DELIVERING GOVERNMENT FUNDED PERSONALIZED PATHWAYS: A BLENDED LEARNING SOLUTION

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ABSTRACT
The skills required to be effective in the workplace are changing, therefore - ‘what people learn’, ‘how people learn’ and the ‘process of funding learning’ must change with it. Simply put, jobs, which did not exist previously, are being created each day. This coupled with the fact that the population is growing at an unprecedented rate is adding pressure to public services in attracting and retaining top talent.

The UK government has responded to these challenges by introducing new learning pathways (Apprenticeships, Traineeships and 24+ Loans) aimed at re-engaging adult learners, who with additional training can play a key role in this ever-changing landscape.

This presentation will provide an overview of how government funding was used to target a gap in the school workforce by training a group of learners aged 24 and older through a blended learning solution. Funding streams, recruitment and retention of learners, curriculum design and blended learning delivery will each be explained to emphasize how technology can be utilized to build a highly effective future proof workforce.

KEYWORDS: Blended learning, Global skills, Hard skills, Internet of things, Soft skills

THE GLOBAL SKILLS CHALLENGE

According to projections, there is a growing disconnect between the supply and demand of skills required to fill some of the most essential job sectors globally. By 2020 there is predicted to be a shortfall of 40 million workers with a tertiary education and 45 million workers with a secondary education in developing economies. At the same time, there will be 95 million more low-skilled workers than are needed.

These challenges are also being felt in some of the more advanced economies. In 2016, Adecco, the 2nd largest staffing company in the USA, released research on ‘How US Executives see the Skills Gap Impacting the American Workforce’. In the report, 92% of the 500 Senior Executives polled stated Americans are not as skilled as they need to be. The United Kingdom is experiencing a similar problem. The 2015 Employer Skills Survey (UK Commission for Employment and Skills: UKCES) reported that a lack of skills, qualifications or experience created 210,000 skill-shortage vacancies in 2015, a considerable increase from the 150,000 reported in 2013. Are these hard skills or soft skills? Well they are in fact both.

So what is the cause for the increasing demand of talented, skilled individuals and the apparent lack of supply? Each continent, country and city has its own unique challenges; there is certainly no broad-brush stroke response. However, there are some emerging trends.

Firstly, IT related products and services are developing at an unprecedented rate, which brings
with it a unique set of new skills that were simply not required previously. Just one example of this is how, ‘The Internet of Things’ (IoT) is transforming how our physical devices, vehicles and buildings communicate and exchange data. This innovation has created specific needs and resulting jobs, which simply did not exist in such high quantity previously. One example of this is in the field of Cyber Security, which according to Forbes will result in 1 million new positions being created in 2016 alone.

Another influencing factor in the skills gap is the growing world population (currently standing at 7.6 billion in 2016), and ‘Population Ageing’ which is set to become one of the most significant social transformations of the 21st century (UN). Labor and the demand for goods and services, such as housing and transportation, are all implications of an ageing population which again puts a strain on skills required to manage this transition. Roles, which focus on Health Care, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing, are put under intense scrutiny, as there are simply not enough people being trained in these vital, skilled areas.

So, what do these two examples highlight about the skills gap?
We have existing and emerging jobs, which require soft and hard skills that we have insufficient talent to fill – on a global scale.

**The UK Response**

Although the United Kingdom shares many of these global challenges, in recent years there has been a greater focus from the government on one specific area with a view to improving the economy and producing a more consistent highly skilled workforce – personalized learning pathways.

Strategically, this began by focusing on NEET’s, reducing the number of 16-18 year olds who were ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’. This approach was born out of a need to reduce the number of High School graduates who instead of continuing to learn and progress into employment and roles that would reduce the skills gap, entered low-skilled, low-earning jobs and in many cases no job at all. The impact of this was higher unemployment figures and related number of people who would then claim additional benefits such as ‘Job Seekers Allowance’ and ‘Housing Benefits’.

The result is that young people are now expected to remain in education or training until they are 18 and will continue to study both English and maths until they have mastered a minimum proficiency (GCSE Grade C). This does not necessarily mean continuing to attend a College or University program (although for many it is), but continue to develop in a job, profession or career, which has an academic or vocational element. This approach has now been adopted by a number of other countries including Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

At the very heart of the NEET initiative are Apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are available at different levels depending on academic ability and quite simply combine practical training in a job with study. As an apprentice, young people are provided with the opportunity to work alongside experienced staff, gain job-specific skills, earn a wage and study towards a qualification and usually take between 1 and 4 years to complete.
More recently, the UK government has extended the Apprenticeship program, specifically targeting 19-23 year olds and ‘Adult Apprenticeships’ which have no upper age limit, allowing anyone who has the desire to retrain in this highly flexible way.

