

CASE STUDY: ABINGDON & WITNEY COLLEGE

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Background

Abingdon and Witney College is a medium-sized general Further Education College in the South East of England, rated 'good' (2) by Ofsted in 2017. The college was established in 2001 as a result of merger and has around 12,000 learners from Entry Level to Level 6. The college offers study programmes for 16 to 19 year olds, adult learning, apprenticeships, and provision for learners with high needs across three main sites: one in Abingdon, one in Witney and a rural skills centre in Hailey. Community and wider adult learning programmes take place in a number of community-based hub centres across Oxfordshire.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

In September 2012, Abingdon and Witney College established the Teaching Skills Academy (TSA), an initiative which is run '*by teachers, for teachers*'. Its mission and aim is to use peer coaching as a mechanism to improve teaching, learning and assessment.



It's all about responding to the needs of staff. Within the college staff are very much encouraged to take ownership for their development and progression.

TSA Coach

Although the role of a TSA coach is focused on improving teaching, learning and assessment (TLA), they also provide advice to tutors about classroom management and behavioural issues. An important aspect of the TSA role is signposting individual tutors and departments to relevant resources when they need support or assistance.



It's what we class as scaffolding – so it's there if you need it.

Tutor

TSA coaches receive a timetable reduction of between 20 and 80 per cent dependent on working pattern. Coaches highlighted personal development, progression to management, and the challenge and reward of helping others as important non-financial benefits.

The TSA is led by the Head of Teaching Skills Academy, and is staffed by six to seven TSA coaches per year who are all outstanding teachers in their own right. TSA coaches are managed by their curriculum managers in terms of their teaching role, but centrally by the Head of TSA in their coaching capacity. The college has purposely chosen a temporary 12-month secondment because it wants the role to be aspirational, and for staff to have the opportunity to put themselves forward for career progression and development. Furthermore, the college's strategic priorities and needs change over time, and senior managers feel that a temporary role keeps the service fresh and responsive. The college tries to select coaches from a variety of different specialist areas to ensure that there is expertise in a broad range of areas, for example behaviour management and the use of information learning technology.



Teachers are not 'sent' to the TSA, they go there themselves. It's owned by the lecturers themselves, they know the TSA is there for them and they take the initiative.

Senior Manager

Activities

Coaches deliver bespoke one-to-one support to members of staff. This is driven by their identified needs and individual requests. Support has included:

- In class coaching and support to improve the level of differentiation and stretch and challenge within lessons.
- Supporting staff to manage any behavioural difficulties within their classroom.
- Helping staff with schemes of work.
- Conducting developmental, not graded, observations and providing resources, such as practical activities for the classroom.
- Creating and sharing a bank of best-practice resources.
- Supporting staff to obtain education and training qualifications.
- Outlining the role and function of the TSA in new staff inductions.
- Developing staff skills in supporting students with additional learning needs e.g. dyslexia.

TSA coaches pride themselves on going to teachers in their faculties, offices and classrooms and take the support to them.



The new methods of outreach, going to teachers and integrating development into existing classes makes it much easier and accessible for teachers to engage with.

Advanced Practitioner

Outside of bespoke one-to-one support, TSA coaches arrange college-wide training opportunities and continuing professional development (CPD). The content of these activities is driven by development themes that have been identified by the Quality Leads or curriculum managers, as well as requests from staff. Last year the TSA emailed one teaching tip per day to all staff to encourage them to take small steps to experiment and improve their practice.



I was devouring those [TSA tips] every single day and making use of them. They're so engrained in me... they're just part of what I do now.

Tutor

TSA coaches also run breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea and twilight sessions – which makes sessions accessible to tutors who teach evening classes – on different topics, for example using SMART boards in the classroom and accessing resources to support students with dyslexia. TSA coaches additionally select a 'theme for the term', design and develop a broad range of activities around that theme, and run 'Festivals' such as 'techfest' and 'commsfest' which focus on different aspects of teaching, learning and assessment.

