Five Steps to Better Curriculum Alignment
USING LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION
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When the Deputy Director of Ofsted expresses his concerns that the Further Education sector as a whole is failing to get to grips with a certain issue, this is one of those moments where Principals have no choice but to sit up and take note. For two things are certain: firstly, whatever the issue is, you can be sure that Ofsted is going to be looking very closely to see if there are improvements, and secondly those colleges who ignore the warning or fail to address it adequately are likely to find themselves on the wrong side of the inspectors when they call.

At the 2017 AoC Autumn Curriculum Conference, Ofsted’s Deputy Director, Paul Joyce raised such concerns about the state of curriculum planning within the sector. After telling his audience that providers should be looking to design curricula that are “meaningful and relevant”, he went on to make it clear that Ofsted didn’t think this was currently happening. In fact, he singled out the following concerns:

- As a general rule, curricula across the sector are not well aligned with the number of local jobs or careers
- He knew of few examples of providers who are letting local employer demand shape their curriculum

In one sense, the fact that curricula are not generally well aligned with employer demand is entirely understandable. For one, since it is colleges and not employers that actually do the teaching, it is natural that they view their curriculum planning as something that should be driven by them (supply-led), rather than by business (demand-led). Furthermore, planning courses based on demand is by no means an easy task, since at a minimum it requires a thorough understanding of what that demand actually is.

However, if colleges are to fulfil their mission of sending students out into the community with the skills that make them employable, better alignment of curriculum with local employer demand is not so much an option, but a necessity. But how can this be done?

In this short 5-step guide, we’ll walk you through how you can design the kind of “meaningful and relevant” curriculum that Ofsted is calling for: one which really does serve the needs of students and local employers alike by being better aligned with the number of local jobs or careers in the region.

**Step 1** – Takes you through how you can begin with a simple Curriculum Review to identify areas of current misalignment, but also shows the limitations of this approach.

**Step 2** – Shows the sort of Labour Market Insight that is needed in order to move from a supply-led approach to a demand-led curriculum.

**Step 3** – Introduces the concept of the “Gap Analysis” and how it can help you move towards a truly demand-led curriculum.

**Step 4** – Talks about the importance of acting on the findings of the Curriculum Review or Gap Analysis and how you can prioritise interventions.

**Step 5** – Gives three potential applications for your newly aligned curriculum: student engagement; employer engagement and fulfilling your mission.

We hope you find this guide useful, and that it will help you and your college better align your courses to employer demand, and move you further towards meeting your organisation’s goals.
Review your Curriculum

There are two places a college can start when thinking about curriculum alignment. The first is to begin with the curriculum itself, auditing current courses to understand alignment to local employment demand. The second is to begin with the local economy itself, working out what demand looks like, seeing how the current curriculum fits, and identifying areas of misalignment and new opportunities.

Since colleges don’t have the luxury of beginning their curriculum from scratch every few years (staff, resources and facilities have been developed around the ongoing curriculum offer), the tendency is usually to start with the curriculum rather than the labour market. Whilst this supply-led approach cannot ultimately produce the kind of demand-led curriculum called for by Ofsted, it can nevertheless provide a fantastic start point. But how can this review be undertaken?

We start by taking the number of students who completed qualifications in each subject area, and measure this against the number of annual openings in related occupations. By comparing these two metrics, it is possible to map how well courses are currently aligned with the occupations to which they relate.

For example, the following chart shows anonymised data for a Curriculum Review we have undertaken, with completions in five subject areas (blue bars) being set alongside the total number of annual openings in the related occupations (green bars):

As you can see, there are both areas of over and undersupply. For example, there are 1,404 annual openings for Accounting/Bookkeeping occupations in the region, yet the college is currently sending out just 67 people with a qualification in this field (4.8% of total annual openings). Elsewhere, there are 256 annual openings in Beauty Therapy/Hairdressing, yet the college is training 330 people each year (128.9% of annual openings).
Of course, there is more to it than this. Firstly, in every region there will be a certain number of job claimants who are seeking jobs in these occupations, and these are taken into account in our actual Curriculum Reviews. Secondly, vacancies could be filled from within the existing workforce (from other occupations) or by workers from other localities. Thirdly, the course completion data only takes account of graduates from the college being audited. There may well be other education providers who are also supplying these skills into the region, and so where there appears to be under-supply, some of it at least may be made up elsewhere.

However, even before we take these three factors into account, the chart on page 4 tells us a number of things from a “directional” sense. For instance, we can see that the college in question is over-supplying in Beauty Therapy/Hairdressing, because it is currently supplying more people qualified in this field than there are currently openings. At the same time, we can also see that there is likely to be room for growth in both Accounting/Bookkeeping, and Baking/Cooking/Bartending/Catering, as in both cases the college is currently supplying less than 5% of the annual openings in the area.

