Sixth Form Matters

A collection
of essays
& case studies

Sixth Form Colleges
Association

THE VOICE OF SIXTH FORM EDUCATION

Sixth Form Matters

A collection
of essays
& case studies

Curated and edited
by Noni Csogor & Bill Watkin

Sixth Form Colleges
Association
THE VOICE OF SIXTH FORM EDUCATION

Contents

System leadership and career education

Melanie Smuts

The aim of most education reform efforts is to empower children to have a brighter future and lead a life of choice and opportunity. But schools and colleges will sometimes focus on succeeding in what they know – improving academic performance – and pay less attention to the next, critical, step: empowering students to make informed choices about what their expanded opportunities in life now are, whether that be going to a further education college, joining an internship, doing an online training course, or finding a job.

One World Network of Schools (One World for short!) is a not-for-profit organisation that supports collaboration within and between networks of schools and educators, and we frequently help the schools we work with to address this question of progression. We find that it is important

to address both the immediate consideration of better performance in those areas that schools 'already know', and what happens next, particularly at points of transition. We need to find ways to empower students to embrace the expanded opportunities that a great education makes available to them. Of course, many questions about effective provision – at whatever age or stage – are universal, often speaking to a human need for development and growth, but answers are almost always contextual, driven by the circumstances in which implementation takes place. Honouring that truth, it is preferable to offer lines of enquiry and thinking rather than a dogmatic set of approaches.

While one of the most significant transition points in UK education is at 16, this work on preparing students for a variety of pathways cannot start early enough. For students and their families, opportunity, choice, and empowerment are intrinsic benefits of education, and this reckoning is not constrained by the age of the student or the imminence of some concrete next step. Much of what we attest to below serves students of whatever age.

◆ *…students need to be exposed from a young age to various interests, so that they can discover what they enjoy and are interested in and be able to see themselves in various fields…*

Finally, it goes without saying that we must remain absolutely committed to securing great outcomes for the students who attend the organisations we serve. We know the impact that a suite of strong results can have on lifelong earnings for an individual and the closure of the poverty gap more systemically. For the purposes of this piece, though, we want to focus our attention on the question of how organisations can think through what to do once that important pre-requisite is secured. At One World this mental model is grounded in our international work with some of the globe's most under-resourced education systems; we currently work in more than 15 countries, the vast majority of which are

in the Global South. These economies often offer fewer post-graduation opportunities than those available to students in the UK. We would contend, though, that the learning we have undertaken in these contexts could be a helpful triangulation point for UK colleagues planning the next steps for their students.

When we think about securing students a successful transition from education into the wider world, we frame that work with three essential elements that go beyond academic and instructional excellence. These are:

- Expanding student options

- Personalising data

- Targeting resources

Expanding student options

Often students – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – will not have many diverse examples in their family or community of the varying kinds of employment and studies available to them after they finish compulsory education. This exposure is both an identity and a knowledge-set challenge: students need to be exposed from a young age to various interests, so that they can discover what they enjoy and are interested in and be able to see themselves in various fields related to those interests. At the same time, they need to balance having had a broad set of experiences with the opportunity to develop in depth, over time, and with increasing autonomy and responsibility in a particular area that interests them. These are two separate experiences, in our view, and it's therefore important that students have access to both.

With this in mind, the following four key considerations support our questions and lines of enquiry:

Expand student identity
What kind of experiences will help my students build a clear vision of themselves as a successful adult?

Build student knowledge-set
What skills, knowledge and attitudes would help students most in achieving their vision of a successful adult? When and how do I build in the time for developing and refining these skills?

Introduce an abundance of choice
How do I help students see and navigate between an expansive set of options as opposed to only one concept of what they can do after school or college?

Commit to a journey not an outcome
How do I ensure that my students understand that there is not one high-stakes opportunity to build a career the year after graduating, but that building a future will require an adaptive attitude with shifts over time?

Personalising data

With options expanded, a student should then be able to have a broad sense of what direction they may want to head in. However, matching student interest with the actual opportunities available requires personalisation. The broader the exposure has been to an expanded range of options, the more versatile the personalisation stage will be. For instance, an urban area with multiple universities, colleges, and apprenticeship programmes, may have a more localised strategy than a rural area, where digital learning programmes, student housing, and large local industries, for example, may be more important. Similarly, some students will prefer to go to university or enter the workplace close to home, perhaps even continuing to live in the family home, while others will want, and be able, to go further afield. The critical success factor here is data: matching student results with the options available to them allows the personalisation component to be precise and predictable. The earlier in a student's journey that data is used to track their potential pathways after school, the more time and resources will be available to get them closer to their goals.

Contextualize opportunities based on student population
What are the opportunities in the region and beyond that best match the student body that I serve?

Leverage student data to assess success and guide options

Does my student data tell me that students are neither over- nor under-estimating their ability to gain entrance into their chosen programmes or employment? What is required to course-correct if I'm off track?

