

A report by the Skills Commission

THE MOVE TO IMPROVE 2

In November 2013, the Skills Commission launched '*The Move to Improve*', an analysis of intervention in further education and skills, and the wider public sector.

We found that many FE Colleges already have robust processes of improvement and self-intervention, and we heard inspiring stories of Colleges breaking out of a cycle of underachievement.

This new publication –
‘The Move to Improve 2’
– is a collection of essays
from the sector, charting 13
colleges’ inspiring journeys
of improvement.

We believe that these case
studies illustrate how
the best of the FE sector
is ahead of the curve on
improvement practice,
and that others should
learn from these examples,
across both FE and other
parts of the public sector.

FOREWORD

2013 began with real concerns over increased provider failure in FE. The Ofsted inspection cycle of 2011-12 had judged 13 colleges to be inadequate, up from four the year before, and mounting financial problems at K College spread unease throughout the sector as slow economic growth meant further and deeper public sector austerity.

Against this backdrop of restricted finances, reducing confidence and closing sector bodies, and with the introduction of a new inspection framework and new demands on FE providers, the Skills Commission charged Matt Atkinson, Principal of City of Bath College, with the task of assessing the systems and practices around failure and underperformance in FE. Under his chairmanship a valuable comparative analysis of intervention procedures in FE and the wider public sector was produced.

'The Move to Improve', published in November 2013, showed the new system in FE – from the FE Commissioner to changes in the Ofsted approach – against the accountability structures, improvement strategies, and failure regimes in schools, hospitals, police forces and universities.

While lessons were certainly learnt by looking to other systems and public service providers, and 10 recommendations were made, what was striking about the exercise was how it positioned FE against developments in other parts of the public sector. With increasing autonomy in the schools and health systems for example, FE colleges appear to occupy a space towards which other providers are heading. Given this, it was

felt that in many ways 'practice is ahead of policy' when it comes to the best providers in FE, a practice the Inquiry members described as 'self-intervention'.

This collection of essays attempts to build on that idea, and complements the largely systems focused 'Move to Improve' report by presenting a fuller picture of intervention, that which takes place within colleges. By exploring examples of good practice around intervention and improvement as they happen 'on the ground' we hope to promote excellence and champion the FE brand.

We are, however, under no illusions about the challenges facing the sector.

2014 begins with a substantial 3% cut to General FE and Tertiary Colleges with the 17.5% reduction in funding for 18 year-olds¹, and the news that the FE Commissioner has already had to visit four colleges. High youth unemployment and concerns over the country's skills gaps persist, and both the Government and opposition have high expectations of the sector as exemplified in Skills Minister Matthew Hancock's vision of entrepreneurial colleges and Labour's Institutes of Technical Excellence.

Colleges continue to play a vital role and with an effective failure regime now in place, and Ofsted keen to closely monitor the progress of grade three colleges, it is our hope that colleges will begin to take greater ownership of the improvement agenda.



A blue ink signature of Barry Sheerman.

Barry Sheerman MP
Co-Chair, Skills Commission



A blue ink signature of Dame Ruth Silver.

Dame Ruth Silver
Co-Chair, Skills Commission

¹ Funding reduction for EFA-funded institutions and providers educating full-time 18 year olds: Impact Assessment, DFE, January 2014

INTRODUCTION

This publication features the stories and testimonies of 13 further education colleges and groups from across England, describing, in their own words, their approaches to self-intervention and improvement. The case studies depict the important steps taken on journeys of improvement, as well as the systems used to maintain high standards and promote a culture of continuous self-improvement.

The origins of this project lie in Recommendation 7 of the Skills Commission's 'The Move to Improve' report which called for examples of 'self-intervention' within FE colleges to be researched and case studies of good practice promoted across the system². While the analysis in 'The Move to Improve' took more of a 'systems' approach, concerned with intervention by regulatory bodies and externally driven failure regimes, here we focus on how intervention takes place at college level.