We can illustrate this in the following way. In Figure 1 below, the blue pie represents the total number of occupations in the college’s labour market region that require an FE-level qualification. Figure 2 shows the same labour market pie, but this time with three wedges, which together represent the college’s entire curriculum. However, as you can see, there are parts of it which are currently undersupplying the labour market (yellow wedge), parts that are oversupplying (green wedge), and other parts which are reasonably well aligned (grey wedge).

The purpose of the Curriculum Review is to identify these three areas, and assuming the college then acts on the findings, those areas of under and oversupply will be reduced, leaving a curriculum that is far closer to alignment with labour market demand for related occupations (Figure 3). However, notice that even if this is done, the realignment only takes place in those areas that the curriculum currently caters for. What it doesn’t do is address the rest of the labour market pie – that is, those occupations for which the current curriculum does not cater for. To identify these, we must begin not with the college’s curriculum, but with total labour market demand in the region.
Understand Local Skills Demand

The starting point for taking a demand-led approach to curriculum planning is to first understand the skills needs of local employers. But short of conducting endless surveys, or gathering a ton of local jobs data and then employing data experts to try to make sense of it, how exactly can this be attempted? The answer is to make use of good, local Labour Market Insight (LMI) to answer the following questions:

- What are the occupations and skills needs in our region?
- What are the education levels of those occupations?

Identifying occupations

Our insight is designed to be able to lift the lid on any occupation, down to the 4-digit Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) level, for any region of the country, down to county and even local authority level. This means we can answer the first question by identifying a number of different metrics in a college region, including the biggest employing occupations, the fastest growing occupations and, most crucially, the expected number of annual openings in each occupation (annual openings is job growth plus natural job churn, due to things like people retiring).

For example, in the table below, we have identified the Top 10 occupations by annual openings in the Coast to Capital LEP region:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Annual Openings</th>
<th>2017 Jobs</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sales and retail assistants</td>
<td>1,509</td>
<td>37,671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care workers and home carers</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>26,456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaners and domestics</td>
<td>1,042</td>
<td>20,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen and catering assistants</td>
<td>1,017</td>
<td>18,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other administrative occupations n.e.c.</td>
<td>1,006</td>
<td>20,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>872</td>
<td>18,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales accounts and business development managers</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>16,349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book-keepers, payroll managers and wages clerks</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>14,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiters and waitresses</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>11,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary education teaching professionals</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>11,797</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Identifying annual openings at the 4-digit SOC level is crucial for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it means that we are able to see what the skills needs of employers in the region actually are. Secondly, it also gives us a metric which we can use to measure the college’s curriculum against this demand, as we shall see in more detail in Step 3.
Identifying educational level

After identifying occupations and therefore the skills needs of employers in a region, there is one other crucial element we need to determine in order to have the understanding required to align curriculum with employer needs. Not all jobs in a local labour market require training at a Further Education college, and so we need to be able to identify the educational level for each occupation.

This can be done very easily with our insight, as we have mapped all occupations to qualification levels. For instance, the graph below shows the same Top 10 annual openings for the Coast to Capital region that we showed on the previous page, but this time we have included the educational level for each of these occupations.

With this type of insight, we have what we need to then identify which areas of the local labour market are currently being met by your curriculum, and which are not.
Whilst the supply-driven approach shown in Step 1 provides a great starting point for curriculum alignment, it cannot ultimately produce the kind of demand-led curriculum that Ofsted is looking for. To achieve this, you need to begin with your local labour market as a whole, and measure your current course offer against this holistic demand.

To do this requires what is known as a “Gap Analysis”. This is different from the Curriculum Review in that it begins with the labour market, rather than with curriculum. Nevertheless, the metrics used to conduct the study – annual openings and course completions – are the same.

For instance, the following table shows a sample of nine subject areas using anonymised data from an actual analysis we carried out. As you can see, the number of course completers is subtracted from the projected annual openings over the next few years in the related occupations to identify the gap between the college’s provision and local demand:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Annual Openings 2017-2022</th>
<th>Completers in 2016</th>
<th>Gap Between Demand &amp; Provision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality and Catering Operations</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and Sales</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Operations</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehousing and Distribution</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport and Fitness</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>-942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>-192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling and Psychology</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>-171</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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There are a number of things to note about this table:

1. The top three occupations are areas where the college already offers courses, but the data indicates that there may well be significant room to grow these to meet demand.

2. The middle three occupations are related to courses that the college does not currently offer, indicating that there appears to be enough demand in the local economy for the college to explore the potential for creating new courses to meet these skills needs.

3. With the bottom three occupations, these are areas where the data suggests that the college is currently oversupplying the labour market to a significant level.

