

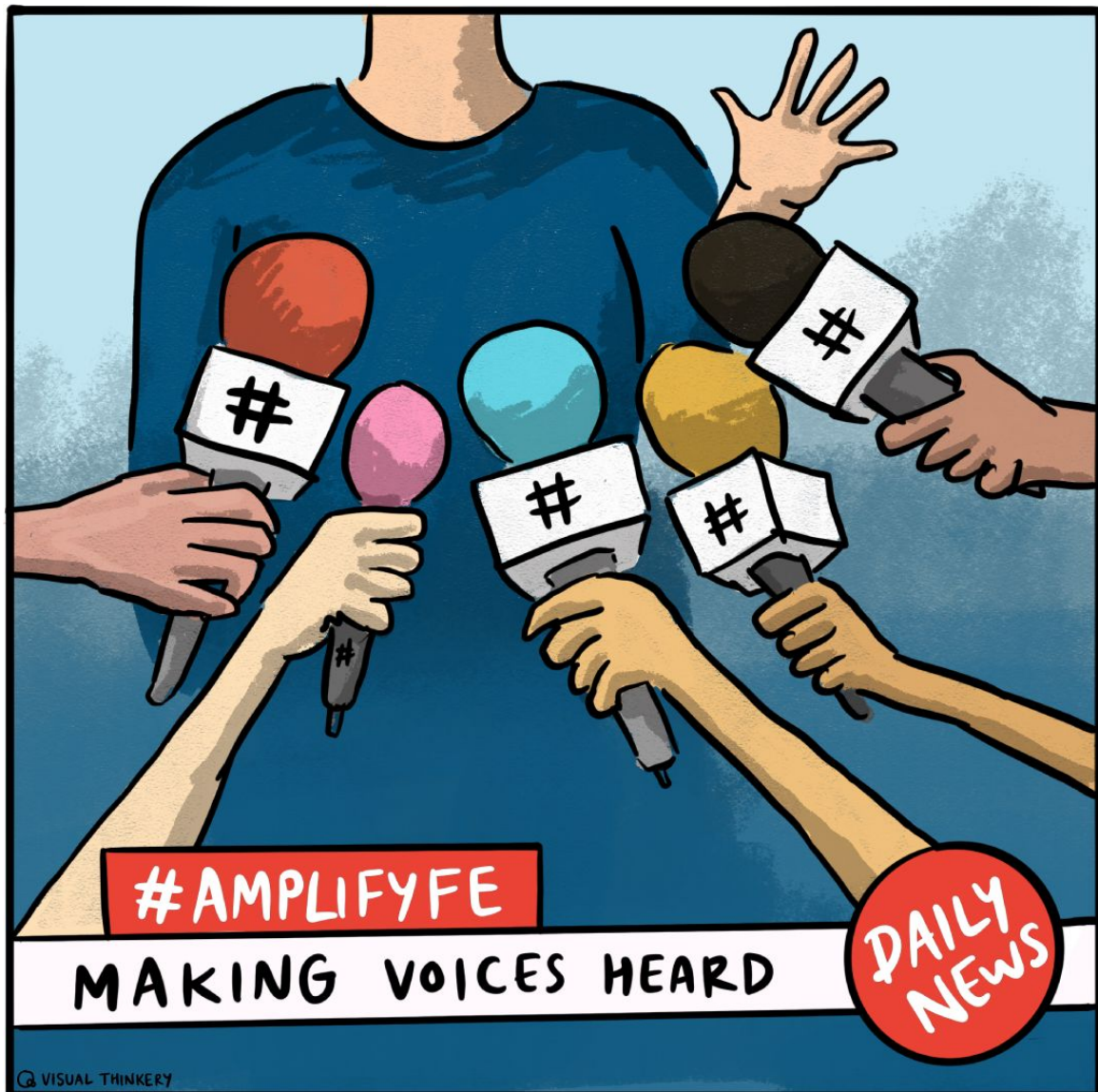


ASSOCIATION
FOR LEARNING
TECHNOLOGY



Communities of Practice Sector Audit Report

July 2020



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About the Project

The [Communities of Practice project](#) is led by the [Association for Learning Technology](#) (ALT) and funded by [Ufi](#) - the VocTech Trust.

The project goal is to establish a successful 'community of practice' (CoP) where vocational teaching staff are able to acquire, develop and share the digital, and digital pedagogical skills they need to thrive in vocational education.

Contributors

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With special thanks to Ufi for input from Dr Nick Lambert.



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Welcome

ALT are delighted to have undertaken the sector audit for the Communities of Practice project in collaboration with Ufi Voctech Trust. The audit was conducted during the unprecedented period of disruption that has been the COVID-19 pandemic. This period has seen many established and new Communities of Practice across the education sector seek to support their participants and members in actively responding to the challenges of COVID-19 through disseminating news, sharing knowledge and resources, and various other peer and community support activities. The findings and recommendations put forward are particularly timely then, as well as being insightful in identifying those factors which are strongly associated with establishing and sustaining effective and collegiate Communities of Practice. The findings and recommendations provide a very strong foundation for the next stage of the project which is to establish a community where vocational teaching staff are able to acquire, develop and share the digital and digital pedagogical skills they need, in support of the overall aim of the Ufi Voctech Trust “to catalyse change across the UK so that significant scale can be achieved in digital vocational learning for adults”.

