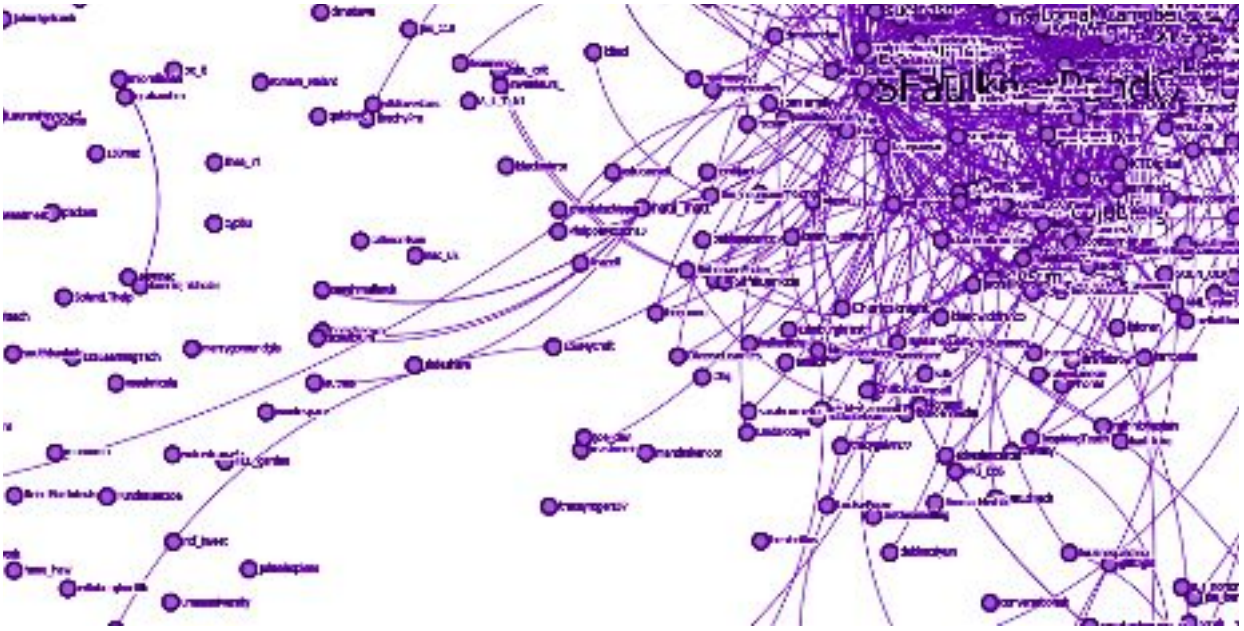
Communities of Practice
Sector Audit Report
July 2020



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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.

Find out more about the project, access the full report and data set on the project website.