Reflections from the AoC Annual Conference and Exhibition

The AoC Annual Conference and Exhibition marks the coming together of people from across the Further Education sector to exchange ideas, share best practice and stimulate debate.

Speaking to Val Keay, Paul McKean, Jisc Head of FE & Skills reflects on the Jisc Panel session from the first day, which featured college principals who were each using technology to enable organisational change and enhance learning experience.

VAL KEAY:
So Paul can you give me an overview of the panel session, who else was involved, and what did you discuss?

PAUL McKEAN:
The panel consisted of Ken Webb, who’s the Principal of the South East Regional College in Northern Ireland and he talked about their nine year technological transitional journey and how the importance of leadership, and leadership by him, was to the journey that they’ve been on; and critically the support that they provided to staff around continuing professional development and that the mentoring of staff and support staff have been given on that nine year journey has been critical to their success.

In addition, we had Stuart Laverick who’s the Principal of the Heart of Worcestershire College and he talked about their solar blended model and their learning resources consortium.

In addition, Ken Thomson, for Forth Valley College, he’s the Principal there, he talked about their creative curriculum and how technology underpins this creative curriculum. What he was able to tell the audience is, that the Senior Management Team at Forth Valley have taken responsibility for risk and therefore given the opportunity for Tutors to be creative and to take risks within their individual delivery of lessons and courses; and technology in itself underpins that creativity and has really helped improve the engagement of learners and engagement with employers, and there’s been significant collaboration built up with their key employers in the area. One thing that he was talking about was a simulation of an oil rig that they’ve created in the college and was paid for by the employer and technology has enabled that.
Finally, the last person on the panel was Paul Feldman, the Chief Executive of Jisc, who sort of brought together all of the issues and things that were talked about by the Principals and how Jisc products and services support that activity.

VAL KEAY:
So Paul, can you tell me why is technology so important in colleges being able to achieve change?

PAUL McKEAN:
I think the key message from the session yesterday was that technology can be a catalyst for change and a key enabler, in enabling the kind of step change that’s required to make a truly different curriculum offer and a different way of delivering, particularly in embracing the blended learning opportunities that technology can support.

VAL KEAY:
And in general, how well do you think UK colleges are leveraging technology? Is there still work to be done?

PAUL McKEAN:
I think it’s clear from the session that there is work still to be done. Robin [ph Gurborough 00:02:58] who chaired the session did ask a question right at the beginning to see whether people in the audience, who were mainly principals, felt that they were being given the opportunity to really embrace technology and funding supported that, and actually there was very limited responses to agree with that statement; However, all the people on the panel certainly did, so it’s the advocacy from the experts – or the examples of good practice – that we do need to share.

VAL KEAY:
So are there any highlights to share from the panel discussion?

PAUL McKEAN:
Yes, I think the story from the South East Regional College was really, really important and was well received by the audience. The fact that there has been a very long journey, transitional journey that SERC haVE been going along for the last nine years; the fact that they’ve really, firmly bought into it from the top; the fact that the Principal has challenged where there are barriers and supported, where necessary, the staff to overcome the barriers; the fact that CPD is a core component and their mentorship arrangements for staffing the college really shows that the value and importance of the use of technology has been taken forward by that organisation and I would advocate that anybody who is looking to change the culture of an organisation goes and sees what they’ve done and tries to replicate it.

VAL KEAY:
And what’s the one, or more if required, lesson you want delegates to take away with them?

PAUL McKEAN:
I think the message we’d like delegates to take away is that technology, as I said, is an enabler and a catalyst and it can help drive quality as well as creating efficiencies. Technology simply isn’t a tool to reduce teaching staff, to enable colleges to do more with less. It can actually help improve the standards and quality of education and actually improve the learner experience; and I think that’s the real key, because actually at the end of the day we’re talking about learners and their learning experience and technology can certainly help improve that.

VAL KEAY:
And finally is there anything you’re hoping to seize from the rest of the conference?

PAUL McKEAN:
Yes, I hoping, given the way in which the previous Jisc technology Beacon Award winners have shared their practice this year, that the announcement on Wednesday evening around the winner of the new Beacon Award, I’m hoping their message is as well received by the sector and is suitably cascaded and I’m dying to see where colleges will be in twelve months on the back of the support and sharing that they are able to provide.