The rationale behind these different learning pathways is to encourage lifelong learners and continue to develop a workforce, which is in tune with economic demand. A further option, which was introduced by the UK government, in addition to Apprenticeships, to allow individuals to retrain to plug this skills gap is ‘Advanced Learner Loans’. Also referred to as 24+ Loans, this initiative is available for individuals 24 and above to undertake approved qualifications at Levels 3 to 6 (equivalent to A Level and above).

These approved qualifications are publically available on a government website called LARS and are delivered like any other similar course, by colleges and approved private training providers. The qualifications offered are largely linked to economic demand and predicted sectors, which may experience a future skills gap. The Advanced Learner Loan pays for the tuition fees and is only repaid if the learner begins to earn above £21,000 per year, if they do not earn above this threshold then the loan is never repaid. This type of bursary has encouraged a section of adult learners to get back into education and ultimately the workplace. Due to the success of the 24+ Loan initiative, the government have introduced a similar model for individuals aged 19 and above.

In summary, there are now a wide range of personalized pathways which exist for individuals 14 and older depending on their preferred destination, ability and learning style. Many students still enjoy the classroom environment, however a proportion need and increasingly demand hands on, real life learning experience, which has attracted the term ‘earn while you learn’.

However, problems still remain. The challenge highlighted here is not unique to the UK; once again it is a challenge felt the world over and the challenge is: How do we create an experience to engage a learner, enhance progress and ensure completion?

Using our example from the UK, funded learning programs are an unbelievable opportunity both to close the skills gap and to bring people out of poverty and into highly paid jobs. However accessing and completing that learning is a quite different proposition.

There are a number of barriers. Firstly, because many of the pathways are funded in some way, quite often learners do not see ‘value’ in what they are completing as they have not made any financial sacrifice to study. This has resulted in poor completion figures, particularly for Advanced Learner Loan funded provision in some areas.

Another significant barrier to learning has been time. Many potential adult learners are already in some form of low-income employment. They earn too much to leave, but not enough to cover expenses whilst retraining, especially with the very low hourly pay rate that an Apprenticeship attracts. Similarly, many adults have a wide range of personal responsibilities such as being a parent and in some instances a career for example. Finding the time to produce the academic elements of a program and in many cases volunteer time for the practical side can prove too much. The very real ‘life gets in the way’ distractions often means that there are variety of reasons...
that learners do not to complete an assignment or attend a class. Another consideration in returning to education is previous experience. Some adults do not have the basic English and math skills required by many employers and as a result confidence is already very low. In addition, school may have been a challenge in the past with examinations and expectations been a barrier to learning and in not achieving their very best. So how do we effectively address the growing skills gap, even if we have access to funded personalized learning pathways?

**Regional Case Study**

Let us consider a case study from a training provider in North West England to illustrate one method of successful delivery. The approved private training organization, which will be referred to as ‘North West Training’, was able to successfully bid for £150,000 of 24+ Advanced Learner Loan funding with a view to addressing a specific skills shortage in the education sector across that particular region of the country. The Lancashire Enterprise Partnership (LEP) had produced a report entitled, “The Lancashire Skills and Employment Strategic Framework 2016-2021”. There were a number of priorities that North West Training wanted to address in Lancashire as part of a bigger regional development project:

1. Although a significant number of young people from Lancashire go on to higher education, many people are not staying in Lancashire or returning to Lancashire when they complete their qualification; the low numbers in the workforce aged 21-34 years old is a serious weakness in the workforce profile.
2. There is a strong link between qualifications and employment, and too many people, including those affected by Welfare Reform, have qualifications below Level 2. These people are vulnerable to becoming trapped in low-paid and insecure employment, leaving some communities experiencing low incomes and multiple deprivation. More Lancashire residents in the working age population skilled at Level 3 and above were required.

One significant developmental area identified was the need for more qualified Teaching Assistants trained at Level 3 and above. Local Primary and Secondary schools as well as Colleges and Universities already had access to a pool of unqualified or Level 1 and 2 classroom support, however there was a significant gap at Level 3 and 4. Local colleges already offered a government funded Teaching Assistant Level 3 program, and there was a national provider which offered a purely distance learning version of the same course. Market research performed by North West Training concluded that neither option was meeting the needs of local learners and education supply agencies (who place Teaching Assistants in schools) highlighted that demand was outstripping supply – there simply wasn’t enough Level 3 Teaching Assistants available to be placed in schools. In addition, Blackpool, which is one of the largest authorities across the United Kingdom, had experienced some big challenges in falling education standards. A number of the local High
Schools had been placed in ‘Special Measures’ by OFSTED meaning that the government had deemed the level of education provided by the school to be unsatisfactory. In addition to exceptional teachers, they required high quality classroom support (Teaching Assistants) to stretch the more able, support the vulnerable and assist the large percentage of students from overseas, as Blackpool has the largest Polish community across the entire UK.

