

Building Resilience in Further Education

Contents

Building resilience	2
<i>Tilden Watson</i>	
<i>Head of education, Zurich Municipal</i>	
Horizon scanning	3
<i>Tilden Watson</i>	
<i>Head of education, Zurich Municipal</i>	
In it together	5
<i>Charlotte Simmonds</i>	
<i>Freelance journalist</i>	
How to manage a merger	6
<i>Peter Roberts</i>	
<i>Principal and chief executive, Leeds City College</i>	
Evolution not revolution	7
<i>Michael Reilly</i>	
<i>Technology consultant</i>	
Case study: empowerment through digital	8
<i>Interview with Cheryl Pennington</i>	
<i>Assistant principal for teaching and learning, Reading College</i>	
Expect the unexpected	9
<i>Tilden Watson</i>	
<i>Head of education, Zurich Municipal</i>	
Case study: Feeling the heat	10
<i>Interview with Craig Douglas</i>	
<i>Procurement and finance manager, Barnsley College</i>	

Putting plans in place today will help secure your college tomorrow, says Tilden Watson

The purpose of this guide is to not only examine resilience challenges facing FE colleges but more importantly explore both opportunities and solutions that can help manage these issues.

Colleges are at a resilience fork in the road. Funding challenges in particular will force many colleges to reduce essential spending on key resilience measures when resilience risk trends are moving in the wrong direction.

We were keen to understand the key drivers around the resilience agenda in the Further Education (FE) sector. This is why we surveyed in the region of 300 FE institutions. Finance, joint ventures and technology all feature high on the survey and are covered in this guide.



Facing an uncertain future

Our research highlights a number of key issues for the FE sector:

80% say uncertainty of funding is the biggest challenge of the next 12 months

45% say engaging in partnerships or joint ventures in the UK is the biggest area for innovation

33% say delivering courses digitally is an area for expansion

66% say technology can offer new ways of engaging with students

25% say a lack of recognition of the achievements of the FE sector in mainstream media is the biggest barrier to attracting new students

Being resilient has never been a more important topic. It has increasingly been seen as a key differentiator in the eyes of partners. What is really startling is the fact that critical business continuity incidents are now seen to hit 1 in 5 businesses every year.

That's why we've brought together leaders and experts in the FE sector to share wisdom and experiences so any reader can pick up this guide and take away something valuable. Many colleges comment on how the good work conducted by the FE sector receives little recognition; we hope the inspiring case studies included here will show our commitment to changing that.

We know it is a matter of when, not if, crisis risks will strike. Therefore, the practical tips, advice and case studies contained within this guide aim to help you prepare for these eventualities. We hope they will encourage you to build resilience today, so you can take your college where it wants to go tomorrow.

If you would like to get in touch with any feedback on this guide, please contact us at info@zurichmunicipal.com.

Horizon scanning

Adequate preparation for potential opportunities and threats is essential for organisational resilience, says Tilden Watson

The UK's colleges are a vital component of today's education landscape. Government research released in 2013, found that 32% of girls and 35% of boys in England alone progressed to further education colleges in 2011/12 after finishing their GCSEs. Colleges across the country are proud of the diverse mix of opportunities they offer, from vocational courses to apprenticeships, part-time study and even higher education qualifications.

Running a successful college is no small feat. From student and staff welfare, to the upkeep of facilities and the murky waters of integrating new technology, there are plenty of demands to keep those in the sector on their toes. The best way to tackle these is to plan and prepare for them.

Evidence shows that those organisations that take the time to assess the risks they face and put business continuity management (BCM) arrangements in place reap the rewards. The Business Continuity Institute, for example, asked for views on the advantages of having BCM arrangements in place. The responses were overwhelmingly positive with a variety of benefits reported including improved business resilience (86%), reputation protection (74%), meeting customer requirements (72%) and safeguarding staff safety (71%).

So what kind of risks are colleges facing? For many, the challenges are bigger than ever before, particularly when viewed against a backdrop of income insecurity. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that the amount the government will spend on education overall will drop in real terms by 3.5% between 2010-11 and 2014-15, representing the largest cuts to education during any four-year period since the 1950s. Meanwhile, the Skills Funding Agency announced in August that nearly 200 FE courses could lose their funding this year, causing widespread concern in the sector. Where will the money come from when the public funding taps run dry?

In March of this year, Zurich Municipal ran a survey that saw nearly 300 FE institutions detail their top concerns over the coming 12 months. Some 80% of respondents cited uncertainty of funding as a major worry. Tied to this was an inability to invest in opportunities that will help their institution grow financially (20%) and fears about capacity to improve facilities (20%).