Broadly defining 'intervention' as "*corrective measures to counter declining performance or overcome failure*"³, 'The Move to Improve' report distinguished between externally-led interventions and self-intervention. Whereas the former type often occurs late and at the point of crisis, pre-emptive self-interventions are managed in-house and can prevent the escalation of risks to problems. As such, proactive self-intervention is always preferable to the arrival of a taskforce from Ofsted, the SFA, or a visit from the FE Commissioner under the system's new failure regime. For the sake of learners, institutional integrity and reputation, the need for external intervention must be seen as an act of last resort.

In considering the intervention procedures across the public sector the Commission noticed that FE colleges occupied a space that other public sector providers were moving towards, as reforms in health and education for example gave schools and hospitals greater freedoms. With 20 years of incorporation and the college sector's greater independence, it was the Commission's view that amongst the best FE colleges, 'practice is ahead of policy' when it comes to effective self-intervention and improvement measures. Colleges have long acted as an adaptive layer, forging their own links and partnerships, and surviving on short term funding cycles. For the best and most innovative colleges, self-intervention/self-regulation/improvement, whatever you wish to call it, is second nature.

However, while pockets of excellence exist across the system it is by no means uniform and for colleges unable to improve themselves, a robust and swift failure regime now awaits. With the increased emphasis on employer ownership in the skills system, new models of skills provision emerging, and continued public austerity, the sector must ensure that best practice around self-intervention and improvement is spread across the system.

In the same way as the AoC Governance Review calls for boards to demonstrate greater 'corporate agility' in a 'climate of growing competition and turbulent change'⁴, we feel it is vital for colleges to reflect critically on their systems and approaches to intervention and improvement.

2 'The Move to Improve', p54, Skills Commission, November 2013

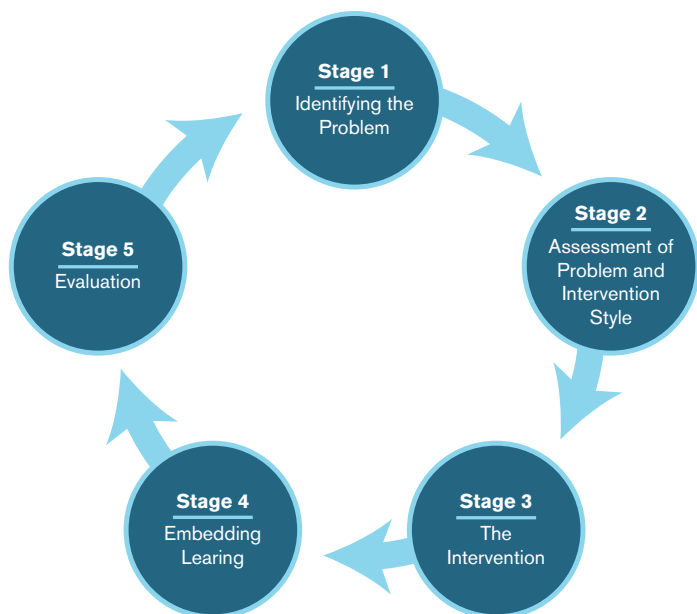
3 *ibid*, p21

4 'Creating Excellence in College Governance', AoC Governors' Council, p20, November 2013

THE MOVE TO IMPROVE - A RECAP

In 'The Move to Improve' we located intervention within an ideal five-point cycle of improvement.

While interventions may occur for a variety of different reasons, we believe that this cycle will be common to most forms of intervention. Whether it be an intervention to improve provision or realign finances, both will begin with the identification of a problem, or opportunity, and should ideally end with an evaluation of the journey undertaken. How these stages are managed and when they occur will determine the form and success of an intervention.



Analysis of the Improvement Cycle Stages

Stage 1 Identifying the Problem

The earlier an intervention can be taken, the better for service users. By identifying risks and problems early on, the less likely it is that issues will escalate beyond an organisation's capacity to deal with them. In other words, the quicker an institution can reach stage 3 in the cycle, the better. After all, it is easier to reorganise services from a position of strength than at the point of crisis. Therefore the role of regulators in identifying indicators associated with underperformance and distress, plays a crucial part in enabling providers to maintain standards and deliver sustainable services. However it is essential that the leaders of public services take responsibility for monitoring all aspects of their provision.

