



Transforming student experience through authentic learning: Lessons for policy and practice

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1 Introduction

This report draws on research into two educational initiatives, Edge Future Learning (EFL) funded by the Edge Foundation in England and Excelerate funded by The Wood Foundation in Scotland (see Rogers & McGrath, 2024 and Dabbous et al., 2023 respectively). Both initiatives sought to broaden and transform education and training in schools and colleges. This report unpacks the distinctive factors and approaches that led to successful whole institutional change in both initiatives with a focus on the implementation of practice and the policy recommendations arising from this.

Drawing on international research and practice Edge distilled effective approaches to teaching and learning into three signature pedagogies – project-based learning (PBL), real world learning and community connected learning (Edge 2023, Signature Practices). They piloted these in the North East of England. The research drawn on here focused on the second stage of the pilot and centred on two of the seven schools and colleges involved in EFL. In a similar vein the Excelerate investment by The Wood Foundation also drew on international research and sought to transform the educational experiences of young people in Scotland through a community-connected learning approach that included PBL and oracy. This report draws on visits to three of the 19 schools involved in Excelerate.

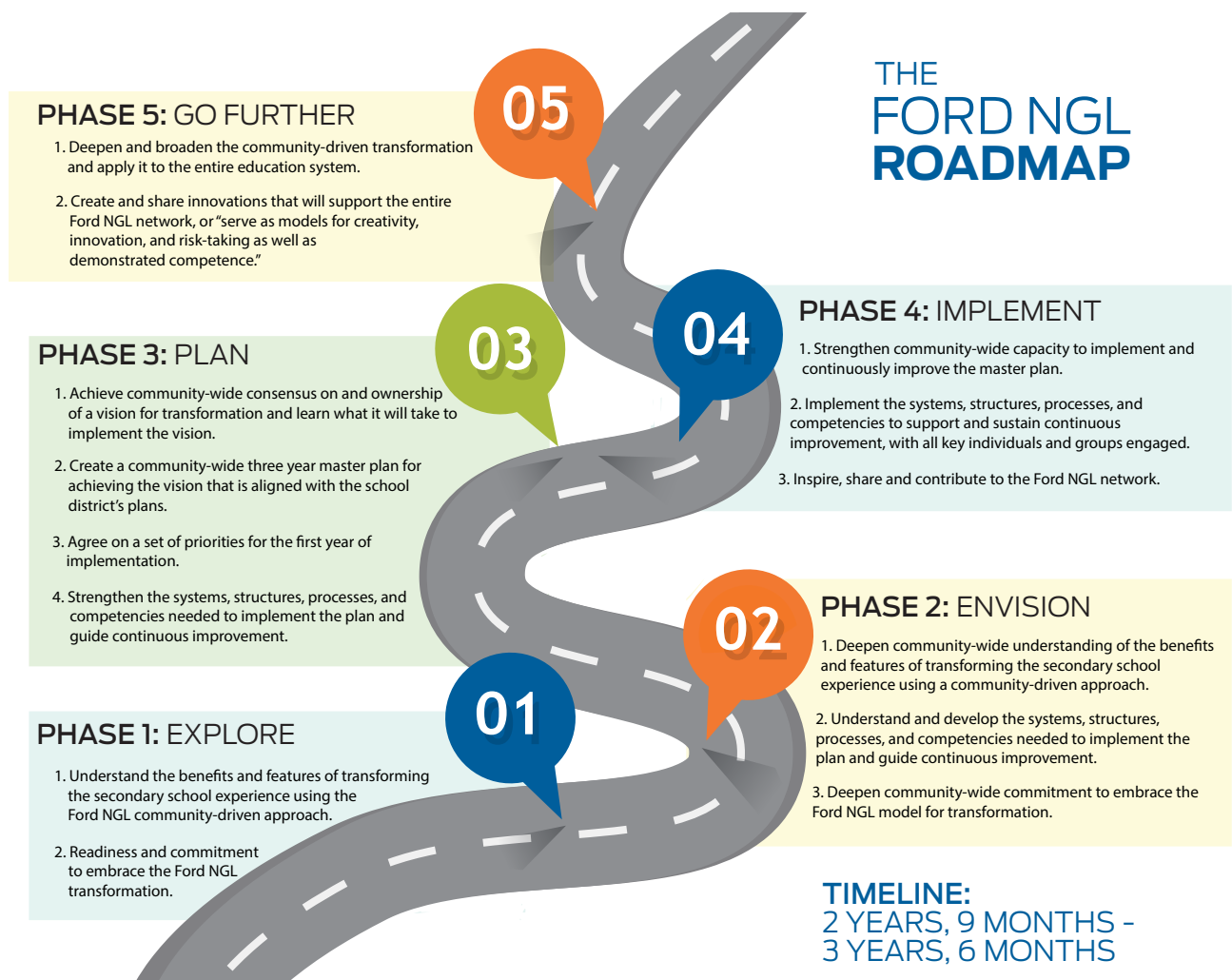
While the curriculum offer is somewhat different in Scotland and England, what was striking about the projects facilitated by Edge and The Wood Foundation was the similarity in approach: the attention given to experiential learning often through PBL; community connected learning; the importance of engaging with employer partnerships to enable students to take part in authentic and meaningful activities; the emphasis given to professional learning for teaching staff and a recognition that transformational change takes time.

