Welcome to the Jisc podcast. UK colleges and training providers are looking to technology to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility of their assessment and feedback practice. In this podcast interview, Jane Charlton asks Jayne Holt, Assistant Principal of Learning Services at Walsall College about their experiences of technology-enhanced assessment and the benefits it is bringing to their students and staff.

My name is Jayne Holt. I’m Assistant Principal for Learning Services at Walsall College in the West Midlands.

What do you feel the challenges Walsall are facing with assessment?

Really making sure we get the right systems and processes in place to support the students whether they are in the workplace or whether they’re in the classroom to have a high quality experience.

That, alongside the transparent overview of every individual student, knowing where each student is at any time and for them to know where they are at any moment in time.

The final challenge is the changes to the qualification reforms and the different methodologies going forward.

How has technology has helped to tackle these challenges?

We have developed our Moodle grade book to be a really powerful tracking and progression tool. Not only can staff at all levels see exactly where students are, students also know where they are and that’s important for them to take ownership of their learning. We can draw drill down into any course or any student and we can see the quality of the feedback and the assessment taking place.

And for our apprenticeships we do use a different solution which is a Smart Assessor e-portfolio and again we can see exactly where students are and they can engage in that system.

What has Walsall needed to put in place to support this?
Walsall have needed to put in place several things to support and to overcome the challenges. One of those things is a strategy and a really strong vision and strategy for how we use technology across the organisation. And then of course the engagement of staff and the development and training of staff to fulfil that strategy. Likewise the support and training of students as well because they often come with the digital skills, but not necessarily the digital skills for learning. So it’s supporting the people who are going to use the system really. Making sure that is firmly and robustly in place.

What has been the feedback from staff and students?

Really positive. What we try to do with any of our technology systems is to incorporate some benefits. So for example with our Moodle grade book and tracking system the benefit for the staff is not only being able to track their students and give feedback online but also at the end of year they can submit, automatically submit their student results forms and that saves them an enormous amount of time. So some of those benefits really mean that staff engage into the technology.

Likewise with students, there are a lot of benefits for them using the system – they get awards, they get badges for completing certain elements of their work and of course they can see exactly where they are at any moment in time. So the benefits are what really engage people and make them want to use the technology.

And what are the positive impacts that Walsall has taken from it so far?

The positive impacts are very much that our systems are completely embedded and integrated into our quality processes. So all of our students work within the grade book or if they’re in the workplace, Smart Assessor. And so from a quality point of view we can see exactly where our students are at any moment in time, it’s very transparent, everyone’s engaged in that system and it has an impact on the outcomes for learners.

Jayne, are there any plans to extend technology-enhanced assessment for the future?

There are plans to extend technology-enhanced assessment. With our students, all our students have to go through an initial assessment, diagnostics and so forth with maths and English and ICT. But we are now looking at a more adaptive approach and many more of our programmes throughout their formative assessments. So we’re looking at a more adaptive assessment system that allows us to very much personalise the appropriate learning opportunity for students going forward.

Thank you Jayne and final question - are there any lessons learnt from the work you’ve done so far?

It’s been over a number of years. Systems aren’t implemented straight away. You’ve got your technological barriers to overcome but you’ve also got the people and the cultural shifts that need to take place for systems to be effective and successful. So technology I always think is more about the people than it is about technology. The technology is the tool and the people and how they use it is what really becomes powerful and that’s about culture and the right support for staff and the right development of staff and the right kinds of incentives and benefits for them to have a good reason to use it. So I think that’s what we’ve learnt really – always start with the people and the adoption of the technology is much easier that way.