Stage 2 Assessment of the Problem and Intervention Style

During stage 2, sometimes an external regulator, but ideally, the organisation themselves, needs to recognise what it is they are intervening in order to do and consider the correct method of intervention. Again, speed is important, and the proximity to potential failure will often dictate the outcome of this stage. In other words, if a regulator has identified a provider to be very close to failure, the intervention may be external and quick, perhaps overriding the management. If stages 1 and 2 are part of an internal cycle of improvement, the intervention may be more collaborative or managed in-house.

Stage 3 The Intervention

Styles of intervention, the intentions behind them, and the powers directing them, can vary hugely. However, the ease at which an intervention can proceed depends largely on the case made for it in stage 2, especially in times of failure when sensitivity and feelings of denial may be running high. This also applies to pre-emptive and early interventions, which may have more scope to incorporate staff, service users and stakeholders into the intervention process. Rather than merely imposing change, this can be beneficial in providing useful insights and giving stakeholders a greater sense of ownership over the improvement measures.

Stages 4 and 5 Embedding Learning and Evaluation

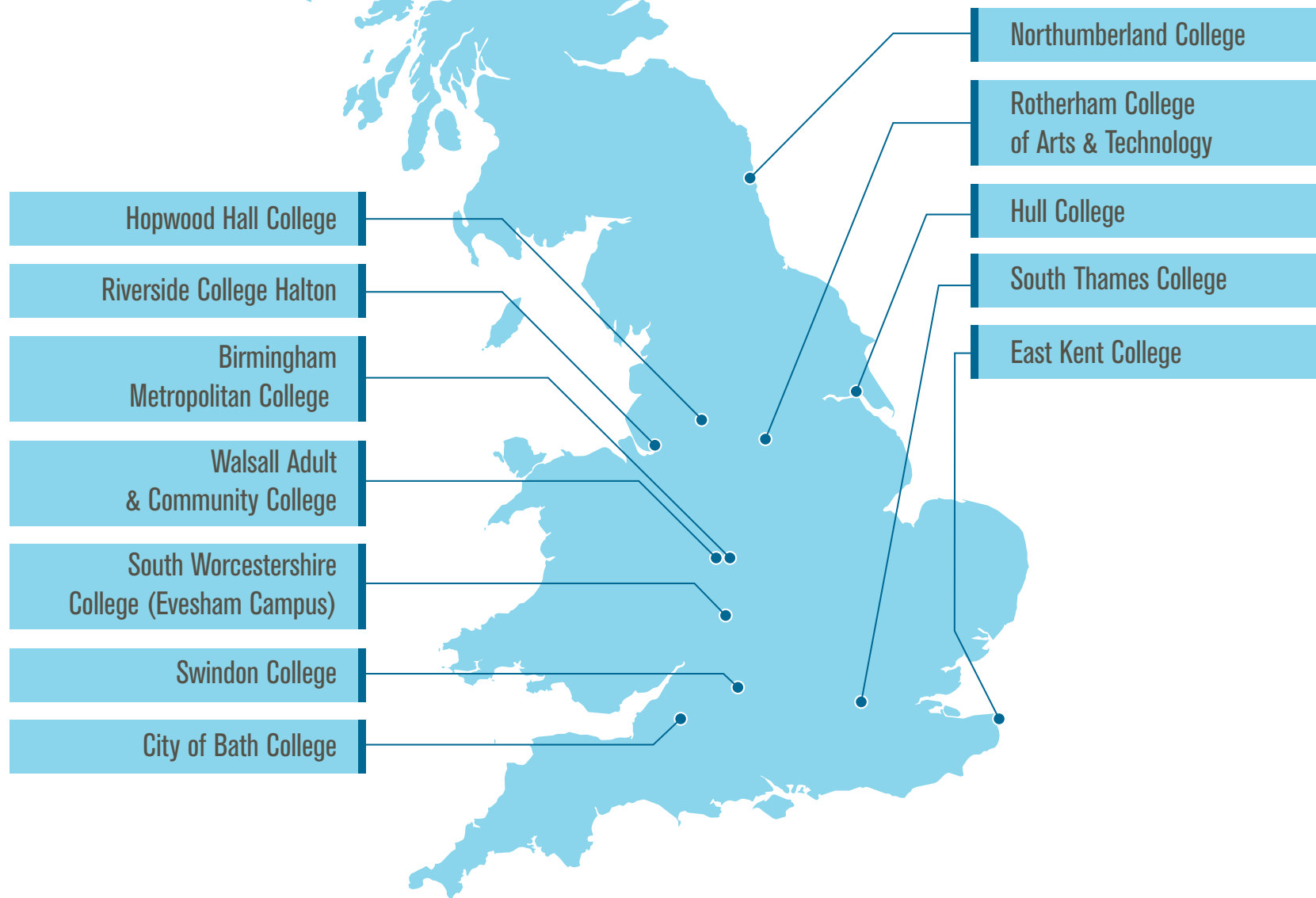
In many ways, these are the most important elements of an improvement cycle. The changes in behaviour, process, or structure need to be embedded within continual practice, or consolidated. This can take place at both an organisational level, and a sector-wide level. Within an organisation, it is important that the changes implemented, to improve teaching and learning for example, are continued with or, in the case of an intervention to restructure, the new structures are monitored closely after reorganisation. Equally, at a sector-wide level, it is important that examples of good practice in interventions are evaluated and promoted to assist other providers in improving their organisations.