EFL was a partnership between Edge, Ford Next Generation Learning (NGL) and the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP) with each partner having different responsibilities. Edge was the enabler and national co-ordinator in providing funding to the deliverers Ford NGL and NELEP, in addition to bringing wider networks and expertise into this initiative and providing practical guidance and support. In Scotland, the partnership was between The Wood Foundation, Ford NGL, Oracy Cambridge and Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, and Angus Councils. Distinctive to Excelerate was the emphasis given to oracy. Both Edge and The Wood Foundation funded visits to the Academies of Nashville in the US and School 21 and XP in England.

Central to the work of Ford NGL coaches, employed in both initiatives, was the attempt to ensure that young people are career and work ready, a curriculum that fosters career learning through real world applications and a rich range of employer engagement. Underpinning the Ford NGL approach was a five-stage implementation process – the Ford NGL road map – see Figure 1. Evident is that this road map is not a quick fix, rather a process that may take many years. Across Excelerate and EFL, the aim was for each institution to develop their own approaches to this model based on their individual context and the needs of the students and the community.

While there were similarities in both these initiatives, the makeup of the schools and colleges involved in each geographical area was different. In England the participating institutions (a Further Education college and a University Technical College (UTC)) had a focus on specific technical and vocational areas. By contrast the three participating schools in Scotland were all mainstream schools with a broad curriculum offer. The students from Scotland were younger than those in England and at an earlier stage in thinking about their future careers and aspirations.

Figure 1: The Ford NGL road map



Source: <https://www.fordngl.com/products/roadmap>

Five distinctive overarching factors and approaches arose from these two initiatives as underpinning successful institutional change:

1. The importance of not working in isolation
2. Staff preparation, planning and continuing professional development
3. Project-based learning – building a strong foundation
4. Project-based learning – more than a project
5. Employers as an integral part of education

Each theme and associated sub-themes is explored in turn before consideration is given to challenges and implications for policy and practice.

2 The importance of not working in isolation

2.1 A whole institution approach

The schools and colleges took a whole institution approach to implementing change in education which meant that no individuals were working in isolation. Often this began with staff within departments working together on PBL projects and across departments given the interdisciplinary and community projects that students were involved in.

As processes became more embedded, there were frequent opportunities to cascade ideas and learning across different schools and campuses that went beyond the 'formal' training provided.

This collaborative approach extended to wider online sharing opportunities with other schools and colleges and face-to-face visits provided a 'window' on the implementation of practice from teachers who were more experienced in community connected learning. It was evident that these visits had made a substantial impact on whole institutional approaches as well as individual staff. As such a wider community of practitioners was developing, all of whom were looking to transform the educational experiences of young people.