*Professor Keith Smyth,
Project Sponsor and Vice-Chair of ALT*

Executive Summary

This audit identified close to 100 Communities of Practice (CoP) in total. The CoPs we audited include online community groups and networks around a common theme or interest set up by sector bodies and technology companies as well as independent groups run by individuals or groups of practitioners.

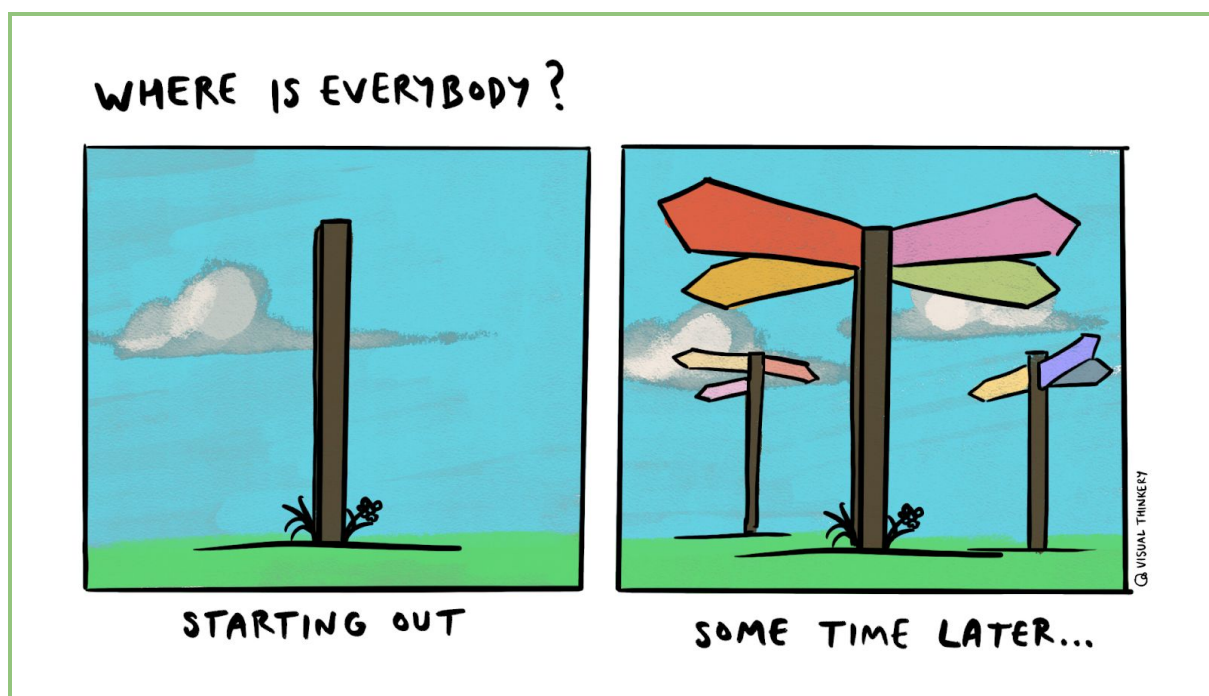
The data we collected include key indicators such as levels of activity, number of members involved, subject focus such as functional skills, governance, and platforms and tools used.

We focus in our report on particular examples of what the vocational, FE and Skills sector landscape looks like to highlight examples of what works - and what doesn't, examining the characteristics of what makes a CoP sustainable in the long term and what happens when they undergo changes or transition between platforms.

Having successfully completed the audit, and analysed the data, here are our key findings:

- **The vocational sector should amalgamate its efforts in common thematic areas:** There seems to be little to connect the close to 100 distinct networks we have audited. For example, we found during COVID-19 new networks were established to cover what is already provided elsewhere (we highlight some reasons for this, such as difficulty discovering CoPs and poor naming conventions). Limited signposting and collaboration between different groups makes it hard for professionals and providers to share knowledge efficiently. One of the aims of this project is to help connect different groups around themes starting with functional skills;
- **Open platforms:** our analysis of social media suggests that the most influential network activity takes place on open and easily accessible platforms, by which we mean that professionals connect with each other using hashtags or Twitter chats, which can be easier to find and access for newcomers. In contrast, closed door communities are of limited benefit to the sector as a whole as they do not facilitate wider knowledge-sharing and collaboration beyond those already involved;
- **Address the one-way communication:** sustainable CoPs give their members meaningful control over their domain, community and practice. The audit identified many examples explored in this report in which both commercial providers and sector bodies operate in 'broadcast mode' around specific events and product launches. This results in a short-term increase in activity but little sustainable engagement, particularly unhelpful for newcomers to the sector, who may not be familiar with existing networks and events;
- **Focus on practical resource-sharing communities:** having identified 30+ communities with a focus on 'functional skills' (such as Skills for Life network), we see that the most active engagement is focused on finding resources, including contextualised lesson content and sample papers-sharing for core curriculum areas, particularly functional skills English and maths. Teachers in these areas have been working with a new, and significantly-changed curriculum, introduced

in September 2019, whose access to lesson content and sample papers, has been further challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Embodying a trend observed across the sector, these teachers note that they expect significant online teaching and learning to continue after the pandemic ends, and that a curated and supportive community of practice could be of real value if sustained, sentiments now echoed by state actors.



1 Introduction

Our desire to do the very best for every learner has always been at the heart of vocational education. Communities of Practice (CoP) provide essential networks for professionals to do just that by sharing knowledge and collaborating; they have always been an important part of the vocational education sector in the UK.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us all that in order to meet the challenges ahead of us working together is essential; that makes having effective Communities of Practice ever more important. Communities of Practice save costs by supporting the sharing of content and know-how; they help in the development of best practice for teaching, training and assessment and they provide a safe space in which to learn lessons from failure.