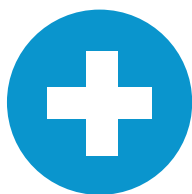
The picture wasn't all grim though. We asked respondents which areas presented them with opportunities for innovation, and responses indicated a broadening of horizons. For example, 45% cited joint ventures and partnerships as an innovation space, while 15% would consider a partnership abroad.

Technology was another area for optimism, with 65% agreeing it could open up new ways of engaging with students, and more than 40% anticipating it will help them operate in a more creative fashion. About 33% even anticipated delivering courses digitally.

The truth is that the sort of challenges and opportunities facing the FE sector are similar to those facing many other sectors across the UK, only with unique twists. A tech-dependent education system, for example, means that even minor IT breakdowns will have a crippling effect for everyone.

Meanwhile, many colleges will hold enormous volumes of public records, private data and intellectual property, meaning an awareness of the latest data protection and privacy laws is imperative. Breaches of these laws can incur fines of up to £500,000 by the Information Commissioner's office (ICO), which are not only expensive but can be very damaging to a college's reputation. This does not mean opportunities for using new technologies, such as digital course delivery, should be avoided – far from it – but colleges should make sure that they are adequately prepared for the potential cyber attacks that may accompany these technologies. This means installing firewalls, virus protection software and ensuring that staff are skilled in how to identify, prevent and respond to such malicious activities.

When it comes to partnerships between FE institutions and corporate organisations there are lots of factors to consider during the planning and implementation process. It's worth remembering to quantify the value of all possible outcomes. Beware of the 'optimism bias' that leads many into promising projects without consideration of what is at stake if things go wrong. While a partnership, like any great relationship, can bring massive benefits to both parties (opening up new markets, enhancing reputations and letting colleges be more ambitious) it is crucial to put a pound sign against what's to be gained, and what stands to be lost. Managing expectations on both sides is critical.



We've seen an ongoing tension between tangible and remote risks. Sometimes it's hard to know how global disruptions, such as climate change and pandemics, can be balanced with today's challenges, such as maintaining facilities. However, that doesn't mean we can or should ignore what may be coming over the horizon.

The government's most recent Risk Register for Civil Emergencies sites pandemics, flooding and terrorist attacks (both physical and cyber) as top concerns for national security whose effects would cut across sectors. It's tempting to say "that will never happen to us", but as recent global health scares – the Ebola crisis being a case in point – and increasingly severe weather year-on-year have shown us, that is the sort of thinking that belongs in the past. It's worth taking a moment to imagine how a major risk may impact on staff and students.

So what's the secret to really building resilience into your institution? Planning ahead. Investing time now will help you reap the long-term benefits of being prepared and a clear head under pressure. Remember, you are in a much more powerful position to have conversations about risks when not in a crisis. Spotting potential pitfalls before they escalate will guarantee the best environment for students and staff when (not if) a crisis strikes. Honest conversations are the building blocks that keep an institution afloat in choppy waters.

Tilden Watson is head of education at Zurich Municipal

Government highest priority risks

From the UK government's National Risk Register for Civil Emergencies, 2013

- ➡ Pandemic influenza
- ➡ Coastal flooding
- ➡ Major terrorist attacks, including cyber
- ➡ Severe overseas volcanic activity
- ➡ Severe wildfires (a newly assessed risk)

Top resilience threats experienced

From the Business Continuity Institute's Horizon Scan 2014 survey

- ➡ Loss of IT
- ➡ Loss of access to site
- ➡ Loss of telecommunications
- ➡ Loss of electricity
- ➡ Loss of skills

In it together

A relationship of trust can make amazing things happen when colleges and corporates come together, finds Charlotte Simmonds

Changes to government funding for further education are forcing colleges to find new, different ways of working. This kind of innovation under pressure can be a wonderful thing, presenting great opportunities for those willing to explore new ideas. Sponsored programmes, such as apprenticeships and work experience, can offer a wealth of opportunity for FE institutions, particularly when focusing on bespoke solutions built on a strong understanding of business and labour market needs. But what could this actually look like in practice, and how would you minimise the risks?

One example comes from Birmingham Metropolitan College, which has been widely recognised for its unique and long-standing partnership with Samsung. It has worked with the electronics company since 2009 to deliver courses for Samsung technical engineers, the college's students and even local teachers. A relationship of trust and mutual understanding has been the backbone of the partnership.