The first step for North West training in addressing these highly publicized concerns was to ascertain why the programs offered by the local college and national distance-learning provider were not meeting learners needs.

The local college offered a course running over 38 weeks, 1 evening per week with each session lasting 3 hours with an annual start date in September. Feedback was that the course was restrictive because each lecture took place in a classroom setting onsite at the college campus.

This often presented difficulties, as it did not always fit around students personal circumstances, which were mainly work and childcare related. In addition, the Teaching Assistant course requires a school placement accounting for a minimum of 50 hours. During the placement students are observed against a set of core standards. Passing the theory and observational elements of the course would ensure students were awarded with a Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF). The college offered the theory element but students had the responsibility of arranging the placement. This confused many students, as they did not know who to contact or what to say, this often resulted in students leaving the course as they could not arrange the classroom hours required. In addition, each student was provided with a traditional clip file for their paperwork, which they carried to lectures and the school placement. Although this benefited many students who were used this method of learning, for a significant percentage, expectations were to have online access to course material.

The distance-learning provider offered the same government funded Level 3 Teaching Assistant qualification, however their delivery method was quite different. Their course material detailed that to complete the requirements of the course they would need to spend a total of 180 hours studying, which included the theoretical, and school placed competencies. Once again the placement was the students responsibility to arrange and maintain, the providers website was very clear that they would not become involved in this aspect of the qualification. On enrolment, learners were mailed with a Pen Drive containing the 11 assignments and other background information to be successful on the course e.g. Course Handbook and overview of the Core Standards to be successful as a Level 3 Teaching Assistant. The biggest challenge to learners was the emphasis placed on independence, planning time independently, completing and submitting assignments at a time which was convenient to learners are just a couple of examples. The number of documents provided at the very start of the course to many was also overwhelming.

Remember that many of the adults had not been in learning for a number of years and may not be as computer literate as the distance-learning provider assumed they should be. There were no face-to-face touch points; all delivery took place between email and the learning portal where assignments would need to be submitted.

It became clear by North West Training that there was a gap in the market to deliver a hybrid of these 2 delivery methods, using a Blended Learning methodology:

“Blended learning is realized in teaching and learning environments where there is an effective integration of different modes of delivery, models of teaching and styles of learning as a result of
adopting a strategic and systematic approach to the use of technology combined with the best features of face to face interaction” (Krause, 2007). Blended learning is not a new methodology. In its simplest terms blended learning is about good teaching and learning and focuses on better ways to support students in achieving the learning objectives. The two elements of blended learning that are combined are on-line instruction and a face-to-face, traditional classroom model (Vaughn, 2007). Recorded lectures, on-campus tutorials and virtual discussion forums are just a few examples, which if combined successfully would present a student with a blended learning experience as it involves a mix of delivery modes, teaching approaches and learning styles.

North West Training marketed their version of the Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF) course using the following features:

- Funded course (24+ Advanced Learner Loan requirements must be met)
- Access to an online learning community offering collaboration with fellow students
- Option of clip file or online portal access to submit assignments
- Face to face course enrolment (Student met tutor, expectations, key documentation and timeframes agreed)
- Rolling enrolment – students could begin course when they wanted
- Online feedback on assignments within 24 hours
- Tutors worked closely with students on securing a placement, realizing that the real life classroom experience was vital to student retention as they could quickly apply the theory
- Invitation to weekly ‘drop in’ clinics where a tutor would be available

The delivery model had many benefits to learners and schools in the Blackpool area. Firstly, during the initial course registration meeting tutors would quickly ascertain the suitability of the course for the learner through effective questioning and by conducting a baseline Literacy and Numeracy assessment (offered either paper based or online). The purpose of this was to verify the learner's ability to complete the necessary qualification requirements, but ultimately effectively support students in the classroom. This important stage ensured that from the very start there was a learning agreement in place with key milestones, learning styles identified. This process set the student up to win in that they had the skills and desire to complete the
Building strong relationships with local schools was another important element to the projects success. Knowing that there were challenges affecting educational standards in some areas ensured that there was genuine demand to make the progress and learning of young people better by Headteachers and other senior leaders. Placing high quality students in these schools, with close mentoring would only help improve those standards. Learners could also see very quickly the application of the skills that they were learning. For example, understanding theoretically how to effectively manage the poor behavior of a student is quite different than working with a student with behavioral challenges, building an effective professional relationship and seeing real change in their attitude. Theory first, delivered either in person or online followed very quickly by application.