Yet many networks that are set up have a short life-span. They are often dependent on the funding of projects to which they are attached, or to short-lived policy initiatives and are mothballed quickly. Some groups are sponsored by proprietary platforms that focus not on transferable skills or knowledge but instead on customer loyalty. Many communities are established with only a small number of active members and abandoned again as members move on to the next thing.

There is also 'community-washing' to be found in all education sectors, by which we mean groups or networks that state that they are community-focused, but in practice give members little meaningful control over the governance, operation or direction of the community and often sit behind log-ins and closed mailing lists, which give professionals little chance of finding them or finding out whether they would be welcome.

This project set out to audit those networks and communities which support teaching and learning, those that support the use of technology, and others which focus on subject specialisms in the vocational sector.

Our aim was to lay out common definitions of Communities of Practice and then expand our existing knowledge base by researching social media platforms, sector organisations, mailing lists, conferences and resources. This report shares our key findings now that the audit phase has been completed. Our findings will inform the next stage of the project, to establish a community where vocational teaching staff are able to acquire, develop and share the digital, and digital pedagogical skills they need to thrive in vocational education as part of the wider work of Ufi - the VocTech Trust.

The audit took place during one of the most turbulent periods in the sector, from February to May 2020. We consider the implications of this both in relation to how we approached the project and also in regard to the conclusions we draw from our findings. While the pandemic has certainly had an impact on the project we identify no reason why our findings should be less valid.

Blended and fully online learning are being scaled up at an unprecedented level in response to the pandemic. To meet the challenges ahead staff require support and development in much greater numbers. As the leading professional body for learning technology, ALT is best placed to lead this work to establish an independent and sustainable sector-wide network that helps connect existing groups.

2 A brief overview of the methodology

The main part of the audit took the form of desk research in preference to engaging with individual practitioners. This, we believe, has enabled us to develop a broadly-representative view of the sector.

Our initial research questions were to identify which (social media) platforms were the most impactful and why; the design and methodology therefore took account of a number of further challenges, namely, to:

- Identify CoPs across multiple platforms and cross-reference their activities
- Access relevant data across different platforms e.g. quantitative information not accessible to the general public
- Define the process for identifying previously unidentified CoP or networks
- Define the scope of the research, including definitions of 'the sector', a CoP and a network

Data sources

The audit included the following data sources:

- Data publicly available on social media platforms and websites
- Information available via online tools that identify related hashtags
- Mailing lists

The data collection tool for the audit was a shared Google Sheet with a baseline set of entries of networks and CoPs that the team was already familiar with to establish the headings and data to be collected. The next stage was to identify CoPs that were currently unknown to the project through hashtag analysis to give a more complete picture.

Final considerations for the methodology to ensure accuracy, relevance and comparability included:

- the timeframe for data collection: we ran the data collection over 2 weeks covering the last and first week of a month
- how particular times of year/significant events might affect different CoP and their level of engagement

Data we collected

General information about CoPs; where they were located and indicators of activity level and benefits to the members.

The scope of the audit

In order to define a scope for the audit, we used the applied definition of a Community of Practice that Etienne Wenger¹ summarises 'as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." This learning that takes place is not necessarily intentional. Three components are required in order to be a CoP: (1) the domain, (2) the community, and

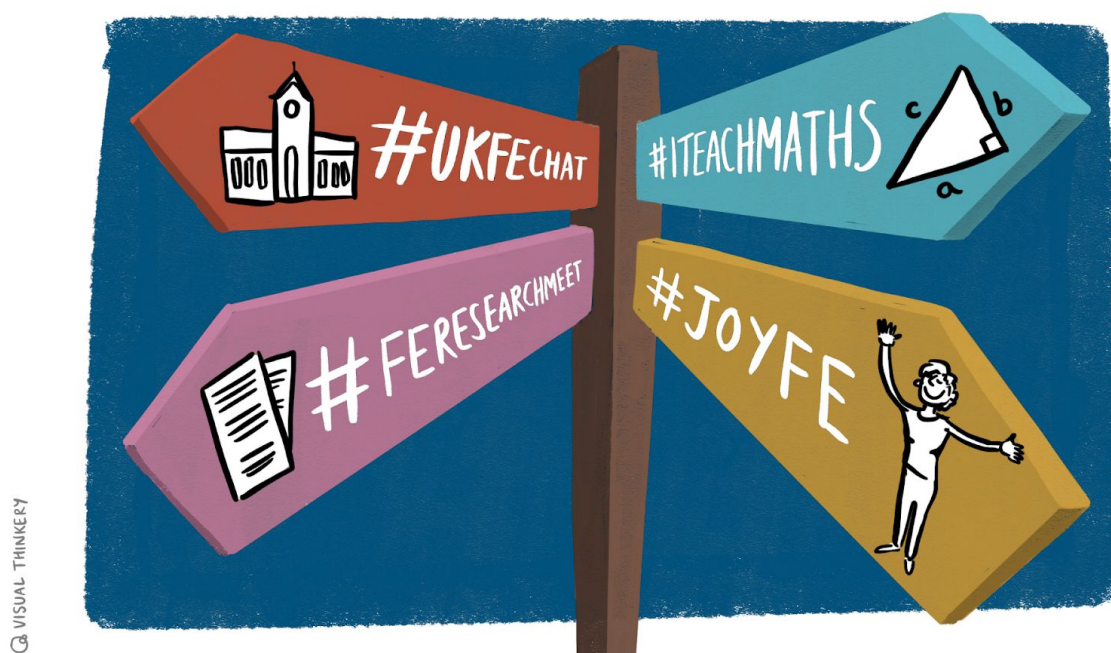
¹ David L, "Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger)," in Learning Theories, July 16, 2014, <https://www.learning-theories.com/communities-of-practice-lave-and-wenger.html>.

