



Evaluating the Greater Manchester Colleges Group: Digital and Blended Learning Project, 2020 - 2021

Executive Summary

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Department
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A Greater Manchester Colleges Group
project made possible by the Department
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Executive Summary

The Greater Manchester Colleges Group (GMCG) Digital and Blended Learning Project brought together all nine colleges that serve all the ten boroughs of the Greater Manchester City Region. Managed by a small central team at LTE Group and The Manchester College, the project was steered by senior leaders from GMCG and further supported by specialists in the field of digital and blended learning in Further Education (FE). The project took place between August 2020 and March 2021 through the Department for Education's 'College Collaboration Fund' (CCF).

“Working alongside other GM [Greater Manchester] Colleges has also been invaluable, we have been able to work together, create resources and talk to each other to evaluate best practice. It would be great if this could carry on” (Digital Blended Learning Champion).

The overarching aim of the GMCG Digital and Blended Learning project

The overall objective of the project was to bring together subject experts in a 'Communities of Practice' model to identify, evaluate, develop and deploy the most impactful digital content and resources for FE students through the recruitment and development of Digital and Blended Learning Champions (DBLCs) in each college. The project also had ambition to work at a strategic level to influence, inform and shape the mid to longer-term development of digital and blended learning strategies of colleges across the partnership.

A key output for the project was the development and co-creation of an online **Digital and Blended Learning Teacher Toolkit**, to support the delivery of CPD and to share resources and emergent good practice across the community.

“Time spent on administrative work equates to reduced time on teachers' contribution to students' learning” (Digital Blended Learning Champion).

“As an Achievement Tutor I can see at a glance where students are on MS Teams. It is so easy to communicate with them, whereas before we tried to connect via phones and email, now we have something that resonates with students, they like the chat and it's safe for everyone.”

Key findings from the evaluation

Quality of Education

1. Teachers are becoming more confident and they are developing their digital practices, but this takes time and differentiated support.
2. Teachers appreciated person-centred, contextualised support
3. Collaborative work aids critical reflection and helps drive up standards
4. Teachers need time and space to access training and trial resources/ digital learning opportunities
5. Working continually in online spaces may impact upon teachers' wellbeing
6. Students have benefited from improved quality of online, remote and blended learning,
7. Students have gained independent learning and digital skills that prepare them well for progression to higher level learning and work

"Students found that blended learning gives them the time to look over their work or complete extra work if needed. They feel they have a constant area for feedback and have access to support."

Digital and blended learning design

1. 'Good' blended learning looks different depending upon the context
2. Resource development (and amendment) needs to be pedagogically driven and reflexively responsive to both students' and teachers' needs, as well as EdTech features
3. High-quality blended learning and rigorous inclusive practices go hand-in-hand

"I have researched on blended learning methods and have started to think more about the pedagogy, rather than the technology." (ESOL teacher)

Leadership and management

1. Leaders played a critical role in the success of the project
2. Leaders need to further consider, and maximise on, the potential of digital and online learning, to develop and expand their provision
3. Digital inclusion, accessibility and digital strategies requires a whole college approach, considered in the context of the wider development of college strategic planning
4. Effective systems and processes are not yet sufficiently coherent to minimise burdensome administrative tasks

"It gave an insight into the breadth of activity already undertaken, the amazing expertise within the colleges and their willingness to work together. This enthusiasm has clearly driven the project much further than originally anticipated and shown the wider benefits of collaboration." (College Principal - feedback from the Leadership of Learning Conference, Feb 2021)

Next steps and recommendations include:

Expand and build on our development so far through expanding communities of practice and the work of DBLCs to include some key areas:

- Blended learning models
- English, maths and digital literacy and independent learning skills
- Sector specific innovation and development
- Build capacity and expertise in sector/subject areas
- Collaborative working with education technology providers
- Collaborative working with commercial software companies
- Sector/subject communities of practice
- Further development of research links
- Digital strategies and digital inclusion

“Culture shift and a change of hearts and minds from the top of the organisations...”

“We need to reflect on lessons learnt, we need to be really clear what has worked well and why, and find ways to build that in to our curriculum delivery models - in a bespoke fashion e.g. some curriculum areas/levels of learners have really benefited from aspects of digital/blended learning. It would be a backwards step not to harness our new powers.”



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