The ‘drop in sessions’ were also very well attended. For some learners, this was an unnecessary distraction and quickly opted out. However, for a core group of learners they would regularly come to these timetabled sessions for assignment advice, reassurance, to discuss a situation that had occurred during their placement or just be part of a learning community and simply develop friendships and have a coffee. Skype and Face time were of course an option for those learners who had a desire for interaction but who had challenges in physically making the sessions. Students had the opportunity to learn online, collaborate with other learners either physically or virtually, apply theory quickly through a school based placement and complete assignments using handouts, multimedia and track progress through the learning portal – a true blended learning experience. This provided students the best elements of each learning format (Frey, Fisher, Pumpian, 2013). Specifically this delivery method broadened the spaces and opportunities available for learning, supported course management and engaged students through interactivity and collaboration (Griffith University).

During the first 3 months, 74 learners enrolled on the North West Training Level 3 Certificate in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (QCF), utilizing two thirds of the allocated £150,000 Advanced Learner Loan budget. Retention of learners stood at over 85% with the average 24+ Loan funded program averaging less than 40% nationally.

So what are the key learning outcomes of a project like this?

- Funding adult learning in principle is a good idea. However, having an engaging curriculum that underpins the program is the most important factor in retaining learners and ultimately completing the qualification requirements.
- Limiting delivery to on campus classroom instruction increasingly fails to attract and engage learners.
- Delivering learning solely through distance learning has its challenges. Many students still benefit from traditional face-to-face learning and teaching experiences.
- Blended learning is the way forward. Developing a hybrid curriculum, which integrates technology thoughtfully, in a relevant way significantly enhances the learning experience.
- Gaining real life job experience brings learning to life. Whether it is through a formal Apprenticeship or other government-funded channels, the ability to
apply theory in a real life context has significant benefits in student retention.

- Having access to a range of personalized learning pathways allows learners, young or old the opportunity to really engage in learning and begin a journey which is relevant and leads to employment.
- Win-win. Using technology as part of a blended learning approach benefits both the tutor and student. By automating and streamlining processes like providing feedback, monitoring attendance and the organization of course materials affords the tutor more time in supporting the student in making good progress. Similarly, students can access feedback quickly, when they need it most providing the motivation to continue, even when times get tough.

However, there is one specific note of caution – computer literacy. The case study highlights (as with any learning experience) the importance of Literacy and Numeracy skills, however IT literacy is as important as these core skills in successfully implementing a blended learning solution. It is very dangerous to assume that society is comfortable and skilled in using technology. It is also wrong to assume that communities have consistent access to the software, hardware and Internet access to make blended learning a success. During the project there were numerous examples of individuals who had the desire to complete assignments, however a proportion simply did not have the IT skills necessary to access the material and complete the core elements. A significant amount of time was spent providing one to one support in accessing the learning portal, installing software and exporting documents into multiple file formats depending on the applications being used by individual learners. It is also important to note that there was no relationship between the age of learner and their computer literacy. As many learners aged 24-35 experienced challenges with technology as those aged 36-65.

**CONCLUSION**

The skills gap is very real. Evidence is pointing to an increasing divide in the skills employers need to fulfill key job functions and those which are currently available. The rate of change in Health, Manufacturing and Technology has highlighted the need to review learning approaches and build curriculum, which is highly flexible, allowing adults of any age to reenter education. Personalized learning pathways are a great way to re-engage adults as they ensure that there is a program which is built to meet their individual learning style and achieve their unique aspirations. However, without carefully planning, even pathways, which are fully funded, can fail as the teaching and learning methodology must be constructed in a way to engage and retain students. Blended learning allows for a hybrid of traditional classroom delivery and innovative technology to motivate learners and increase the chances that students will complete their chosen pathway. A truly exciting time lies ahead but there is a job to be done. The challenge is to continue to develop personalized opportunities for learners, young and old so that they become excited about learning once more. Students who are engaged and self-directed see value in their work and understand where they are in heading and how they will get there. However, this can only be
achieved if barriers to entry are removed and technology continues to innovate allowing essential workplace skills to be fully mastered thus closing the global divide
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