(3) the practice.'

<https://www.learning-theories.com/communities-of-practice-lave-and-wenger.html>

Ethical considerations about collecting and sharing/publishing the data from the audit for the sector

The research conducted as part of this audit was aligned to UK data protection laws and covered by ALT's Privacy and Data Processing policies. The data we collected in the audit were in the public domain and after reviewing the risks we felt that no explicit consent was required for our analysis. The data we collected and stored were reviewed and will be deleted when they are no longer required for the project, also in line with current UK data protection laws. For the purposes of this audit, we did not obtain any information by joining closed groups.



3 Findings from the audit

Our findings revealed two aspects: what the audit tells us about communities of practice in the sector and which appear to be among the most prominent and why.

The sector landscape for vocational education, further education, training and skills professionals

The audit identified 100 individual groups and networks across the vocational education, FE, training and skills sector in the UK and beyond. While we attempted to identify the most active/influential CoPs based on the data we collected, we acknowledge that there are other groups, particularly those which are not openly accessible, that fall outside the scope of this audit.

One of the key characteristics of communities of practice is that they are not necessarily known as being one, particularly if they have organically established themselves as a result of an event, a community chat or a project. This means that professionals searching for the term 'community of practice' online may not come across them if they do not already know to search for a specific name or person. One of the outputs from the audit - an index of the communities that we audited - may be a helpful practical resource for practitioners.

In order to overcome the challenge of finding communities of practice hidden in plain sight we used social media algorithms, including the Twitter search algorithms and smart searches for particular hashtags or accounts to identify hard to find groups.

The audit identified small groups, with up to 60 members (FE-LRC-WALES) as well as large networks with 4,288,788 users (TES Forums). There is a large variance between the sizes of the groups depending on the tools/platforms they use. For example, while a

platform may have many users, the active community it supports may be far smaller. Similarly, followers of a Twitter account or Facebook page may not necessarily be active in the CoP.

While there is a lot of variation, most groups and networks use social media platforms and online tools, including:

Platform	Example of community audited
Twitter	12 CoPs use a Twitter chat hashtag (i.e. they use a hashtag which includes the word chat), for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #eAssessChat • #UKFEchat • #mathscpdchat A total of 67 Twitter handles were identified during the audit.
Facebook	18 CoPs have a presence on Facebook, 1 uses Workplace from Facebook, and 7 use Facebook groups, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society for Education and Training (SET) QTLS (1192 Members) • APconnect (public) (32 Members)
LinkedIn	16 CoPs have a presence on LinkedIn, 9 use LinkedIn groups, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL) (103 Members) • Elearning network (5361 Members) • National Association for Teaching English and Community Languages to Adults (15 Members)
Mailing lists	14 CoPs use mailing lists, of these 8 use Jiscmail, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FE-LRC-WALES (60 Members) • Jisc Change Agents' Network (428 Members)

The majority of CoPs are open and free to join. However, there are other membership models, which range from the individual paid membership of the Society for Education and Training to the Blended Learning Consortium's institutional annual membership.

Professional bodies like ALT often support both closed groups for members only, and open networks such as Special Interest Groups, including the FELTAG Special Interest Group and the Blended Learning Essentials Digital Champion group.

There are also closed groups on a variety of platforms that potential members can join; some require the submission of a portfolio of work, or completion of an online course to join, such as the educator expert groups associated with Apple, Google and Microsoft respectively. Their core group discussions may be held in closed/hidden spaces, but social media platforms are still used for the overspill of conversations, alongside content and events marketing.

To highlight the nuanced landscape of CoPs on social media we have included some

communities based around a Twitter hashtag or conference for example, that don't necessarily fit the full definition of a CoP but present a truer picture of what influences practice and professional development.

As part of the CoP Twitter analysis, two different types of data-sampling were used. First, the tweets from a known CoP Twitter account were extracted. From the resulting data, hashtags were extracted for each tweet and this data was processed in Voyant Tools to visualise hashtag frequency and tag relationships.



Figure 1: @SocietyET Twitter account hashtag word cloud of frequencies. As part of the initial Twitter account analysis, it should be noted that the data are limited to the last ~3,600 tweets. In some cases, the 3,600 limit resulted in extracting a partial archive of the most recent tweets from the account.

The initial set of hashtags was analysed to identify and extract frequently-used hashtags. At this stage, we removed a number of hashtags that although used by different communities, weren't exclusive to those communities. For instance, the hashtag #intuition used by the Education and Training Foundation's @SocietyET is also used extensively in non-education-related tweets as it is a common dictionary word.

We also observed that many tweets included hashtags that relate to an event or conference. These were easily identified as they included a reference to the date of the event e.g. #setconf19. We extracted current event hashtags, only including those with a suffix -19, 2019, 20 or 2020.

Further analysis was then conducted by extracting tweets with each of the identified hashtags. Because of the restrictions imposed by Twitter these data were limited to a 2-week collection window. This helped us to identify active hashtags and to observe the behaviour around those hashtags, including the number of tweets using the hashtag, the % of replies, the % of retweets, and activity levels across the 2 week period.