2.2 A clear vision through strong and supportive leadership

The above would not have been possible without the strong support from the Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). This went far beyond a 'token' interest. In Scotland the SLT steered the implementation of Excelerate to ensure that it aligned with the school's vision and goals. In the EFL FE college, one member of SLT was given the role of strategic lead and this was seen as crucial in ensuring buy-in and that the project kept on track. This strategic lead reported regularly to the leadership excellence group, chaired by the CEO, which helped expand the project across other faculties and the other campuses.

Critical to the success of the project was that the underpinning rationale to be involved in this work was premised from a strong desire to benefit **all** students. All institutions held a broader view of education as enabling students to develop the wider skills and competencies needed to thrive in the 21st century world of work and society, alongside the importance of qualifications. Relevant, too, is how both EFL and Excelerate promoted engagement with wider external stakeholders, including employers and the community, to inform and contribute to the learning experiences of students.

SLT recognised that engagement in this project was about sustained commitment and was not about quick wins. The intentionality of vision ran through each aspect of teaching and learning.

2.3 The importance of flexibility and the institutional context

While both EFL and Excelerate were aimed at transforming education, neither were pre-defined programmes rather they promoted underlying principles. In each institution the importance of the local context was valued and schools and colleges had the flexibility to develop their own approaches to the Ford NGL model based on their individual context.

Feels very organic, the way it grows and the way it is individualised and it's not one size fits all, really, it's about this school, and this school community and our young people specifically. (School)

In contrast to some educational interventions, there was no indication that engagement in this project was seen as a bolt-on. Rather the overarching aims of EFL and Excelerate aligned with the strategic aims of each institution.

2.4 The support of a critical friend

Both Edge and The Wood Foundation employed Ford NGL coaches to provide ongoing support to staff. The role that the coaches took was similar to that of a critical friend – someone who understands the broader context and inherent challenges but who is outside the immediacy of the school/college (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2005). This role was important for three reasons:

1. Enabling reflection – through skilful questioning and prompting the Ford NGL coaches encouraged reflection and thinking in which each institution was encouraged to develop their practice while considering their own context.
2. Enabling accountability – the Ford NGL coaches were able to challenge ideas:

So I think having that level of accountability to someone external was extremely important, having someone who could be agitating our thinking was really important. (UTC)

3. Taking a broader perspective – unlike the teachers who were caught up in all the day-to-day activities of a school or college, the Ford NGL coaches were external to the institution and hence had a bigger picture, while at the same understanding what each institution was trying to achieve.



3 Staff preparation, planning and continuing professional development

3.1 Meaningful Continuing Professional Development and dedicated time for this

SLT in all organisations realised that it was crucial that staff did not feel forced into becoming involved in the initiative especially since, for some staff, implementing PBL might provoke anxiety and resistance to change long-standing pedagogical practices. The provision of a variety of meaningful Continuing Professional Development (CPD) experiences was therefore essential to bring the projects into fruition, as indeed, was the allocation of staff time for CPD. All organisations were fortunate to receive external training supported by Edge and The Wood Foundation including visits to Nashville, US and XP school in Doncaster, internal-in-house training and time in their institutions to reflect and process these new ideas.

Interviewees who had benefited from the external training spoke positively about the understanding they had gained from trips to Nashville, completion of the PBL 101 course, or visits to other schools already using PBL. These experiences could turn around even someone who described themselves as an initial 'sceptic':

Then I had two opportunities, the first was to visit XP school... and the second was for myself and a colleague to get some PBL training, we both went on a PBL 101 course... and I'd been transformed from that sceptic into someone who could see the impact these things were having and how they were working and began to feel quite passionate about it. (UTC)

3.2 Staff being ready and confident to implement change

All organisations recognised that staff teaching different subject areas and with different prior experiences were at different starting points in the facilitation of PBL. Across EFL and Excelerate, English for example, was seen as a natural fit for PBL and oracy because of the collaborative approaches to discussion and debate that occurred often. In Science one teacher commented on how the experimental approach to testing and formulating research and evaluation was a good starting point and hence '... we've decided, well, let's take some of the things that we do already and flip them around and make them into PBL' (School).

