



Hopwood Hall's 10-year journey with the matrix Standard. An interview with Kath Bollard-Wilkes

Hopwood Hall College and University Centre operates across two campuses, one in Rochdale town centre and another in Middleton on the north-eastern side of Manchester. It is a further education college offering a wide a range of vocational courses including BTECs and T-Levels as well a range of part-time courses for adult learners, Access and Higher Education programmes and apprenticeships too. Their offering is focused on ensuring all students gain the skills, abilities, and confidence to progress into their chosen careers and enjoy success.

Hopwood Hall College was first accredited with the **matrix** Standard in 2012 and over the last decade, they have used the **matrix** Standard to build, develop and streamline their processes for their learners and staff.

We spoke with Senior Careers and Work Experience Advisor, Kath Bollard-Wilkes who joined the staff at Hopwood Hall College in 2011 and was fundamental in getting the college-ready for their first matrix Standard accreditation. Read her journey over the last decade below.

matrix Team: Hi Kath it's lovely to speak with you and I can't wait to hear your journey with the **matrix** Standard, let's get started! When you joined in 2011 what was the college like and how did the processes work?

Kath: Good morning! It's great to talk with you and to tell our journey with the Standard and share what it has done for us as a college, for both learners and staff. So, yes, I joined way back when in 2011 (seems so long ago now!) and at that point, the college was just starting the process of getting ready for the first **matrix** Standard assessment and going for accreditation. The college had worked towards accreditations and assessment before for the likes of Ofsted, but we wanted to challenge ourselves and make sure that we weren't missing a trick in supporting our continuous improvement Journey. At the time Information,

Advice and Guidance (IAG) was considered “the fluffy stuff” in general as you couldn’t measure it or provide hard outcomes to show off to the Senior Leadership team for instance. It also was not marked by Ofsted, so a lot of education places thought “why bother with IAG?” due to Ofsted only measuring your teaching and learning, and not bothering to look at your IAG support or delivery. But because we wanted to challenge ourselves and make sure we're providing the best IAG support possible to complement what Ofsted were after, we thought that the **matrix** Standard was a great framework and tool to work from and become accredited.

matrix team: Interesting to learn that IAG wasn’t highly considered at the time of your first assessment, and I suppose it was a brave choice for you to go for the **matrix** accreditation then! So, in your first 12 months in the role when you started working with and using the framework and working towards the assessment, what were your first impressions, and then later on how was the framework worked into your department?

Kath: In 2011 when I joined the team there were two teams that we were planning to merge, The Learner Services Team and the Administration team. These two teams were to form the Student and College Services Team, and the idea was that it was going to be a holistic, all-encompassing team to streamline students and the college. This was a perfect time to get ready for the assessment whilst doing this merge, as we could provide evidence for all the elements required for accreditation and it would mean that we could start as we meant to go on with this team. Once we started to look at the **matrix** framework and what was required, I won't lie we did have a mini heart attack when we first saw the framework as we thought we would have to jump through lots of hoops like you have to do on other assessments. However, we soon saw how the framework was broken down into bite-sized sections (the elements) for us to work through and that made the process so much easier and smoother, and that is one of the key features that makes the **matrix** Standard different and why we like it.

In terms of how the framework started to weave into the department, a few years after our first accreditation Ofsted revised their framework completely and no longer focused just on teaching and learning, they changed it to look at the whole picture looking at intent, impact, and implementation. We were ready for when Ofsted came for inspection that year as we could show how we were consistently improving, so we were right to start using the **matrix** Standard prior to it being a requirement as it put us in good stead.

Because of the journey we have been on with **matrix**, we have been consistently improving and checking ourselves against that framework. The yearly continuous improvement check makes sure that we do not lose sight of what we are doing and where we want to get to. You revisit the continuous improvement documents every year and it’s a working and continuous document and not just standalone, **matrix** brings continuous improvement as an organisation to the forefront of everything you are doing.

matrix team: You made the right decision to become accredited so early on as it now feeds into what Ofsted are looking and measuring for. Moving onto the processes then, how has **matrix** helped you look at individuals as well as whole departments?

Kath: I'm going to start off with an analogy here, so just go with me! If you think of your organisation like a dartboard and then think of the **matrix** Standard as the wires that run through the board (your organisation). The lines go through the bullseye so that's your Senior Leadership Team, then the wires go out to the trebles, so your wider management teams, and then the wires go out to your wider teams and then out to your learners who are the numbers around the outside of your dartboard.

Using that analogy that's how we approach **matrix** Standard and that is how it is designed to be used, throughout the whole organisation rather than a tick box exercise, and quite frankly if all you are using it for is a tick box then I would not recommend that you do it because you won't be doing the Standard or yourself justice.