10 of the 104 hashtags related to events or conferences that included the suffix-19, 2019, 20 or 2020. Of these 10 hashtags only 3 were active during the 2 week collection window #festivaloflearning2020 (1 tweet), #digifest20 (41 tweets) and #eassess20 (90 tweets). The inclusion of the date gives the hashtag a specific timeframe, which leads to increased activity around the date of the event but not a sustained conversation over the longer term.

The nature of the development and growth of communities of practice is organic and can be heavily influenced by the role of individuals. For example, as part of our understanding of Situated Learning Theory², we have come to recognise that communities of practice have key influential members and over time peripheral members gradually become more influential.

The audit focused on the communities rather than the role of individual influencers. The audit measured impact on active members of communities, but we are aware that not all members leave a traceable digital footprint. As David White set out in his model of Visitors and Residents³, those who are residents leave evidence of their residency, whereas 'visitors' leave little evidence of their visits, therefore capturing this evidence and impact must be outside the parameters of this audit.

A number of examples of relevant hashtags identified throughout the audit:

1. #ukedchat
2. #edtechchat
3. #LTHEchat
4. #UKFEchat
5. #advancehe_chat
6. #BrewEdFE
7. #FEResearchMeet
8. #apconnect
9. #lteachmaths
10. #JoyFE

² David L, "Situated Learning Theory (Lave)," in Learning Theories, January 17, 2007, <https://www.learning-theories.com/situated-learning-theory-lave.html>.

³ White D, Visitors and Residents, <http://daveowhite.com/vandr/>



Findings - specific examples

In this section, we share examples from the audit that relate directly to our key findings.

Key finding: The vocational sector needs to join up its efforts

Having audited close to 100 distinct networks, it is clear that while there is a plethora of activity there is no joined-up community. For example, we found during COVID-19 new networks being established to cover what is already provided elsewhere and with no connection to those already established (we highlight some reasons for this, such as difficulty discovering CoPs and poor naming conventions). This makes it hard for professionals and providers to share knowledge efficiently.

Example of where/how this is happening...

What is clear from the audit is that there is currently no single community or network that attracts members and engagement from the whole of the vocational education sector. During the audit we looked at communities and networks that support Further Education and Skills, Higher Education, Adult Education, regulatory bodies, awarding bodies, as well as wider groups that support the sector (Jisc, ETF, Ofsted, NUS, UCU etc).

Their communities of practice focus on sub-sectors or sub-aspects, such as #LTHEchat, which focuses on learning and teaching in Higher Education; #UKFEchat, which focuses on Further Education and Skills; #advancehe_chat, which covers teaching and learning in Higher Education and Further Education; the TES, which focuses mainly on schools, but covers Further Education and Vocational Education too. We looked at networks and groups related to students, including the NUS Further Education (FE) Staff community of practice, the Jisc Student Experience Experts Group, and the Jisc Change Agents' Network which supports staff and students working in partnership on curriculum

enhancement and innovation. We also looked at major global networks from those that support the educational use of Apple, Google and Microsoft products to communities that support the use of e-learning in Welsh FE libraries.

Example of a group that works well...

The TES runs individual community fora, including the TES Community forum - Further Education; TES Community forum - Vocational; and the recently set up TES Community forum - Teaching & Learning. The TES website has 74 individual forums that support different (mainly school-based) subject areas, staffroom topics, career stages (roles) with a combined membership, across all forums of 4,288,788 and a Twitter following of 313,000 @tes and 31,600 @tesfenews, making this by far the largest community we audited. The TES communities build on the reputation and readership of the weekly publication and website TES.com

What we learnt: The audit found that communities that support a broad range of discussions attract a greater membership. Providing a way to find relevant discussions is important, whether that is by individual forums or by the use of multiple hashtags.

Key finding: Moving to open platforms

Our analysis of social media suggests that the most influential network activity takes place on open and easily-accessible platforms, where professionals can connect with each other using hashtags or Twitter chats, which are relatively easy to find and access for newcomers. Closed door communities on social media platforms are of limited benefit to the sector as a whole as they do not facilitate wider knowledge sharing and collaboration beyond those already involved.

Example of where/how this is happening...

Apple, Google and Microsoft each have their own Communities of Practice linked to certification for educators, based around their products. They are member-only communities hosted on their own proprietary platforms. In addition to these closed communities, they have Twitter handles and hashtags that relate to those communities, e.g. Apple uses #adechat, #appleeduchat, #appleteacher but this isn't necessarily where the main discussions take place.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Microsoft launched a new CoP, Microsoft Enable Remote Learning Community, on the 6th March 2020. This community is a closed door community as it is hosted in Microsoft Teams. Joining is not automatic, it involves completing a Microsoft Form and then waiting to be added to the team, creating a barrier to entry of the community and limiting potential new members from seeing its activities, and benefits to joining.

Example of a group that works well...

Some groups run open communities of practice on Twitter, where it is easy for potential new members to see how they work before deciding to participate. One example is the #LTHEchat with a website that explains how to get involved, how the group is run and includes a blog of current and past discussion topics. The group also runs a monthly Twitter chat in conjunction with #advancehe_chat.

What we learnt: The audit shows how communities that are hosted on open platforms are easier to observe, discover and learn from. When a community uses a platform like Twitter, a potential new member is able to see the activities of the community, learn how it works, and consider participating. New potential members can benefit from the community without directly participating, as they are able to observe the conversations of other members.