These stages however represent an ideal and are a useful model against which to assess practice and to think of intervention as existing within a continuous cycle of improvement. By featuring real examples of self-intervention and the systems adopted by colleges to work towards continuous improvement, alongside our analysis, we hope this document will highlight the common features of successful interventions and provide a useful insight into embedding best practice around improvement and quality enhancement.

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GEOGRAPHIC SPREAD OF OUR CASE STUDIES



SET 1: THE JOURNEY FROM INADEQUATE

Case Study 1 Swindon College – Intervention for excellence and outstanding success

In February 2013 Swindon College was one of the first institutions to be graded as outstanding under Ofsted's new Common Inspection Framework. This outstanding inspection judgement was the outcome of a sustained period of self-improvement activity that followed a history of underperformance and instability at the College. The College's previous inspection in 2009 rated the institution as satisfactory with one curriculum area being judged inadequate. The Ofsted inspection of 2007 had rated the overall effectiveness of the College as inadequate with the achievement of learners also being judged as inadequate.

In considering the impressive improvement journey the College has been on, from inadequate to outstanding, the Principal, Andrew Miller, puts forward a model of in-house intervention that focuses on:

Leadership

Stability and integrity in middle and senior management structures was a key element of the approach taken on the Swindon improvement journey. Adopting a distributed approach to leadership where layers were reduced impacted positively on communication strategies. Roles and responsibilities were clarified and significant efforts were taken to ensure that managers were 'on message'.

Accountability

Part of the approach taken at the College was to ensure that there is team and individual ownership of students and courses. Students were genuinely placed at the heart of the College and made the first priority. Staff were held to account for student outcomes and the information flow around performance was improved. Teachers and managers focussed on the minutiae of student performance by drilling down into information which became readily available. There were much higher organisational expectations of staff and this brought about a culture of genuine ownership.

Governance

The improvement journey at Swindon College saw the governors improving their leadership role by monitoring and challenging performance. The improved approach to governance impacted positively on the culture of the College. An open approach between governors and senior leaders was promoted and trust was established. Governors are also clear about the difference between governance and management. Over the course of the improvement journey governors became increasingly focused on teaching, learning and quality and played a significant role in setting organisational expectations.