Of course, the identification of gaps in the first six subject areas comes with the caveat that we are only looking at the college’s supply, and the figures do not take into account the supply from other colleges, or other sources of labour such as industry-trained pipelines and job changers from other occupational categories. Nevertheless, the figures are significant enough to indicate that there may well be room for the college to grow the top three courses, to consider offering the middle three, and to look at whether current provision in the bottom three should perhaps be reduced.
This might sound like an obvious point, but it is not uncommon for a college to conduct a Curriculum Review or a Gap Analysis, only to leave the results of the report sitting on a shelf, ready to demonstrate to Ofsted that the college really is taking steps to align its courses with employer demand. But of course the whole point of undertaking a Curriculum Review or a Gap Analysis is for the college to take the areas of misalignment or opportunities for potential new courses and to start changing things.

Having said that, one of the reasons that a college might have for not following through on the findings is that they don’t know where to start. “Yes, the study has revealed that we oversupply these courses, or undersupply these ones, or that we do not cater for this or that occupation, but how do we know which ones we should concentrate on?” The answer is, where possible, to concentrate on the most significant areas of misalignment and gaps.

For instance, the graph below shows the gaps between annual openings and course completions in 14 subject areas at a particular college. Rather than trying to realign all 14 subject areas, it makes more sense to prioritise those courses where there is a large oversupply or large undersupply – in this case, perhaps those where the difference between annual openings and course completions is more than 200:

No college is ever going to be able to perfectly align their curriculum with labour market demand. Quite apart from the fact that the labour market is constantly changing, there is of course the matter of whether the college’s resources allow for the increase in provision in areas where there is misalignment, or the starting of new provision where there is currently no offer.

However, by undertaking the Gap Analysis, and then by prioritising the most significant gaps, you can get far closer to the kind of demand-led curriculum called for by Ofsted’s Paul Joyce, which we mentioned in the Foreword to this guide.
So you’ve commissioned a Curriculum Review or a Gap Analysis, and you’ve taken steps to implement the findings, such that you now have a curriculum that is much closer aligned to the needs of your local labour market than before. Is that the end of the process, or is there more you can be doing? We would suggest that by having courses that are better aligned with local and regional need, you now have some great opportunities to enhance your college in a number of different ways. Here are just three you might want to consider.

Engage young people with your curriculum

A curriculum that is closely aligned to local jobs is a curriculum that can be confidently promoted to young people to show them a career route through your college. In other words, if your college has identified where the demand is in your local labour market, and then realigned courses with this demand, then you have the ideal opportunity to shout about it to people in your region. And the beauty of it is that this can be done using the same insight that was used to identify the areas of misalignment and opportunities for creating new courses.

Imagine a college that had carried out a Gap Analysis and had discovered that there was a huge demand for Sales accounts and business development managers. Having increased their provision in related courses, the same data uncovered by the Gap Analysis can then be used to market those related courses. In other words, local data can be used to show potential students how the courses you offer can lead them to the career they want to do, and this insight can be used in your marketing materials, school engagement, and on your website (see image below).
Engage employers with your curriculum

Just as a curriculum that is closely aligned to local jobs is a curriculum that can be used in student engagement, so too it is one that can be used to improve engagement with local employers. The reason that aligning courses to the local labour market is currently a hot topic is because there is a skills gap where employers complain that they are just not getting people with the right skills coming through.

But if your college has used good Labour Market Insight to investigate local demand, to identify misalignment and gaps, and to then better align your courses with local employer needs, then you are actually better serving employers in your area and providing them with the skills they need. This provides you with the perfect opportunity to talk to them, to foster better partnerships with them, and to engage with them on issues like apprenticeships and the work placements which are set to be an integral part of the new T-Levels system.

Fulfil your mission to young people, employers and your community

In the introduction to this piece, we began by citing the Deputy Director of Ofsted, who stated their concern that they still weren’t seeing curricula that are well aligned with the number of local jobs or careers, and that they were looking for colleges to develop a more “meaningful and relevant”. By undertaking the steps set out in this guide, you will of course be helping to meet the requirements set out by Ofsted, but that should never be the real reason for doing it.

The real reason is that as a college your mission is to give your students the best opportunity to get employment using the skills they have learned; to supply employers with the skills they need; and therefore to bring great benefit and prosperity to your community. By carrying out the steps we have set out in these pieces, you can go a long way towards fulfilling this mission.
Your Mission

Being sure that your college’s courses are helping your students’ employment prospects and benefitting your local economy is never easy. Yet it is fundamental to your mission.

Our Insight

Our aim is to give you the insight on your local economy that will enable you to fulfil this mission, as well as meeting Ofsted requirements, beating your competition, and ensuring you are making great use of public funds.

Tell us About Your Challenges

We’d love to hear about the issues you are grappling with that our local insight might be able to solve. Contact us and we will:

- **Discuss Your Needs**
  We’ll talk about the challenges you are facing and suggest some potential solutions.

- **Arrange a Meeting**
  We’ll set up a face-to-face meeting where we’ll come and demonstrate our proposed solution.

- **Provide Ongoing Support**
  We will work with your organisation to implement our solution and help you get the most out of it.

Contact us now

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