Key finding: One-way communication dominates

Sustainable CoPs give their members meaningful control over their domain, community and practice. The audit identified many examples in which both commercial providers and sector bodies operate in 'broadcast mode' around specific events and product launches, resulting in a short-term increase in activity, but little sustainable engagement. This is particularly unhelpful for newcomers to the sector, who may not be familiar with existing networks and events.

Example of where/how this is happening...

#Edtechchat is an example of a Twitter community of practice that appears to be in broadcast mode. The account has a very low reply rate in comparison to other twitter chats analysed. The reply rate was 5%, compared to 48.7% and 38.3% for #UKFEchat and #LTHEchat respectively.

Jisc has a number of communities of practice which they support using a Jiscmail list and face-to-face events. One of these is the Jisc Student Experience Experts Group, which meets twice a year and uses an event hashtag with a date e.g. jiscexperts20. This group does not have a dedicated Twitter account and very little conversation happens on Twitter between the face-to-face events. During the events key individuals from Jisc tweet, often serving as the personal face of Jisc, rather than using the @Jisc account.



Figure 2: hashtag word cloud

There is one Jisc community that operates slightly differently: the Jisc Change Agents' Network. It has its own Twitter account @CANagogy, which was not active in the 30 days during the audit collection period. The #jiscan hashtag was also not active during the data collection period.

The main @Jisc Twitter account often uses the hashtags #digifest20 #openaccess #connectmore19 #edu4_0 as can be seen in the Wordcloud and activity levels are recorded in the table below:


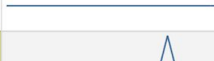


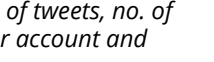
Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (50,465)	No. of accounts	% @reply	% RT	Tweets per account	Activity
#digifest20	Y	Y	41	11	2.4%	90.2%	3.7	
#connectmore19	Y	Y	0	0	-	-	-	
#edu4_0	Y	Y	3	2	0.0%	33.3%	1.5	
#jisccan	Y	Y	0	0	-	-	-	
#studentsaspartners	Y	Y	72	53	1.4%	68.1%	1.4	

Figure 3: Data extracted from tweets using the hashtags frequently used by @Jisc showing no. of tweets, no. of accounts that used each hashtag, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, no. tweets per account and activity level during the audit period.

We included a range of different bodies within our audit, including the Federation of Awarding Bodies, which has a Twitter account @AwardingBodies established in April 2015 plus two additional accounts: @Awarding_PL and @Awarding_AAA, set up in January 2020. @Awarding_AAA describes itself as 'a professional resource for the awarding and assessment industry'. All three accounts appear to be in broadcast mode, with each account having a low reply rate as can be seen in the table below:




Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (87,866)	% @reply	% RT	Activity (Min:11/08/08)
@AwardingBodies	Y		1,669	3.3%	57.8%	
@Awarding_AAA	Y		50	0.0%	72.0%	
@Awarding_PL	Y		154	1.3%	57.1%	

Figure 4: Data extracted from the Twitter accounts @AwardingBodies, @Awarding_AAA and @Awarding_PL showing no. of tweets, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, and activity level during the audit period.

Example of a group that works well...

The #UKFEchat community of practice runs a weekly Twitter chat on Thursday evenings at 9 pm. The community has a website, a Twitter account, and a unique hashtag. The account name and hashtag are almost the same, @TheUKFEchat and #UKFEchat, and the account has 2,928 followers. During the audit period, the account wasn't active, it last tweeted on the 14th June 2019 (see table below). According to the supporting website www.ukfechat.com, this was the day before the UKFEchat Conference 2019. The hashtag analysis revealed that the Twitter chat is still active with 747 Tweets using #UKFEchat, during the two-week data collection period.



Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (87,866)	% @reply	% RT	Activity (Min:11/08/08)	First Tweet	Last Tweet	Active in last 30 Days	
@TheUKFEchat	Y		729	9.7%	66.3%		20/05/2014 09:07:03	14/06/2019 20:53:33	No	
Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (50,465)	No. of accounts	% @reply	% RT	Tweets per account	Activity	First Tweet	Last Tweet
#UKFEchat	Y	Y	747	179	48.7%	34.0%	4.2		20/05/2020 19:43:26	04/06/2020 13:50:12

Figure 5: Data extracted from the Twitter account @TheUKFEchat showing no. of tweets, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, and activity level, date of first and last tweets compared to the data extracted from the tweets using the hashtags #UKFEchat during the audit period, showing no. of tweets, no. of accounts that used each hashtag, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, no. tweets per account and activity level.

What we learnt: Communities of practice are built on conversations and interactions where members share knowledge and practices. Using a Twitter chat hashtag can encourage meaningful conversations within the community which benefits those directly involved and those on the peripheral of the community.

Key finding: Practical resources for functional skills a priority

Having identified 30+ communities with a focus on functional skills (such as Skills for Life network), we see that the most active engagement is focused on practical resources, including contextualised lesson content and sample papers-sharing for core curriculum areas, particularly functional skills English and maths.

Teachers in these areas have been working with a new, and significantly-changed curriculum, introduced in September 2019, whose access to lesson content and sample papers, has been further challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown. We discovered that Functional Skills teachers expect significant online teaching and learning to continue after the pandemic ends, and that a curated and supportive community of practice could be of real value, sentiments echoed elsewhere in the sector, including by some state actors.

Example of where/how this is happening...