Teaching and Learning

The Principal comments that “*staff at Swindon College want to improve*”. In promoting individual improvement, effective support systems were put in place; the culture is based on support and challenge. Arrangements for pay and performance management were strengthened and the College took a ‘fun’ approach to improving teaching, learning and assessment. A competitive element to team and course performance was adopted which saw the gap between the best and worst performing programmes reduce from 40% to 14%. One innovative feature of the Swindon approach to the improvement of teaching and learning was to involve employers in lesson observations. This helped the College take a view on the resources they were providing, the appropriateness of the content being delivered, and any gaps in the employability skills of students.

The approach taken at Swindon College can be summarised as:

- Ensuring integrity in the self-assessment process
- Enhancing the involvement of College governors
- Developing models of long term support for teachers, i.e. not short term interventions
- Developing bespoke solutions to areas requiring improvement
- Information and Learning Technology and its role in sustaining high performance

Case Study 2

Riverside College Halton - Achieving Transformational Change

In November 2008 Riverside College Halton was inspected by Ofsted. The report which was published in January 2009, was one of the worst in the history of the sector. Eleven out of fourteen grades awarded were inadequate (Grade 4) including overall effectiveness and capacity to improve.

In February 2010, just fifteen months later, Riverside College was re-inspected. The report, which was published in March 2010, revealed that 'remarkable progress' had been made. Eleven out of twelve grades were good or better and no area of the College was judged to be inadequate. Overall effectiveness was deemed to be good (Grade 2) and capacity to improve was judged to be outstanding (Grade 1).

Key features of the College's turn around was a focus on leadership, and a drive to create a positive culture change.

Leadership

The governors were successful in attracting an experienced Principal who had led two of the most successful colleges in the North of England and had a well-deserved reputation as an outstanding Principal, recognised in Ofsted reports at both former colleges. Around the new Principal a strong and capable senior management team was quickly assembled, which allowed organisation improvement to begin. Two new senior managers were recruited through an agency and a further two senior managers were recruited through national advertisements.

From the outset the importance of an effective and focused middle management team was also recognised. There began an immediate process of rationalisation of middle managers followed by recruitment of experienced managers from outside the organisation.

Culture Change

The leadership shared a draft vision statement with staff, which contained a strong focus on the values underpinning a successful college. It affirmed the moral purpose of the organisation and an intention to strive 'to be outstanding in everything we do'. Staff were invited to comment on the set of values and the strategic aims for the organisation.

Steps were taken to create a culture of celebration and recognition. Many staff had lost confidence in themselves and their organisation. A weekly publication was launched, highlighting the positive achievements of staff and students, this was instrumental in restoring staff's belief in themselves and their organisation.

A robust approach was also taken to tackling underperformance, including non-compliance. Disciplinary procedures were used in the small number of cases where staff were disruptive or intent on bringing the organisation into disrepute. Capability procedures were used in cases where staff were unable and/or unwilling to reach acceptable standards.

**Riverside
College**

Widnes & Runcorn

The vast majority of staff responded in a very positive way to the new approaches that were being adopted. They wanted to work at a successful college that delivered positive outcomes for their students and the local community. To a surprising extent they supported decisive and direct action to address deep-rooted problems and a series of actions were undertaken to address the College's key priorities by:

- Putting teaching, learning and standards at the centre of the organisation with extensive support for teachers to become good or outstanding
- Implementing comprehensive systems for student tracking, intervention and support
- Developing rigorous and extremely detailed processes for monitoring the College's key performance indicators
- Winning back community trust and confidence through the establishment of new systems of schools liaison, admissions and marketing
- Revising the curriculum offer to ensure that the right students were on the right courses
- Insisting on high student standards of punctuality, attendance, behaviour, and submission of work
- Putting the interests of the students at the heart of the College with a real commitment to 'educate the whole person' investing in enrichment such as the development of a vibrant college chaplaincy

LSIS described the College's journey as "*One of the most remarkable transformations recorded by Ofsted in the learning and skills sector*". However, more importantly, the number of young people in the borough who were NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) began to fall rapidly, and the achievement of college students was ranked in the top 10% nationally for value added on both vocational and A-level programmes.

