

Hello – and welcome to my April newsletter. Employer levy, trailblazers’ standard, the reported bias of Ofsted’s Chief Inspector - there are so many big-picture headlines at the moment it is difficult to focus on much else, but it’s as important as ever to ...

Issue 13 April 2016

Keep an eye on the detail!

Spring is in the air – the abundance of daffodils now being replaced by tulips, the bright blue skies followed by short (hopefully) bursts of intense rain or even hail and of course, it’s conference season!

I don’t know about you, but for the last three months or so my e-mail inbox has been filled with invitations to attend conferences on every conceivable aspect of FE and skills including the employer levy and trailblazer requirements; standards and frameworks; and funding and inspection. Each one advertised as “the only conference I will need to attend”, “not to be missed”, “the essential conference for FE and Skills” or equally questionably, “the best two days I will ever spend”! Spend being the operative word, I hate to think of the cost of attending all these “unmissable” events; the daily rate (often times two or three), accommodation, travel and subsistence, and of course the lost working time.

I am sure all of the conferences are useful in their content, but there comes a time when wise choices need to be made to avoid becoming a professional conference attender!

It is also a wise choice to know how important it is not to lose sight of what we do every day. Taking time out to look at the big picture is right, and an important thing to do – but what is equally important is to ensure that we know we are doing a good job on a day-to-day basis.

On a number of occasions over the last couple of months I have had the opportunity to take a look at some of the key documents we use, both paper-based and on e-portfolio/management systems, and have been surprised by just how weak this is, in organisations that would rate themselves as good.

A good starting point is the Individual Learning Plan (ILP), which, I have decided must have been named by someone with a great sense of humour, as more often than not, it isn’t individual, it isn’t a plan and it doesn’t talk about learning! So what does it do? Invariably, it sets a start date and an end date, which are invariably the same distance

apart regardless of what the learner needs to achieve. It often lists the units that are to be worked on, which often also share the same end date – so much for the planning.

In terms of individuality, the name changes and the qualification title changes, but much else stays the same. Too many times I have seen “embedded” written against the sections for ERR or Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills, which of course may be correct, but that doesn’t mean they don’t need checking, reviewing and maybe further development.

Much emphasis on an ILP is placed on assessment, with little on learning, with perhaps the worst examples being in Functional Skills. “Exempt” is often written against these, which implies that they can be forgotten about. Too often we forget that the exemption is only from the test, not from learning. When a learner gets a C grade, then clearly they didn’t get a B or an A, which means further development is needed. Even with the highest grade, I would suggest that further development is still needed, even if only to transfer that learning into a work situation. Recognising, for example, what happens to a car engine if coolant quantities are incorrectly calculated, or a customer’s hair if perming solutions are mixed to the wrong ratio, or who pays the amendment fee if the travel apprentice misspells the name on a holiday booking!

The SFA’s decision to remove the contractual requirement for a review of progress seems to me to have been an ill-thought out move. I understand that a learner should show progress on every visit, but the more formal, quarterly review was so much more than that, being an opportunity to cover so many areas of development. A key part of Ofsted’s revised Common Inspection Framework is the progress an individual had made from their starting point and that is so difficult to show from a series of process-driven, short-term action plans.

Of course, the answer is staring me in the face – a conference on effective document completion!

Kevin Dowson