CASE STUDY: WARWICKSHIRE COLLEGE GROUP

MEGAN EDWARDS – OCTOBER 2017

Background

Warwickshire College Group (WCG) is a Group of seven General Further Education (FE) colleges based in the West Midlands. It was rated 'good' (2) by Ofsted in 2015. The group has two specialist land-based centres but also offers a wide range of academic and vocational provision, including; vocational courses, Higher Education (HE), apprenticeships and A-levels. WCG has approximately 18,000 students; 4,500 full-time 16-18 year olds, 2,500 apprentices, 10,000 adult learners and 1,000 HE students.

Understanding the role of advanced practitioners

At WCG, advanced practitioner-type staff are called Teaching and Learning Improvement mentors (TLIs). The TLIs are managed by the Head of Teaching and Learning Improvement who reports directly to a member of the Senior Management Team. The role focuses on supporting and mentoring teaching staff to improve their teaching and learning practice, and subsequently enhance the student learning experience and learner outcomes.

> To make sure teachers are delivering what they should be doing, in a style that's engaging and that maximises the impact they have on the learning of the students… we go in to make sure that every student gets an equal opportunity of achieving.

Teaching and Learning Improvement mentor

TLIs receive a minimum of a 40 per cent timetable remittance and are required to teach for at least 30 per cent of their timetable. WCG believe it is critical that TLIs are active teachers as this ensures that they fully understand the prevailing teaching environment. In line with this view, all teaching staff at the college are required to be teacher trained, an initiative which the college supports financially.

> I think it's important they still teach…that is a big thing. They need to be current; they need to be talking relevantly.

Senior Manager

The college group has seven permanent TLIs based across the seven college sites, six are full-time and one works part-time. The college have decreased the number of roles from 22 to 7 since the programme started in 2001, on account of budget and funding restrictions.

The TLIs report to the Head of Teaching and Learning Improvement and they are loosely allocated to departments based on their College location and, where possible, their subject specialism. This is however, a flexible process, and TLIs do also work across-departments. Senior management believes that allocating TLIs to teachers based on their subject specialism ensures that individuals are supported by someone who understands their academic needs and vocational area. However, senior management and the TLIs themselves encourage and think it is important for TLIs to work across departments, especially when carrying out developmental observations, as this forces them

to focus on professional practice in teaching, learning and assessment rather than subject content.

> What we are looking for is the style, progress and how the learning is happening, and if you're a specialist in that area and you're used to teaching that type of stuff you can get a bit clouded. But if you're neutral or not a specialist, teaching and learning is the only thing you can look for.
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> **Teaching and Learning Improvement mentor**
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> It definitely helps me to have someone who has a degree of understanding of my specialist subject… but if they hadn't, then that wouldn't be an obstacle because having the charge of somebody who comes from a slightly different background can present novel approaches to teaching you hadn't otherwise thought of.
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> **Tutor**

WCG employ specialist TLIs to cover the areas of equality and diversity (E&D), HE, maths and English. This ensures that there is expertise in the areas that the Senior Management Team has identified as requiring additional focus and attention. Senior management think that having specialist roles is very important, and without them, key themes in teaching, learning and assessment would get missed. For example, practitioners are required to embed maths and English within their lessons. If a teacher needs particular support within this area, they would be assigned to the maths or English specialist. Specialist TLIs deliver additional activities across the college sites, for example, the E&D TLI has an annual schedule of activities – ranging from promoting and creating awareness of Passover to Black History Month.

Activities

There are four core categories of activities that the TLIs deliver:

− Induction and on-boarding for new staff.

− Developing and delivering training.

− Developmental teaching observations.

− Mentoring and coaching to support staff.

Firstly, all new members of staff are introduced to their departmental TLI and are given an induction handbook. It outlines the support given by TLIs, signposts to useful resources and explains the professional standards expected of all teachers at WCG. It contains a detailed teaching and learning checklist that TLIs must cover during induction. All new starters attend a Transformational Learning Programme, run by the TLIs, which runs through the teaching and learning strategies and expectations at WCG. The induction process is designed to help all new staff 'bed in' and reach an effective standard of teaching quickly.

Secondly, TLIs develop and deliver training. During the year they work closely with their Heads of Department to identify developmental themes across the department and then design and deliver appropriate team or one-to-one training sessions to address these needs. Sessions could focus on a range of topics, such as, Ofsted, equality and diversity, and exam board changes. Additionally, at the end of the academic year, all WCG staff take part in a training week. The TLIs create and lead training sessions based on the developmental themes that have been identified across the college.

Thirdly, a large part of the TLI role is to conduct the college's developmental lesson observations.