We have used the framework of the Standard to meet the changes that are happening in the world over the last decade and the 3-year cycle that contains the 12 and 24 month continuous improvement checks have really kept us on track and made us challenge ourselves constantly, it's not a static document or process, it's continuous. An example of this change is that originally it was only the Student and College Services Team that were accredited, but over the past decade we have expanded the accreditation out into the Employer Services Team and the Apprenticeship Team as the apprenticeship boom was happening. Now we are looking to expand the accreditation to the whole of the college.

matrix team: That is a great analogy! I like how that image of the standard how it brings it to life, and it really showcases how you have expanded your accreditation over the last few years. How has having the **matrix** Standard influenced change within your organisation in terms of your signposting to other IAG services and working with partners?

Kath: Due to the location of our college we are located between two local authorities who we work closely with to ensure we can reach a wide range of people. The **matrix** standard reaffirms our need for partners because it makes us look at what everyone can bring to the table and how we and the partners can best support the learners in our local areas, especially when you need to be reactive to situations. The standard gives us accountability over our partners and stakeholders too, so it again gives us a continuous structure to work with.

matrix team: I guess having that great relationship with your partners helped over the past 18 months, so how did the pandemic help you and the college move forward with your IAG services? Did it accelerate any strategies you had in place?

Kath: Yes, that grounding relationship with the partners was so good during the last 20 months, having said that the last 20 months was really hard for us, and yes like you say we did have to accelerate and think of digital solutions to the problem in front of us. We were the first organisation to go through our 3 year **matrix** accreditation remotely, it was the first week in March 2020! The pandemic did (like many others) accelerate our adoption of technology and we are now more accessible to our learners. By actually doing the **matrix** assessment remotely it helped us to start to figure out how we could still be there for our learners. We realised we needed a Zoom account so we got that, the reception team got an app on their phones so they could answer the switchboard on their phones, leaving no learner without help. We have changed so much as a service that when it comes to the continuous improvement check next year, we will have loads to show and talk about.

matrix team: That's great that we could assist in figuring out what you needed to move to online learning, we all had to help each other as it was such a strange time! With the improvements made to the services via the pandemic, what do you think will be the impact of your continuous improvement this year compared to last year?

Kath: Now because of the pandemic there has been no alternative but to accelerate a plan that was already in motion. We have seen impacts across both our learners and staff already! In the past, I will be honest here, getting evidence for the "personal guidance" we have already struggled with, however after making all these changes due to the pandemic we will have loads of evidence for this section and we can build on it over the coming years, and look to the next 3 year assessment. Some examples that we can see already are we have had over 600 of our learners complete virtual work experience with employers over Zoom which worked really well. We have engaged with over 70% of all our learners with personal guidance. Also, because we have accredited the apprenticeship team, we are all singing from the same hymn sheet, as it were, which has made the learners' journey to work more seamless. We have been able to get learners into an apprenticeship rather than into an entry level job to improve progression. The full report will be out in January 2022, and we are really excited to see the figures.

Other impacts we have seen whilst being accredited with **matrix** are in our staff reviews and how we operate them. The staff has two performance reviews a year, a half year one in October, and an annual one in June, and this is where the **matrix** slots right into that development because it's continuous. We do our continuous improvement plan in March which feeds into our curriculum plan in April and into team planning in May/June and then into the staff reviews in June and we can set the objectives for that staff member for the next academic year. Finally, in July we firm up our KPI's and continuous Quality improvement plan as a service. If the **matrix** was a standard that we only saw every three years then it wouldn't support the development of the staff.

matrix team: You truly use the **matrix** Standard to the fullest and it's great to see how embedded it has become into your colleague for both learners and staff. The current **matrix** Standard framework is under review and having been accredited for more than 10 years we asked you if you would like to be on the **matrix** Standard review Advisory group, and you said yes. **Why** did you want to be a part of the group and take that opportunity to have an impact on the revision of the standard?

Kath: Well, a few years ago I took 2 years off to pursue other career aspirations and when I decided I wanted to come back to Hopwood Hall and Further Education, one of the first things people said to me was "oh good your back, you can get stuck in with **matrix**.". I was happy to be asked to assist in the Advisory group because I wanted to make a change and see change happen, not only for us but for other organisations and for the accreditation itself. The standard has done so much for us that I want to give back and help the standard continue to work for other organisations. I have really enjoyed being a part of the Advisory Group as it has again challenged me to think about what the standard is, what it means to our sector, and how it can be perceived in other sectors. Knitting all the language together to make it work for all sectors has been really enjoyable. It's been great to meet other organisations and hear their feedback and I hope to meet them in person at the launch event next year.

Thank you to Kath for taking the time to speak with us to tell us all about her journey with the **matrix** Standard and what it has done for Hopwood Hall College over the past decade. If you would like to know more about how the **matrix** Standard can help serve and improve your organisation then please download a guidance pack or contact us to talk to our **matrix** Standard team.