"Our work together began when the company was looking to upskill its engineers who needed to keep pace with the ever-growing demands of a new generation of appliances, devices and tablets," says Mustafa Shevket, the college's faculty director for technology and relationship manager. "Together we turned City & Guilds qualifications into tailored professional qualifications for Samsung partner employees. Today this relationship has flourished to include Samsung-sponsored academies and an apprenticeship programme."

Not only are such partnerships beneficial for society – particularly in light of gaps between Stem (science, technology, engineering and maths) skills and the employability of today's students – but they can also add value to a college's reputation. "Brand names instill status into what you're offering, and give others confidence to work with you," says Shevket.

Shevket adds how it's important that companies don't perceive colleges as a threat to their own in-house training capacity. "Understanding their objectives and what you can offer is key. Colleges are educators first and foremost; we give companies the building blocks," he says. Ultimately, he concludes, with some simple relationship management rules in place "amazing things can happen".

Charlotte Simmonds is a freelance journalist

What makes a successful partnership?

- ➡ Understand the local labour market – what areas could your college excel in?
- ➡ Relationship management is everything, so build a rapport based on trust
- ➡ Work together to plan for potential risks and an appropriate response
- ➡ Present the college as an asset rather than a threat to a company's existing training and professional development schemes
- ➡ Take ownership of the partnership and be bold with new opportunities for both staff and students
- ➡ Beware of bureaucracy and understand how to make things happen within your partner's corporate culture

It takes planning, patience and good communication for a merger to be successful, says Peter Roberts

Leeds City College was formed in 2009 as a result of a merger between Leeds College of Technology, Leeds Thomas Danby and Park Lane College Leeds. The latter had only recently merged with Keighley College. If that wasn't enough, in 2011/12 the college was involved in two further separate mergers: another FE merger with Joseph Priestley College (Leeds); and then the first, and still only, example of a higher education (HE) institution – Leeds College of Music – merging with a college to become part of the FE sector.

Needless to say we were proud when, given this background, Leeds City college received an overall grade of “good” following a full Ofsted inspection in May 2012. The report stated that “the management of the mergers to establish a new and effective College has been extremely successful”. So what was the secret?

Here are my top tips (but the key to success is to do them all well):

- Take time to understand the strengths, weaknesses, culture and values of each organisation involved
- Experience of mergers is vital for the senior leaders involved. It's worth buying it in if no one has it
- Establish the rationale, vision and values the new organisation will have. The board and staff need to be involved in determining what it will be like
- There needs to be a detailed plan relating to pre-merger preparation. Normally this involves an overarching steering group and separate work streams (organisational structure, finance, curriculum, student services, communications etc). Get people who buy into the merger to lead these
- All the research indicates there is an underestimation of the time and resources mergers take. Don't ignore the research – it's true!
- The importance of internal communication cannot be overstated; it's more important than the external. In all the organisations affected there will be uncertainty and a feeling of powerlessness. As such, poor communication can lead to reduced morale, negative behaviour and good people leaving
- Don't assume that mergers handled gently and gradually are less painful. New organisational structures with people and responsibilities need to be in place as soon as is practicable
- Once the post-merger phase kicks in, carry on with the communications, reinforce the values, ensure that senior managers stay visible and continue to hold forums, consultations, blogs and Q&A sessions
- Don't expect the benefits to be realised straightaway or for the single-college culture to be immediately forged. It will take a period of time for both to be fully felt
- Finally, don't take your eye off the day-to-day college activities. Students still need to be successful



Evolution not revolution

Utilised effectively, new technology has the potential to be a game-changer for the FE sector, says Michael Reilly

The extraordinary global popularity of Moocs (massive open online courses) has provoked an intense debate in the FE sector about how to harness the potential of technology – particularly when you take into account the risks, such as cyber attacks and malware. It's often difficult to predict the future and if you bet big on emerging technologies you may stand to lose your shirt. But there are some common sense guidelines that could help to multiply the effectiveness of efforts in this area.



Online courses

It is worth remembering that before the HE sector became so beguiled by Moocs, the first of these courses was actually developed for the FE sector. In many ways, Moocs are a better fit for FE because of their flexibility to adult learners, who can study at their own convenience and pace. They can also more meaningfully 'flip the classroom' so that more time is spent 'hands-on', learning valuable industry practice, whether by traditional means or with new human-computer interfaces. Perhaps some of the disappointment that the HE sector is experiencing with Moocs – such as inferior results and high drop-out rates – could have been avoided if it had not hastened to put technology before outcomes.



Partnerships

Why has the development of learning technology been dominated by Ivy League institutions in the US? Crudely put, they have the money and the means. If the FE sector is to reap the rewards of technologies, then teachers, learners, employers, providers and policymakers will all have to cooperate. It may only be through partnerships that the economies of scale necessary to make technology a game-changer for FE will be achieved.