Each TLI receives a caseload of approximately 40 observations to complete per academic year. Critically, the observation process has moved from being graded, which directly linked to teachers' pay and progression opportunities, to providing developmental feedback. In developmental observations teachers are provided with immediate verbal feedback and a moderated formal report which provides a Learner Impact Profile. The profile rates six dimensions of teaching, which should be embedded in every lesson, from 'not seen' to 'highly effective'. If teachers are not observed as 'effective' in any of the six areas they are assigned a TLI as a support mechanism and are scheduled for a re-observation. Whilst the lesson observations no longer directly impact pay and progression, they still form part of the performance management process - the formal report and feedback are used by managers during the annual appraisal process. The TLIs have noticed that the shift to developmental observations has had a positive impact on the perceptions of their role.

> Taking the onus away from, particularly, pay and progression is probably the most important thing because you're not thinking, "if I don't do very well in this observation it directly impacts on my income".
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> **Teaching and Learning Improvement mentor**

Finally, TLIs provide formal and informal mentoring to support staff to improve their professional practice. The majority of formal mentoring follows an observation and the mentoring activities focus on the areas identified as requiring improvement. The mentoring is delivered by a different TLI to the one who carried out the initial observation; this ensures that the TLI providing support is viewed as impartial. Specific mentoring activities vary and are dependent on the person and the context, but range from one-to-one discussions to providing resources and facilitating role playing activities. TLIs additionally welcome informal self-referrals. This can be a quick question in the corridor or a chat in the staffroom. All support and mentoring activities are recorded for impact evaluation, however, shorter, more informal discussions sometimes slip through the net and are not documented. A tutor, formally from industry, found their TLI particularly useful in providing advice and guidance around ways to present content in the classroom that maximises learner impact.

> Personally it's more about tools, techniques and approaches… if I want to try and access advice on approaches or identify what resources might be available that I'm unaware of, that's how I might use my mentor most often.
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> **Tutor**

More recently, TLIs have been involved in curriculum inspections - conducting walk through observations, evaluating teachers' schemes of work and marking, looking at student attendance, analysing patterns in observation reports and ultimately providing an overarching report for each department. This report is then used to develop a department-specific TLI support programme.

Capability

To support effective delivery, there is a dedicated training period for all TLIs at the beginning and end of each academic year which includes training from both internal and external training providers. TLIs are additionally encouraged to take ownership of their own development by identifying any external conferences that may be appropriate for their continuous professional development. As well as identifying and using industry resources to keep abreast of the latest developments in teaching, learning and assessment and their own specialist areas.

There is a mandatory weekly meeting that all TLIs attend. TLIs use this as an opportunity to share best practice, moderate observation reports and support each another. TLIs also keep in contact informally during the week through emails and phone calls.

Outcomes

Since stopping graded observations, the college has found tracking quantitative outcomes more difficult. However, WCG believes that positive impact can be demonstrated. Re-observed teaching staff show clear improvements in their observation report following TLI intervention, and teachers have been observed embedding suggested teaching, learning and assessment strategies within their lessons. Students have also noticed a difference, giving feedback to TLIs about enjoyable teaching activities in the classroom. In student surveys, the level of satisfaction with teaching has improved, with an increasing number of students rating teaching as 'good'.

> It made it [joining WCG] much better, much easier to settle in. It's given me access to experience which I would not have otherwise gained, I would have had to get it first-hand through my own experience and mistakes, or through my own research.
>
> **Tutor**

Additionally, the TLIs feel that their own teaching has significantly improved since taking on the role. Observing lessons outside of their subject area has provided new and innovative perspectives.

> You learn so much. You see so much.
>
> **Teaching and Learning Improvement mentor**

This is reinforced by the fact that many TLIs have gone on to become a Head of Department; an unexpected, but welcomed outcome of the TLI programme.

> Most of the TLIs have gone on to become Heads of Departments and for me that's brilliant because I have a teaching and learning expert managing a department. …one of the reasons is … because they (TLIs) get to see so much, it broadens their scope…they can pluck out the good teaching…. It has supported the college in succession planning.
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> **Senior Manager**

However, all staff feel that the budget cuts and the subsequent decrease in the number of TLIs has made the role more challenging. The caseload per TLI has increased and the time they are able to spend providing support has decreased – which may impact on the quality of support that can be provided.

Shared learning

✔ Top tips for other providers

− Time. You need to invest a significant amount of time into the programme otherwise you will only scratch the surface.

− Teach. It is essential that advanced practitioners still teach and get out to see as many lessons as possible across different subject areas.

− Team. A consistent team with strong communication is vital. Extend your team outside of your own provider and link in with other providers in your area to create a sharing network.