Case Study 3

South Worcestershire College – From Inadequate to Good in a Year

South Worcestershire College (SWC) is a small general further education college with two main campuses serving the south of Worcestershire. The College faces competition for learners from six local secondary school sixth forms and five further education providers located within a 20-mile radius of the College.

SWC received an inadequate grade in the Ofsted Inspection of late October 2012. Its full re-inspection almost exactly a year later was graded as good for Overall Effectiveness, Outcomes, Teaching, Learning and Assessment, and for Leadership and Management. All subject areas inspected were graded as good.

The Improvement Journey

Taking up post in January 2013, the new Principal was clear that a number of improvements had to be brought in quickly in order to have a positive impact on the current student cohort. Building confidence of staff and the whole leadership was essential in order to raise the expectations and ambitions of the College.

A robust and rigorous action plan was put in place, with considerable thought going into its design so that key targets and data could be monitored by governors to track progress. A reinvigorated Standards Committee took ownership of the challenge of the Post Inspection Action Plan, committing to meeting on a monthly basis, which fed into board monthly meetings. The development of 'milestones' was particularly effective in judging and enabling the board to 'celebrate'

progress, as well as flagging-up any 'early danger' signs. There were a number of new processes introduced including an increased focus on target-setting/monitoring for students, better performance management of staff, more frequent course audits, and expansion of the 'learner at risk' system.

A set of 'prompt-cards' were designed for staff to summarise the 'must-haves' for good or better learning. For example, one of the College's weaknesses was the embedding of Equality and Diversity in the classroom. A 'prompt-card' included several bullet points with suggestions as to how to do this.

As a small college with a tight budget, resources for improvement were restricted but use of good external support was made and the College also linked with colleges with 'exemplar' practice. The whole improvement plan was underpinned by staff development, coaching and the use of 'champions', which were very effective in the improvement of teaching and learning, the embedding of Equality and Diversity in the classroom, and in increasing take-up of technology-enhanced learning.

Within the year, long success rates rose 9% points to 87.5% for 2012/2013. High grades also improved dramatically – a reflection of the improved ambition and aspiration of students and of the staff who supported them.



SET 2: CHALLENGING DECLINE

Case Study 4 City of Bath College – Intervention for Improvement and Realignment

In 2006 City of Bath College was placed in recovery by the Learning and Skills Council. Whilst recovery status was driven by long standing financial issues, standards at the College were consistently low and the reputation of the College had been in decline for a number of years. 2006 saw the departure of the majority of the senior management team and an interim team of senior managers were put in place. Changes to the board of governors also took place and, with exceptional financial support from the Learning and Skills Council, a significant restructuring exercise took place.

In August 2007 a new Principal was appointed, who then appointed a new senior leadership team. A new Chair of governors was appointed whose primary task was to deliver effective governance of the College and reconnect the College with its communities. The new leadership team and governors developed and delivered a new strategic plan for the College which had quality at its core and sought to:

- Raise standards
- Realign the curriculum to better meet local needs
- Develop a culture of continuous improvement
- Significantly improve the reputation of the College
- Deliver financial stability for the College

Between 2007 and 2013 these priorities influenced the activities of the College and by 2013 the College achieved a good Ofsted inspection outcome (the best in the history of the College), a 20% improvement in learner success rate outcomes, stronger financial performance, a significantly enhanced reputation as evidenced by increased enrolments, a higher performing workforce and a clear technical and vocational mission and ethos.

When considering the factors that made the intervention successful the Principal identifies the following:

- A strong and stable leadership team – the leadership team appointed in 2007 remained in place until 2013 when two members of the team left, one for retirement and another to join Ofsted.
- A relentless and obsessive focus on standards – the leadership team and governors constantly strive for, and expect, improvements in standards and this has become embedded in the culture of the College.
- Developing a clear mission and ethos which is reflected in the curriculum offer – the College developed a very clear mission centred on a technical and vocational expertise and consequently significant areas of provision were removed from the curriculum offer.