Given the different starting points, it was important that schools and colleges took an incremental approach to on-boarding staff whereby those less confident could learn from those already implementing PBL. In the large FE college, the implementation of EFL had begun in one faculty and focused on Level 1 health and social care learners – 'we'd deliberately made the decision to work with a large faculty, a priority technical faculty, but to get it RIGHT' (College). From there the project rolled out to Level 2s and Level 3s with an open invitation to staff. This incremental approach worked well, starting with staff who were keen to be engaged and gradually spreading throughout the college through cross-pollination of learning and understanding. Similarly in one school the PBL working group took a 'drip-feed' approach across faculties to increase the number of subjects using PBL.

What came across clearly from the institutions visited, was that while the process of implementing PBL was a learning curve, staff felt supported by SLT to take risks and could learn from this and most importantly that staff felt the training received had enabled them to have the confidence to do this.

3.3 Reflective practice and changing mindsets

The implementation of EFL and Excelerate was underpinned by an ethos of reflective practice where from the beginning each institution could tailor the approach taken to the needs of the institutional context and community and the needs of their learners (see also 2.3). Also evident was how reflection was fostered in the conversations with the Ford NGL coaches.

This emphasis on reflection was an on-going thread throughout the fieldwork visits as teachers spoke of changes in practice that are often seen in the PBL literature (for example, Dole et al., 2016). This included the transition to a more student-centred approach to teaching whereby the role of the teacher shifts from one of transmission of knowledge to a facilitator and more attention is given to student voice:

It makes you reflect on how much you're doing the work and not the pupils. So it does make you think, am I doing too much teaching? Are there activities already or is there anything I can do to make it more pupil-led? (School)

Inevitably changes of practice for many staff also included the use of projects and real world scenarios during lessons. For example, one member of staff who was new to groupwork, as a fundamental element of PBL, spoke of how, 'I know when I first tried it, I made a bit of a mistake in thinking I could just tell them to work in a group and then I looked and thought 'No I can't do that'' (UTC).



4 Project-based learning – building a strong foundation

4.1 A scaffolded approach to PBL

For many students the PBL approach to learning was likely to be different to their previous experiences. Staff realised that the successful introduction of PBL would require planning and structure that was cross-curricular, with an awareness of what colleagues were doing and when.

It's a carefully scaffolded approach. If we're thinking about project based work in English, we know that they're also doing industry projects in January through to Easter as a work skills thing, and those initial projects we do from September to half term or Christmas in English, this is part project based learning and part learning how to learn that way so that that becomes a way of working all the time. (UTC)

Staff at the UTC explained that Year 10 learners will do a 'set up' term, then they do industry projects, then in the summer term they do community projects.

Important, too, was an incremental approach to projects with progression from smaller tasks with clear scaffolding through to more complex projects and a gradual removal of scaffolding as the learners built up their skills.

At Level 1 they did a lot of smaller class-based projects with me first. Then the crisp packets project, where they made blankets for the homeless, that was a massive one. But we had constant small things in class, standing up and speaking, collecting stamps for their oracy passport, slowly building them up to the point where when I said 'this is what we're going to do' they didn't go 'agh!' and freak – they just went 'oh, OK'. (College)

Interestingly both EFL institutions showcased student work to parents so that parents understood more about PBL and how this approach was supporting their child's learning and development.



4.2 PBL for all students

In valuing each individual student, each institution did their best to ensure that opportunities were available and tailored to all students. The observation of two English classes, for example, captured how different approaches to scaffolding PBL could be better tailored to the learning needs of students. Both classes were studying Macbeth and had slightly different driving questions and tasks.

In a different example a teacher had incorporated a specific oracy technique to encourage students to speak and be involved.

So when they [the pupils] come in, they've got a talking point on the board and we're speaking about things that relate to them, and we're trying to get them all join in. I always knew the ones [pupils] that didn't talk but now I'm making more of a conscious effort to be, they're not talking, what can I do in my lesson, that's going to get them to talk? (School)

Underpinning these examples was the importance of supporting students at different levels to become independent learners.

