of coherent and comprehensive e-strategy within institutions, and the associated organisational and cultural change are not optional. This is not recognized within the consultation document and we believe that this is a serious omission.
6. We are delighted that participation is seen as a key process of the facilitation of personalised learning. We fully agree with the importance given to this form of engagement – empowering and supporting learners to shape the services they receive, and recognising the important contribution learners can make to improve the quality of educational provision.

However, we are keen that participatory personalisation is not limited to consultation and evaluation, but that the contribution that user participation that empowers learners to take initiative and control is supported in order to realise the government's vision for a transformed, innovative and world-leading sector.

7. We are in agreement that personalisation has the potential to be an effective strategy for engaging all learners, and could operate as a particularly effective mechanism for engaging vulnerable, disadvantaged and disengaged young people. We are keen to see all learners' circumstances, needs and preferences adequately recognised and appropriately supported. We believe that personalisation is not simply a matter of determining what learners or groups of learners need – it requires the more complex approach of supporting people in their own exploration and articulation of their needs, both in collaboration with other learners and in their independent contribution to their own learning.
8. We welcome the intention to expand and to harmonise existing provision. More focused support, greater one-to-one time, staff development, introducing and establishing new systems – all of these require the provision of sufficient time and resource. We would expect to see a significant financial commitment to support the systemic extension of services proposed for the sector, particularly in terms of staff development and time.
9. We are surprised by the lack of reference to innovation within the framework. We would expect that the emerging practices associated with supporting personalisation would call for creative thinking and solutions. We would like to see provision for the encouragement, support and sharing of innovative responses to the facilitation of personalisation.
10. "...personalisation has a role in encouraging and engaging those not currently in learning by capturing the views of potential learners and creating learning opportunities in which they want to participate." (p.8). While we support the proposed relationship between learner views and the opportunities presented to them, it is not clear how or to what degree this is being proposed. We are concerned that personalisation should not be misrecognised as a lever which can be applied in order to elicit a narrow band of response. We believe that if the vision of personalisation is realised – the re-shaping of service provision in line with learner need, ability and preference, in the context of employer and national skills needs – then in addition to the implications for service structure and delivery, evaluation and assessment will have to be significantly reviewed.
11. The document refers to the development of the 'expert learner'. We support this as a necessary element of success in improving retention and achievement. We would wish to raise within this the need to consider the digital literacy that learners will need to develop to support their learning, utilising what are for some very well developed digital skills within their learning process.
However we recognize that while many young learners are already at an advanced stage of digital skills and will come into Further Education with a mindset / skill set that will naturally assume the use of e-skills as part of their learning process, other learners have not yet developed this level of digital knowledge and skills.
12. We are concerned that this is not recognised as part of the learner need and therefore as integral to any strategy for meeting learner needs. Teachers need to recognise that digital skills may not equate to digital literacy; learners may be confident but lack the critical skills to support their own learning and future careers.

We would also remind colleagues within the Department that there needs to be parity in digital accessibility across the sector(s) and for the individual

13. We welcome the reference to improved assessment for learners. Personalising assessment, particularly with regard to assessing when ready rather than to a predetermined timetable and the ability to recognize and accommodate a range of evidence and ways of working, has the potential to greatly enhance motivation and achievement. We are disappointed that the role of e-assessment and e-portfolio is not explicitly recognized within this, as development in these areas will be crucial to the success of this element of the strategy.
14. If personalisation is to be truly meaningful to the individual we need to be actively engaging with e-assessment, e-portfolios, and unique learner numbers and with the current and potential practices made possible by web 2.0 technologies.
15. We agree that tailoring the service to the learner must apply to the whole learner journey and not just parts of it. We encourage the strategy to consider the various elements of the learner journey – initial assessment, student representation, tutor/broker support, student evaluation, more flexible qualifications etc. holistically, ensuring that they are joined up and the danger of silo development is avoided, particularly with regard to the supporting systems and infrastructure.
16. We advise careful consideration needs to be taken regarding the question of access and control of the electronic environments and data contained within them at different stages in the learners journey. This is particularly pertinent for younger learners as their legal status changes from age 14 to 16 to 18+
17. We fully support the need for synergy and consistency across sectors, ensuring the learner experience is seamless at all stages of their learning journey. We would encourage further integration across sectors of work such as MIAP to ensure that the data and systems used to support learners are consistent and accessible. We would also encourage strategies to ensure investment and development across the sectors is equitable to ensure that the resources (particularly e-resources) are consistent across providers.
18. We are concerned by the lack of reference to the data and systems requirements that will need to be identified and developed to support the aspirations for improved student identification and support.
We welcome the work of MIAP in developing the unique learner number (ULN). We would recommend a focus on data portability, data ownership and lifelong learning within these agendas.
19. In light of the above comments we stress the importance of strategic review of business processes within colleges and also for the careful planning of ICT infrastructure, taking account issues such as cost of ownership, the need to deliver seamless managed learning environments, simple data transfer and availability and minimizing risks of staff skill shortages. We believe that personalisation initiatives introduced in the absence of system-wide changes in business processes are likely to fail.

Annex A

Definitions

Defining personalisation:

“In an educational setting, personalisation means working in partnership with the learner and employer - to tailor their learning experience and pathways, according to their needs and personal objectives – in a way which delivers success.” (p. 7)

We agree that personalisation is not just something that is ‘done to’ the learner – it is a description of a relationship between the provider and the learner where the learner’s experience, needs, preferences and opinions are respected and responded to – a realisation of the rights as well as the responsibilities appropriate to each party.

AoC NILTA has produced a model of [Personalisation in Electronic Environments](#) which we would like to extend here in terms of a definition of personalised provision:

Adaptive personalisation:

This refers to the pre-organised provision of a personalised experience. Learners may be able to access the same process from a different location, and complete tasks at their own pace, or are presented with a range of tools and access determined by their username. While this offers a tailored experience to each learner, differentiation is based upon the curriculum, the category of learner or the learner as a member of an organisation, rather than as an individual. We can broadly categorise this as institutional provision and procedure.

The Managing Information Across Partners (MIAP) initiative provides a good example of this kind of personalisation – a range of learner information and requirements can be transferred between institutions in order to provide continuous learner support.

Customisation:

This enables the learner to engage with institutional provision. An example of this within the terms of the document would be a learner choosing which modules to select to complete a course of study, or standing for a recognized student council role.

“The development of Specialised Diplomas as a modular qualification with young people taking different modules or qualifications in different institutions...” (p.17) is a clear example of customisation.

Dynamic personalisation:

This refers to what we regard as learner-led personalisation: support and acknowledgement for the learner to create, write, collaborate and direct content and activity within the contexts of their own choosing. This is the institution engaging with the learner. There is little evidence of how this type of personalisation will be supported within the document, although the intention to equip learners with the skills to negotiate and design their own learning journeys is indicative of this kind of activity.

The full document can be downloaded from our website at <http://aocnilta.co.uk/2006/11/15/personalisation-2/>.