Capability

The rigorous recruitment process for TSA coaches ensures that only those teachers with sufficient experience, capability, and interpersonal skills are recruited to the role. Suitability is assessed through an application form and an interview, and only those tutors who have been assessed as being in the 'leadership' category, as opposed to 'aspirational' or 'development', on the college's competency pathway system¹ are eligible. Once recruited, there is a training day for new TSA coaches at the beginning of the academic year. Additionally, every coach has a one-to-one meeting with the Head of TSA on a termly basis.

The Head of TSA monitors the number of hours spent on coaching and the activities being undertaken. This allows the Head of TSA to identify areas of repeated staff need, and informs the training offered to TSA coaches to ensure that they are able to support staff in the identified areas. TSA Lead oversight also ensures that no individual coach is overburdened.

Outcomes

Most of the outcomes identified by the college are qualitative. The college feel that staff have embraced the support and see it as a great way to improve and progress. They also feel that the introduction of the role has positively impacted on teaching, learning and assessment in practice.



It's hard to put it on paper when your line manager says, "and what's the impact of that?" It's more important that they get the help they need, the support they need, the coaching, they grow, they develop, but they can see it, they can feel it, their students benefit from it and people going in to observe do see it.

TSA Coach

The college and TSA have worked hard to communicate and build the mantra of '*for teachers by teachers*'. The fact that the TSA is '*entirely divorced from line management*' ensures that it is seen as an entirely non-threatening service. Staff now view the TSA and TSA coaches as a developmental tool and embrace the opportunity to improve their professional practice. In turn, staff feel that the culture surrounding 'asking for help' has shifted. Departments that were initially resistant to TSA support have started to voluntarily request their assistance.



The perception I have of them is like the ultimate teaching staff. This is what you want to be. This is the level you want to be at because you can always be better.

Tutor

Learners were extremely complimentary about the college and the staff working there. They felt that the culture and teaching practices were highly conducive to their learning and success, and specifically noted the difference between the college environment and school or Sixth Form. Additionally, learners mentioned methods which were innovative and encouraged independent learning.

¹ The competency grid system is based on ETF Professional Standards.



The style of learning is very much that you go away and find the information for yourself.

Learner

Whilst there are limited quantitative markers of the impact of TSA coaches, the Head of TSA noted that the college's recent Ofsted report highlighted that the college has a *'highly effective teaching, learning and assessment strategy'*, and that *'teachers receive excellent support to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment'*.



Managers have taken effective action to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment are good. Managers have set clear expectations of what constitutes effective teaching and staff in the 'teaching skills academy' support teachers well in attaining those standards.

Ofsted, 2017

Senior managers noted that although feedback from staff is excellent and KPIs would suggest excellent performance, they need to find a more robust way to measure impact over the next few years.

Shared learning

Tutors feel that once a request for support has been submitted, it should be dealt with very quickly so teachers are not left worrying. TSA coaches agreed, stating their appreciation of how difficult it can be for tutors to ask for help. Therefore, once they do, they make it a priority to act quickly.



The thing I've noticed here is that they've got time. Whereas where I used to work they were just so busy.

Tutor

Further, the college feels that moving away from graded observations to developmental observations has eased the concerns of many staff.



Top tips for other providers

- Clearly separate the advanced practitioner role from management to build confidence, trust and rapport.
- Make the purpose and remit of the role high profile so that all staff know it exists and know what advanced practitioners can support them with.
- Ensure that support is available, timely and flexible so that tutors can access advanced practitioner support informally and quickly.

- Encourage development days where different departments swap over for a couple of hours to discuss and then share best practice.
- Encourage an open door approach to observations to make them non-judgemental, non-threatening, and a reciprocal process.
- Consider making the advanced practitioner role a fixed term position to encourage new ideas and practices from a variety of staff with different experiences, disciplines, and backgrounds.