4.3 Interdisciplinary projects

Frequently in PBL, projects cross traditional curriculum boundaries. In the college, for example, performing arts students had worked with public services, travel and tourism, and construction. Public services students had worked with digital and sport. This was possible because staff had strong links with colleagues in other departments, often attributed to the systems and structures put in place to support the project.

In one of the schools the students were set a project about the design of an exciting roller coaster with input from roller coaster designers in the US and UK. Students created the roller coaster ride, the theme, merchandise and advertising material which drew on a range of different subjects including engineering, entrepreneurship, design and creative skills. At the end of the project each team had to pitch their ideas to a panel of judges who were industry specialists in the field.

Often projects that involved interdisciplinary connections mirrored the world of work. For example, in the college, IT students were not only working on projects in their class but worked with sports students to design a website on personal fitness.

Effectively you're saying to them, this is what the work environment is like. You won't be sitting working in isolation just with people who are IT specialists, you could be working with health specialists and so on. (College)

4.4 Community-focused PBL

Many projects had their origins in the community often with an aim to make a positive difference. Projects included developing a litter robot for the local community where there was a perceived problem with litter across the streets, music memory and storytelling with older people, work with local charities, a blankets for the homeless project, and responding to a request from a local radio station.

Important here was how these new experiences fostered a greater sense of belonging and connection within the community, while also providing students with real world experience and skills.

5 Project-based learning: more than a project

5.1 Developing work-ready skills

In both reports there is a clear message that education is a preparation for adult life: both staff and students commented on the links between what was being learned and what employers would be seeking. PBL was credited with exposure to different careers, development of work-ready skills, and building independence amongst pupils:

You're not going to have me when you go into your workplace or work with you, standing over your shoulder saying do this, do this. (School)

However, the age and stage of the learners was different across EFL and Excelerate and this necessitated different approaches. Excelerate learners were in mainstream secondary schools and had not yet made career choices, signalling a generic approach, whereas EFL learners were older and already following a career-related curriculum. This meant that EFL learners were given a crucial role in the leaver profile¹ visioning day, when stakeholders from industry joined teachers, students and parents in workshops that explored the skills, knowledge and attributes young people need to be successful in their chosen industry:

We started by asking the students 'What skills do you think you need to help you take your next steps?', whether that might be university or apprenticeship or employment. (College)

This level of involvement was highly motivating, giving a sense of purpose and direction to the learning experience, driven by an understanding of why certain skills were important. Leaver profile posters on classroom walls provided constant reminders of the knowledge, skills and behaviours that learners needed to develop to be industry-ready:

The skills that are on our Steps [pointing to the leaver profile poster] are the ones we chose for our department, so we know they are what the industry wants. (College student)

5.2 PBL: a two-way process

The leaver profiles also gave purpose to the embedding of PBL across the curriculum, making it very evident that PBL is more than just a project, it is a two-way process. Learners understood that certain skills would be required for them to perform well in each project and, because of their leaver profile, they also understood that the projects were helping them to prepare for their future life.

A clear example of the two-way process of skills development could be across schools and colleges in relation to the development of oracy or communication skills that enable learners to communicate ideas and take control of their learning. In Excelerate, schools had embraced oracy as part of PBL, with some teachers commenting that the two should be seen as part of all pedagogies rather than individual entities. The importance placed on oracy was such that it now sits alongside PBL, real-world learning, and community connected learning as one of Excelerate's four key approaches to education. The development of oracy skills was not only a need for

¹ The leaver profile captures the students' personal, professional and technical development.

the learners: teachers could also adapt their behaviour by, for example, allowing longer pauses for students to reflect before responding to a question.

Where a project was assessed by presentation the importance of oracy was evident as a way of showcasing what has been learned, but there was also recognition of the important role that oracy can play at all stages of PBL including interpersonal and team working skills. The importance of day-to-day communication skills was also recognised as preparation for future life, and could be industry-specific:

They won't just be laying bricks, they'll be laying bricks for a customer so they need to be able to communicate, and also the ability to be proactive. (College)

In EFL, Level 1 learners had an oracy passport in which they collected stamps for completing a range of speaking tasks that required gradually more skill and confidence. Staff explained that some learners began the course unable to speak out when asked simply to give their name. PBL had been part of this transformation, for example, learners described how a project that required them to empty college collection boxes for crisp packets frequently resulted in conversations with strangers, something that developed their oracy skills and confidence.