How to take on technology

- ➡ Don't put technology before outcomes
- ➡ Partnerships may be necessary to achieve economies of scale
- ➡ Use experimentation appropriately
- ➡ Be wary of big bets that may not come off

Top technology security tips

- ➡ Choose strong passwords
- ➡ Make sure everything is backed up
- ➡ Protect sensitive data
- ➡ Use appropriate virus protection
- ➡ Control access to computers; don't leave them unsecured in public places

Data driven

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the world wide web, has described data as "the new raw material of the 21st century". It could be the fuel to power FE into the future. It will vastly increase the opportunities for the digital modelling and simulation of systems, which expand the learning environment. Next-generation learning management systems can, with the aid of analytics, offer personalised diagnoses of learner development. Data can also be used to establish FE more securely in the overall economy if it can systematically demonstrate the impact of its efforts on employment.



People power

Yet while data has the potential to be significant, some researchers have doubts about the capability of computation to match the mix of intuition and analysis used by experts in the field. Indeed, teachers, learners and even the labour market already seem slightly uncomfortable equating learning outcomes with opaque algorithms and analytics. The lesson is that a new digital pedagogy is urgently required. What use are flipped classrooms, simulation, gaming and other technological advances without experts who can ensure that learning is constructive rather than passive?

Variety is the spice of life

The promise of new technology can be seductive. The strategies of all the stakeholders involved in education will vary and, if the system has effective feedback mechanisms, those strategies that prove innovative will increasingly be selected as successes. The potential of the sector to adapt rests on its ability to try out new activities and then invest in what works. Too much experimentation can be distracting while ill-considered commitments may prove costly. Getting the balance right is arguably the key challenge.

Michael Reilly is an independent consultant who explored the potential of future technology for the UK government's Further Education Learning Technology Action Group team

CASE STUDY: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DIGITAL TOOLS

Reading College in Berkshire has more than 8,500 local learners participating in more than 900 courses. With such a diverse offering, taking a proactive stance on the use of new technologies in teaching has been crucial to the organisation's strategy.

One such programme is the college's much lauded "Pass It On" initiative, an online resource that contains useful information about technology, learning opportunities and more than 100 free or low-cost application downloads, such as Padlet, an application that allows students to collaborate and share their ideas on a common topic easily.

"Our teaching teams have easy access to a wealth of browser-based learning technologies, which are helping to provide engaging and interactive sessions that are relevant, available at any time, any place, and on any device," says Cheryl Pennington, assistant principal for teaching and learning. "It's helped develop the digital literacy skills and independence of our learners."

Pennington says that making new technology so readily accessible has "empowered staff and students" to gain the confidence to discover how tools and applications can enhance what they do. It's also brought teachers and learners closer together.

"For example, using Google communities has broadened my reach to my part-time students," she says. "In many ways it's become a virtual learning environment that means I can continue to support students beyond their five-week course. My advice to others would be that piloting this kind of new technology can enable, as it has for us, a deeper understanding of what works for your college, meaning you can put experimentation and innovation at the heart of your approach."

Expect the unexpected

How can business continuity planning support the future success of colleges? Tilden Watson explains

There is much for the further education sector to look forward to. Technology offers enormous scope to engage with learners on and off campus, while a corporate partnership can enable a college to deliver cutting-edge courses and apprenticeships without dependence on government funding. However, we know that macro concerns about the UK's economy, our environmental challenges, along with our ever-more reliance on technology hold special characteristics for the FE sector. None of these challenges will disappear in the coming years. While such insight may paint a picture of doom and gloom, there is little that a few hours spent looking ahead can't help to ameliorate.



Business continuity planning means understanding how your college may react in a crisis – be that a major incident, such as a fire or health emergency, something more nuanced, such as negativity on social media, or a conflict with a partner or supplier. In short, business continuity plans (BCPs) are part of a commitment to continuing business-as-usual. At its heart is the principle of being prepared, rather than making spontaneous decisions. A well-laid plan, with clearly plotted responsibilities and continued attention should keep any organisation ready for whatever challenges lie ahead. **In reality, your BCP should include:**

1. Risk analysis

What are the major threats your college might face? Every institution is unique, so it's important to understand the individual challenges. Consider the full spectrum of risks from severe incidents such as terrorist attacks or a major transport accident, to problems with utilities and infrastructure, such as a power cut to IT systems failure.