Track all critical intervention points

Have the key intervention points which impact pathways (such as subject choice and high stakes exam grades) between a student starting and finishing here been mapped out? Are there plans in place for each of them informed by the data available at those points?

> *For students and their families, opportunity, choice, and empowerment are intrinsic benefits of education, and this reckoning is not constrained by the age of the student...*

Inform students of their options

Am I making sure that students have a realistic understanding of what impact their current subject choices and grades have on their future pathway options?

Learn from alumni pathways

What are we learning from our alumni data about which pathways lead to the greatest success for students? Are we clear about what success means? It will not be the same definition for every student. Which are the programmes that our students thrive in? How can we make this an accessible route for current students?

Targeted resourcing

Because pathways work is not always included in the ordinary business of running a school, it requires careful consideration and a strategic approach at all levels of the organisation. If this is not done carefully, the time and effort required will not fit in beside existing day-to-day demands, and students will not be adequately supported. Often the temptation is to apply for the next step at the last minute,

causing students and staff members allocated to careers work to feel overwhelmed and to get into reactive application cycles driven by deadlines each year. Not only does this greatly disadvantage students, it also leaves untapped the immense opportunity to build strong, successful adults and alumni from the student body.

UK sixth form education is most commonly a step on the road to HE; the most important elements are the UCAS application, and well-informed advice and guidance to support young people to get into the university or employment of their choice. With their teams of multiple staff focused on the progression options facing students, sixth form colleges are able to build relationships with local and national universities and employers, remaining up to date with developments and steering young people to aspirational but achievable destinations. Such resource and expertise are, sadly, not found everywhere; in a number of UK schools and in many jurisdictions around the world, there is only limited capacity to personalise the advice and guidance, and this is a limiting factor in young people being stretched and fulfilled later in life.

Map out time required
How much time, with how many applications per student, with what amount of dedicated resources in the programme do we have to complete application targets? What project calendars, application deadlines and competitive programmes have hard deadlines?

Create partnerships
Which universities, fellowships, local colleges, job and skilling programmes, support services, and NGOs are working in this area? How can we create partnerships with them to support our students?

Involve alumni
How often are alumni contacted? Can they be involved to support students on campuses, to mentor, or to provide support or exposure? How are we communicating and celebrating alumni success to current students and with stakeholders?

Conclusion

At One World we would contend that discussion of the elements and questions set out above, informed by the deep knowledge of context that can only be brought by teachers and leaders who are embedded in their communities is – in and of itself – a valuable activity to undertake. We would also offer three slightly less concrete suggestions in conclusion:

> *The diversity of the senior leadership team in a college is a teaching tool and messaging device about what the organisation really believes about opportunity and access...*

Act 'as if'
The school leaders on our team often found themselves having to act 'as if'. That meant engaging with possibilities that students, staff and communities might not have considered, and working out how to get there. The mental frame of 'as if' forced them to work in the best interests of the best possible outcome for the students they served, rather than towards what was accepted or traditional. It's our view that an ever-expanding set of options and routes – and a global war for talent – will mean this mindset will be even more important for leaders to adopt in future.

Role models matter
The education leaders on our team were also often challenged to think about how authentically their students were able to see themselves and their progression journeys post-transition. What role models who looked like them or testified to similar lived experiences could they discern? How does the path of progression look different in the context of the unequal distribution of power and opportunity across dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality? Leaders can often have direct control over that. The diversity of the senior leadership team in a college is a teaching tool and messaging device about what the organisation really

believes about opportunity and access, and should always be considered in this light.

Collaboration is key

Much of One World's work in general is highly collaborative, driven by the belief that the best solutions to the urgent questions leaders ask are discovered in context, whilst leaning in to the best thinking that has been done previously in the area of enquiry. The dangers of the collaborative approach include that it becomes a free-for-all, where any and all ideas hold value, and the notion that a solution that worked in one place will necessarily work in another with little adaptation. To address these pitfalls we recommend working to a strong existing framework – like the one we present above – as well as practising respectful engagement with the organisations we work alongside. Seeking to understand the points of view, values and drivers that already exist in a system of whatever size is a crucial engagement strategy, and must take place before improvement journeys are mapped out.

133

About the author

Melanie Smuts

Melanie is part of the One World Network of Schools where she leads initiatives across the African continent, focusing primarily on new-school starts, personalised learning, and college and career pathways. She also manages OneWorld's project in Tajikistan and supports partners in India.

"If we are to remain globally competitive, we need professionals of the future with advanced levels of learning; if society is to thrive, we need to foster a love of learning. We need to support and stretch young people to take their learning as far as they can so that, as adults, they make a truly valuable contribution to society and the economy."

Sixth Form Colleges
Association

THE VOICE OF SIXTH FORM EDUCATION