5.3 Supporting learners' personal development

The PBL approach, when consistently and sensitively delivered, had a strong impact on learners' personal development. In EFL this was seen in references to specific career-related opportunities that supported progression into the local and regional job market. One student described how their engineering project presentation resulted in them talking with the Board members of a local company, who went on to produce a prototype of their design solution.

In Excelerate, student contributions showed the personal development potential of the approach:

So when we were doing [projects], it was like, a really nice change from your normal school subjects, because you were allowed to be a lot [more] independent when doing it and it was taken a lot of different approaches. So instead of writing and writing, you're in control of your own work, which really builds upon your responsibility skills and then the variation between the tasks. So sometimes we'd be in teams, sometimes we'd be on the computers, it was just really all rounded. So you're building on all your skills at the same time, even if you weren't realising it.



6 Employers as an integral part of education

Distinctive to the approach taken by EFL and Excelerate was the importance attached to employer engagement and the fostering of business partnerships. This was premised from a starting point of any relationship being mutually beneficial for both employers and the educational institution. Although schools and colleges were at different stages in the development of employer partnerships, four elements stood out as contributing to the systematic approach adopted.

6.1 Formally constituted employer boards and the allocation of specific tasks to employers

In EFL, given the focus on technical and vocational education, advisory employer groups had been established that were formally constituted and had regular meetings. These boards comprised key stakeholders in the relevant sector and were seen as driving a lot of the programme delivery which meant that the institutions were delivering the skills that employers needed. Employers were linked to specific tasks or workstreams based on a menu of activities that included smaller contributions such as offering a careers talk or a mock interview, or the loan of equipment to supporting a student to write a CV, providing mentorship and involvement in an industry project. The schools, too, had a menu of activities that employers could engage in.

6.2 The active involvement of employers in the curriculum

One challenge with PBL learning and employer engagement centres on how learning is brought into the classroom in a meaningful way as opposed to having employer projects that are bolted onto the curriculum. Evident was that projects had been co-constructed between employers and teachers and were integrated into the delivery of teaching and learning. In addition to being available for first hand encounters and questions, employers also provided feedback on the outcomes of projects as seen in the roller coaster example earlier (see 4.3). As another example college students studying public services took part in a series of extended projects with the local police force that often mimicked real-life scenarios and culminated in an event. Members of the police attended and monitored the event and provided feedback.

Not only was engagement of employers impacting on the curriculum it was also impacting on students:

We've noticed that when we engage with employers with the students it enriches the students' experience so much that they raise their game. (College)

6.3 Employers and the future workforce

Regular employer conversations drew attention to local skills shortages which influenced the curriculum on offer and from the employers' perspectives opportunities for recruitment. Within health and social care, for example, employers had said how much they struggled to recruit to learning disability nursing and social care. As a result the college added a full week to their timetable dedicated to understanding adults with disabilities just to try and break down some barriers for students. There were benefits for students, too, from the close working relationship with employers. In health and social care there was an agreement in place with one organisation

whereby all health and social care students were guaranteed an interview. This was to help the organisation meet their skill gaps and *'because they've got much more confidence in those learners because they've shaped their learning'* (College).

6.4 The appointment of a non-teaching member of staff to support employer engagement

New employer-facing, non-teaching roles were created and funded for EFL and Excelerate with a distinctive focus on supporting employer partnerships and engagement. The people employed in these roles had the knowledge and expertise to make strong employer links and acted as an interface between the community, the employers and the school/college and brought knowledge of labour market intelligence and careers information. In Excelerate this person also supported teachers to deliver PBL.

Specifically, this employer partnership role was involved in relationship building with employers, industry projects and employer visits with a view to developing long-term relationships. In contrast to teachers, those appointed to the employer partnership role had the time to focus on this rather than juggling with teaching responsibilities.