In total, we identified 33 CoPs that provide support, discussions or resources related to or supportive of functional skills. It is important to note that functional skills are only taught in England, their equivalent in Wales and Northern Ireland is essential skills, and core skills are taught in Scotland. Two of the groups focus on supporting skills taught in Scottish colleges, both run by the College Development Network - Essential Skills & Volunteering and Languages & ESOL. One group supports skills taught in Wales, the Learning and Work Institute Wales supporter network.

Five CoPs focus on the teaching and assessment of maths in general, two Twitter accounts previously mentioned MTBOS and Iteachmath, two additional maths-related Twitter chats #mathscpdchat and #coremathschat and the Association for eAssessment Mathematics SIG. Whilst another five CoPs focus on English, including the National Association for Teaching English and other Community Languages to Adults, the professional association for teachers of ESOL, who recently set up a twitter chat using the hashtag #ESOLchat.

There are also communities that aim to support the improvement of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in general including the Learning and Work Institute supporter network, Research and Practice in Adult Literacies (RaPAL), UCU Union Learn.

City & Guilds offer functional skills support, mainly in the form of resources, but in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have started to run online #TeachMeets. These #TeachMeets are closed webinar sessions that require pre-registration to attend.


Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (50,465)	No. of accounts	% @reply	% RT	Tweets per account	Activity
#functionalskills	Y	Y	100	73	4.0%	55.0%	1.4	

Figure 6: Data extracted from tweets using the hashtags #functionalskills showing no. of tweets, no. of accounts that used each hashtag, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, no. tweets per account and activity level during the audit period.

The hashtag #functionalskills was used 100 times during the audit period. Many of those tweets were advertising functional skills courses or jobs, or were broadcasting information from @SfLNetwork the Skills for Life Network about their e-newsletter including information about functional skills and their Outstanding Teaching, Learning

and Assessment (English and maths) programme. 55% of the tweets were retweets, helping to amplify the broadcast mode of the hashtag, very few were conversational tweets.

Example of a group that does work well...

The TES community forums have a number of active discussions on functional skills these are spread across various TES community forums including: English, Teaching and Learning, Computing and ICT, Secondary, EAL, Mathematics, Education News; Career Clinic, Personal, Private Tutors, etc. These discussions can be found by using the keyword search function. There are currently 170 posts relating to functional skills across the forums. Similarly, there are active discussions about functional skills in the community section of UKEDchat.

What we learnt: There are many sector bodies and organisations with information and support to offer, but individual practitioners find it difficult to locate these. It is important to make it as easy as possible for practitioners to identify relevant discussions and resources, through a system of tagging.

Differing approaches to using community hashtags and accounts on Twitter

Although the #DigiLearnSector community of practice uses Microsoft Teams as its main platform, it also has a Twitter presence, where they use the hashtag #DigiLearnSector. Interestingly they don't have a dedicated Twitter account. Instead, they tweet from the University of Central Lancashire's Technology Enabled Learning & Teaching Team's Twitter account @UCLanTELT.

The #HEAchat Community of Practice changed their Twitter handle and hashtag after the Higher Education Academy (HEA) became Advance HE. They became #advancehe_chat and @AdvanceHE_chat. The community also decided to combine their monthly Twitter chat with the weekly #LTHEchat.

Below you can see the activity levels for the two Twitter chats. The #LTHEchat includes more tweets as it is a weekly session, but you can see that #advancehe_chat involves fewer accounts. Both communities have supporting websites. The #HEAchat blog has not been updated since 2018 and makes reference to the old Twitter handle @HEA_chat.

Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (50,465)	No. of accounts	% @reply	% RT	Tweets per account	Activity
#LTHEchat	Y	Y	2,630	374	38.8%	38.4%	7.0	
#advancehe_chat	Y	Y	554	103	35.7%	43.1%	5.4	
#heachat	Y	Y	1	1	0.0%	100.0%	1.0	

Figure 7: Data extracted from tweets using the hashtags #LTHEchat, #advancehe_chat and #heachat showing no. of tweets, no. of accounts that used each hashtag, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, no. tweets per account and activity level during the audit period.

The #Iteachmath community uses a set of sub-communities to help members find conversations that are most relevant to their own practice.

The group uses Twitter Bots to automatically retweet sub-community hashtags and advises new members to follow the relevant Twitter accounts (@iteachmathHS, @iteachmathMS, or @iteachmathElem). It uses the corresponding hashtag to increase the chances of new members getting a response.

Account name	Imported	Updated	Imported Tweets (50,465)	No. of accounts	% @reply	% RT	Tweets per account	Activity
#MTBOS	Y	Y	10,012	3,305	1.4%	80.9%	3.0	
#Iteachmath	Y	Y	10,740	3,271	1.5%	80.1%	3.3	

Figure 8: Data extracted from tweets using the hashtags #MTBOS, and #Iteachmath showing no. of tweets, no. of accounts that used each hashtag, percentage of replies, percentage of retweets, no. tweets per account and activity level during the audit period.

A successful example of combining/adding hashtags is @ExploreMTBoS and @iteachmathAll, the second of which was set up to make it easier for new Twitter followers to easily find and follow relevant tweets. As the table below shows, the vast majority of the 10,000 + tweets used both hashtags. Both hashtags are used for broadcasting relevant information to the community.

What we learnt: We can see that many approaches are used with varying levels of success. What is clear from the audit is that the choice of platform, name, and associated social media handles and hashtags are important when it comes to generating engagement, so newcomers can discover and join in with activities and - most importantly - community sustainability.

