

Long live the utopian imagination: it keeps us rooted in the community

Opinion: Eddie Playfair, Principal of Newham Sixth Form College, offers his view on where we will be in five to 10 years' time

Hindsight is wonderful, foresight more risky. Things generally don't go as planned, although sometimes they turn out better. Any decent vision of the future needs a bit of utopian imagination. What follows is a brief personal view of where we might be in five to 10 years' time.

By then, most sixth form colleges have dropped the "sixth form" label and are partners in strongly collaborative tertiary systems that aim to meet fully the educational needs of their area and involve universities. Colleges' former designation is less important than their distinctive contribution to a coherent local offer. These systems continue to value success, now measured in terms of what "whole students" learn rather than simply how many qualifications they achieve. These local systems are explicitly charged with promoting equality and solidarity (formerly known as social cohesion) and they have risen to this challenge.

Students appreciate the range of specialist pathways that only a large system can offer, including conservatoire, elite sports and bilingual routes. Students still follow A-levels, Btecs, diplomas or the IB, but rather than competing these are all elements of an overarching English Bacc that promotes wider learning, skills development, service learning and research. There is no academic-vocational divide as all students work within the same framework while having a wide range of choices.

Everyone in the college takes learning seriously. From their second year, most students are peer mentors, mediators or volunteers. They attend lectures and classes as well as student-led study circles, and everyone is involved in mentoring and coaching others. Key lectures are recorded and are accessible digitally. A Centre of Teaching and Learning Excellence run with a local school of education promotes teachers' professional learning, research and publication.

The library still houses thousands of books, and students are expected to read set texts and whole books. The college runs writing workshops and reading groups and is a centre for community-run digital media and publishing. The campus is technology-rich and all students have portable devices that give access to learning resources via a personalised learning platform. The technology is used to promote sustained concentration and educational dialogue.

Staff and students see themselves as lifelong researchers. Every student engages in at least one major research project with clear social benefit. These are often collaborative and involve placements, in some cases abroad. Research themes arise from students' interests or may be stimulated by one of the many speakers or debates on campus. These research projects stimulate passionate discussion on campus and students offer advice and support to their peers and take pride in producing valuable work. These are published and are a vital part of the college's contribution to the community. Producing a worthwhile project is an important rite of passage.

All students contribute at least 50 hours of service learning per year, a form of volunteering that requires evidence of learning. Experienced volunteers graduate to community organising, taking a lead in local initiatives and developing political and leadership skills that go beyond being a student representative, ambassador or volunteer.

Students lead family literacy programmes to share the experience of reading for pleasure, and these have had a demonstrable impact on educational achievement and public health locally. Students make a massive contribution to community development and the annual audit of this public value helps the case for recurring public funding.

The college's social enterprise centre organises placements and internships and supports clusters of social enterprises addressing community needs. Using the resources of the college credit union, students establish successful food co-operatives, community catering, social care, technological and environmental enterprises.

The college is at the heart of the cultural life of its community with a restaurant, bookshop, exhibition and performance spaces, and it provides opportunities for the creation of new work in theatre, dance, music and the spoken word. This cultural programme breaks down the barriers between "popular" and "elite" art forms and combines ideas, styles and traditions that flow from, and enrich, the local creative community.

Students help to coach local school teams and promote physical activity. They also help to develop sustainable technologies, they understand the finite nature of our planet's resources and its biodiversity and are providing creative solutions to environmental problems.

The college is linked to a global network promoting education for global citizenship. Curriculum projects and international exchanges provide them with enhanced opportunities to understand the challenges facing humanity and develop possible solutions. The college is part of a UK Global Citizens' College, which is able to access substantial funding from governments and international agencies to support this work.

The college's core values have not changed since 2009. It remains focused on learning, success and achievement. It is constantly responding to the needs of its communities, which has led it to develop a wide range of extended provision: for its own students, for 14 to 16-year-olds, in higher education and with other colleges, employers and community organisations - all based on a model of disciplined experimentation driven by agreed community and learning objectives.

With each new project, the college creates governance and management structures to support innovation while maintaining accountability and strong financial control. This extended provision enhances core activity.

This was not inevitable. During the 2009-12 recession, colleges could have chosen to retrench. Instead, they maintained an absolute commitment to their communities, choosing to innovate and improve opportunities for students. At a difficult time for the public sector, colleges worked hard to create new partnerships based on sharing values, services, costs and risks - and as a result the system is in good shape and continues to invest in innovation. Because it combines aspiration with responsiveness, the college of the future is as relevant, successful and rooted in its community as it ever was.

Long live the utopian imagination - it's what keeps us going.

Eddie Playfair, Principal of Newham Sixth Form College (NewVIc), east London.