So having [Business Community Support Officer] being able to really build those relationships and be able to use those partners for not just maths, but they can be applied to other areas of the curriculum as well and be able to keep those partners in the school has been a massive benefit. (School)



7 Conclusions

7.1 Challenges

Inevitably there are always challenges when introducing whole school/college change. Characteristic of all senior leadership and hence many teachers across the schools and colleges was the 'can do' mindset whereby challenges appeared to have been viewed as an integral part of the ongoing process of creating the best possible environment for learners, rather than as some kind of obstacle in their path.

One obvious challenge, however, was about creating space in already busy timetables both for staff training and professional development and importantly the space for staff to develop PBL projects in conjunction with employers and cross-curricular teams.

Another challenge was about engaging staff who might be less sure of change, however, the approach taken to the gradual on-boarding of staff and the sharing of practice across subject areas seemed to mitigate this and was viewed as part of the natural growth and spread of new practice.

Although not seen across the schools and colleges visited, a further possible challenge to other institutions might arise from the time that it takes for new initiatives to become embedded across the whole institution. Here SLT in schools and colleges, together with the Edge Foundation and The Wood Foundation, understood that substantive educational change takes time and is premised on a collaborative effort. In a similar vein it is possible that employer engagement might be challenging for some institutions. The development of the non-teaching employer partnership role was particularly impactful in this area. Undeniably there are cost implications, however, in EFL it appeared that while the role might need to be frontloaded to develop and engage with employers, once relationships were established then the time allocated could be reduced. This was because the teachers gradually took more responsibility given that they had the expertise to work with employers on the design of teaching and learning. There is no suggestion here that the role should cease, just that less time might be needed.

7.2 Implications for policy and practice

Embarking on new initiatives in schools and colleges

Underpinning the successes reported here was the intentionality and vision for change to transform teaching and learning to better meet the needs of young people and to better prepare them for their future life. Of critical importance was how the vision of each institution was aligned with the aspirations and aims of EFL and Excelerate and how schools and colleges tailored their approach to the community context.

Important, too, was how students sat at the heart of new initiatives. This meant providing opportunities to support the interests and aspirations of all students and consideration given to how students, themselves, might be supported as new approaches to teaching and learning were implemented. Evident here was how schools and colleges carefully scaffolded PBL to meet the needs and abilities of students, rather than, for example, assuming all students could do groupwork.

1. New initiatives in schools and colleges must sit within the vision of the institution and the community context so that change can be embedded rather than be bolted on.
2. Student perspectives need to be considered carefully within any new initiative and attention given to how new approaches to teaching and learning are scaffolded.

High quality continuing professional development for teachers

Teachers benefitted from a rich variety of experiences to support their engagement with innovative approaches to education. Many teachers commented on the high quality of training received, the impact of seeing practice in action in other schools and colleges and of the reflective dialogues with the Ford NGL coaches. The expansive and sustained approach to staff professional development enabled new approaches to become embedded in teaching and learning since staff had sufficient time to process the learning from professional development opportunities.

Transforming approaches to teaching and learning is not a quick fix. For initiatives to embed and become part of the educational culture staff need:

1. High quality sustained professional support and training – not one-off CPD events with no follow-up support.
2. An educational ethos that supports teachers to take risks in trying out new approaches to teaching and learning.
3. Time and space for reflective practice so that new learning and concepts are processed before and during implementation.

Employer engagement

Meaningful and sustained employer engagement with schools more so than colleges has been a long-standing issue within education in the UK. Three key points arise from the practice reported here:

1. The relationship with employers was premised on mutual benefits for employer partners and schools/colleges.
2. The recruitment of a non-teaching member of staff with expertise and understanding of industry to build employer partnerships and act as a bridge between employers and teachers.
3. The systematic approach to employer partnerships with the establishment of advisory groups and a clear menu of activities/work-streams which employers signed up to.

If governments are serious about transforming education and the meaningful engagement of employers with education, then funding and resources need to be dedicated to this.

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