An effective way of establishing a CoP is to have an easy to locate presence on Twitter, and other social media platforms, which are clearly linked to one main hub platform.

Establishing a dedicated Twitter handle and hashtag often seems to be the most direct way to give a community presence and makes it easy for members to follow and stay up to date with the latest community news. While this may sound obvious the audit identified a surprising number of examples where this is not done.



4 Conclusions

We summarise conclusions from the audit and practical steps for the next phase of our project.

Platforms

It is important to consider the platform(s) choice when setting up a CoP, reducing the barriers to entry. The majority of CoPs we looked at during the audit were based on at least two platforms, often a website and a social media platform even if the main conversations were held on a proprietary platform, additional peripheral conversations are often held elsewhere on Twitter/LinkedIn/Facebook.

Hashtags

Finding a balance between uniqueness and discoverability is something to keep in mind when setting up a hashtag. If the hashtag is unique like #MTBOS, which stands for Math Twitter Blogosphere, it's unlikely to be used by another group, but is less intuitive for new members. In fact, some members involved in the #MTBOS community decided to address this issue of inclusiveness by setting up a second group using a more intuitive hashtag and twitter handle, #iteachmath⁴.

It is important to be aware of the potential for hashtag hijacking, where other accounts pick up on trending hashtags and use the hashtag to spam the followers of that hashtag. If this is an individual account you can block it and report to Twitter. The same functionality is available across different social media platforms.

⁴ <https://iteachmathcommunity.weebly.com/how-this-works.html#>

If the problem becomes more widespread it may be necessary to change to a different hashtag.

Engaging with existing networks and CoPs to network the network

The creation of an independent CoP with a focus on functional skills for the UK vocational education sector, that will help vocational educators to discover, share and discuss the resources, training and support they need to develop their digital pedagogical skills. It will be part of, and support the VocTech digital marketplace that will aggregate resources, and review/rate them to refine the way technology is used in vocational learning institutions.

Next steps: Towards a UK functional skills Community of Practice

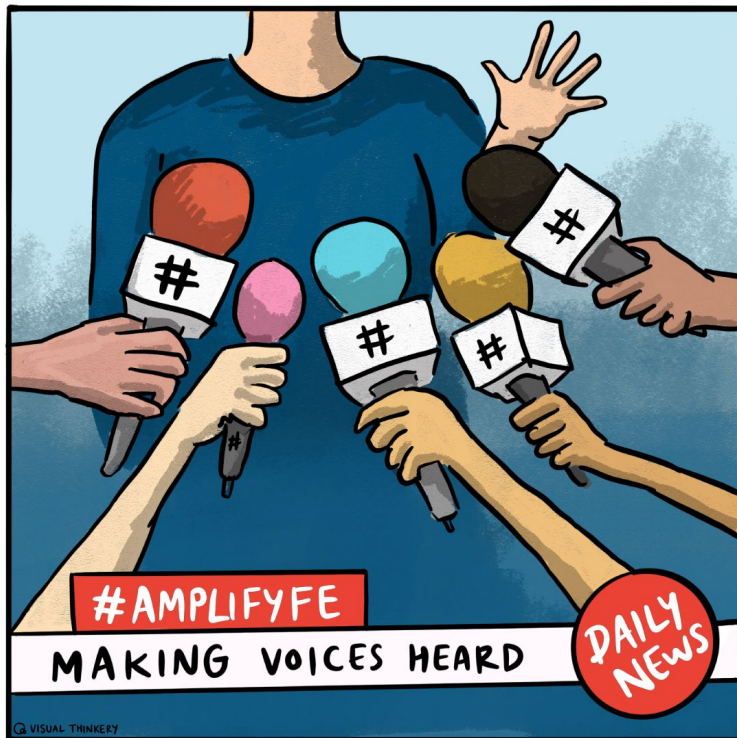
Like other vocational and hybrid-vocational qualifications, each of the national governments in the UK has created its own cluster of functional skills qualifications. This is because each national government has its own views on which essential skills it expects its learners to acquire, with some placing an emphasis beyond literacy and numeracy, to incorporate 'soft,' and employability skills, such as working with others or skills relevant to particular job roles or sectors.

As a consequence, creating an educational Community of Practice by subject, which can successfully work across the UK, requires teachers, and the community's curator, to be able to identify common thematic strands, collective-learning and problem-solving attributes, challenges and benefits, that will incentivise such practitioners to participate: the 'what's in it for me' factor.

The audit provides an important overview of those networks and communities which support teaching and learning, those that support the use of technology, and others which focus on subject specialisms in the vocational sector.

We can now build on our findings to inform the next stage of the project, to establish a community where vocational teaching staff are able to acquire, develop and share the digital, and digital pedagogical skills they need to thrive in vocational education as part of the wider work of Ufi - the VocTech Trust.

Blended learning is key to providers and professionals succeeding in these challenging times and staff need support and development that is effective and sustainable across the sector as a whole. As the leading professional body for learning technology, ALT is best placed to lead this work to establish an independent and sustainable sector-wide network that helps connect existing groups.



About the Project

The [Communities of Practice project](#) is led by the [Association for Learning Technology](#) (ALT) and funded by [Ufi](#) - the VocTech Trust.

The project goal is to establish a successful 'community of practice' (CoP) where vocational teaching staff are able to acquire, develop and share the digital, and digital pedagogical skills they need to thrive in vocational education.

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With special thanks to Ufi for input from Dr Nick Lambert.



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