2. Mission critical processes

Establish which vital services and facilities should be maintained or restored as a matter of priority and develop a plan to enable this to happen. This should include clarifying a timescale for recovery following an interruption. Coherence on these missions will support a speedy and effective recovery during a crisis.

3. Impact analysis

What impact would a particular risk have on the college overall? Will this be financial, reputational or something else? Understand what precautions you can take today to mitigate these impacts tomorrow.

4. Communications strategy

Internal and external communications are crucial in minimising reputational damage following a crisis. Colleges should make sure they are able to access everyone they need so up-to-date contact details are imperative. Ensure clear lines of communication are created and that a team structure is in place that will make sure everyone who needs to know what's happening does – this includes planning for journalists who may be seeking a story.

5. Senior buy-in

Are you having the "what if?" conversation at the highest level? Senior sign-off on a BCP is a powerful statement that your college is serious about resilience. Creating a BCP doesn't need to be time-consuming, difficult or even tedious. A monthly strategy meeting, for example, is a great place to start kicking around ideas. Getting to that final step – senior buy-in – becomes a lot easier when department managers have taken the time to understand the concerns of their immediate team.

How to prepare for known unknowns

Some simple actions can help ensure risks don't become crises:

- ➔ Conduct a threat analysis to prioritise main threats
- ➔ Run a scenario to test that your BCP works, then refine where necessary
- ➔ Develop a robust internal and external communications plan to protect your reputation
- ➔ Prioritise college activities and set recovery-time objectives
- ➔ Develop a robust crisis management plan

CASE STUDY: FEELING THE HEAT

Barnsley College in South Yorkshire has experienced rapid growth in recent years. Today it hosts nearly 10,000 students across apprenticeships programmes, full- and part-time study, sixth-form and HE qualifications.

Managing growth is a particular challenge when it comes to facilities, which include 23 buildings and a working farm, says procurement and finance manager Craig Douglas. In May of this year these demands increased further when a fire broke out in the kitchen of its new £42m main building.

"Our catering area burst into flames and no one was around because it was a bank holiday weekend," recalls Douglas. "Luckily, the fire was immediately contained by fire shutters and a sprinkler. There was also a quick response from staff and emergency crews. I remember finding out straight away what was going on, but feeling confident it would be under control. That's because we're well prepared for things like this."

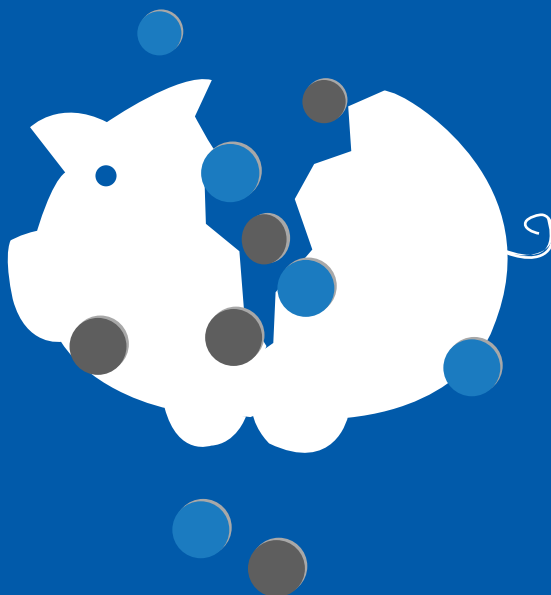
Such forethought meant damages potentially worth millions of pounds were contained to just tens of thousands. Staff also had a back-up plan for keeping the kitchen open, using temporary service counters to bring students their hot meals.

Douglas says disaster planning and risk management is a serious priority across the college. "Each of our departments maps its own risks, which goes into a shared risk register that's reviewed quarterly at the highest level. It's a living document, anyone can see it and it can be updated if necessary. We want to make sure we've got every angle covered."

When it comes to a crisis, Douglas says that staff are "regularly trained" and that keeping "a 24-hour line of communication" open between senior managers via mobile phone is a simple but effective means for a quick response. "Our estates team are pro-active and on the ball. With such a large campus, we can't afford not to be. Obviously we can't always stop incidents from happening, but if we can deal with them when they do, that's 90% of the battle."

Competition in the FE sector can be cut-throat, so when it comes to maintaining reputation, attracting new students, securing government funding or forging new partnerships, a BCP is a powerful tool for instilling confidence in what you do. We predict it will only become more critical in the next 10 years for colleges to demonstrate resilience and preparedness to their stakeholders. But even more importantly, planning ahead gives a college the internal confidence to know what they are truly capable of, and how far they can go.

Tilden Watson is head of education at Zurich Municipal



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