- Having robust performance management processes in place – an intolerance to underperformance, mediocrity and coasting performance is a feature of the College culture and consequently a number of underperforming individuals were asked to leave the College.
- Expert governance which provides support and challenge – complete openness and honesty exists between leaders and governors, and board members are clear on their responsibilities.
- Investing heavily in external relationships – external stakeholder engagement features as a main priority and consequently the College has achieved a trusted position in the community.

Case Study 5 East Kent College – Enhancing Leadership and Management

The College is a medium sized general FE college based in an area with some of the most deprived wards in the country. In 2010 the College appointed a new Principal and Chair of governors. At this time a more robust process of self-assessment was implemented which clearly identified the College as in need of significant improvement. Of particular note at this time was the lack of a clear purpose and strategic plan which clearly articulated the College's aims and objectives for the future.

Whilst Teaching and Learning standards were satisfactory overall there was significant inconsistency in performance across programme areas. Success rates were poor due to low retention, student satisfaction was variable, staff morale was mixed and the curriculum offer had changed little over many years. In October 2010 the College was inspected and graded satisfactory overall.

Given the scale of challenge and inconsistency, leadership and management was identified as the main priority for raising standards and improving performance.

The Improvement Journey

A key priority was to create a shared learner focused culture supported by clear targets for improvement. A new strategic plan was approved which was explicit that the main purpose was to provide an outstanding experience for the students. The plan was fully consulted on and supported by internal and external stakeholders.

In order to deliver the plan a new management structure was implemented with clarity around roles, responsibilities and expectations supported by staff development, particularly in leadership skills. Sub-strategies were then developed with regular review and tracking of progress to ensure staff remained focused on the key priorities.

The initial priority was to improve Teaching and Learning standards though a supportive culture that personalised development and recognised improvements made. It was no longer 'comfortable' for staff to deliver satisfactory lessons without actively seeking to improve. All staff wanting to improve were given one to one support to do so and the majority responded well to this approach, which resulted in significant improvement. Energies and resources were focused on improving rather than judging. The College also launched the Year of Teaching and Learning and gave time for outstanding practitioners to support and mentor colleagues.

A further key challenge was to move a risk adverse 'play safe' culture to one that embraces change and is not afraid to try something new. This began with a new curriculum planning process where innovation was encouraged and curriculum staff challenged to consider alternatives from what had always been done.

The student voice also played a key role in these developments. They played a vital function in the annual self-assessment process and in shaping the priorities for student enrichment within a limited budget.



The Principal was very visible to both staff and students, clear in his communications, which were in turn reinforced through his actions. Managers were similarly clear as to the expectations of them and through quarterly performance reviews had an opportunity to meet with the executive team to share their success and areas for improvement and to be applauded/challenged accordingly.

Significant attention was particularly focused on the middle management to ensure a shared sense of purpose with the senior team and board. For example, leadership qualities and expected behaviours were agreed upon and published to encourage good practice to become embedded as the norm.

Given the College's clarity of vision and purpose the senior team have been highly effective in planning and driving through significant change that has resulted in sustained improvements. In doing so the College has been in a strong position to submit successful applications for additional capital funds, which have been backed up by a strong education case and supported by external stakeholders.

Impact

As a result of the actions outlined above the College has experienced transformational success namely:

- An increase in good or better Teaching and Learning from 61.7% to 87.6%
- Significant increase in positive student progression to 98% of students either going into work or further study
- Much improved facilities with over £15 million of grant income to improve the College's estate
- Improved success rates of students to above national averages with significant success at foundation learning level
- Investors in People Gold achieved
- Ofsted award of outstanding for leadership and management and good overall within 3 years of being satisfactory overall
- A new suite of HE courses and greater progression into HE
- A new foundation offer for students with particularly challenging behaviours
- National awards winners for Student Voice, Beacon award winners for supported learning with the Principal currently shortlisted for FE Leader of the Year

Case Study 6

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology – The Five Big Things

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology is a medium-sized college providing vocational courses in most subject areas. The College had been judged to be satisfactory in all its Ofsted inspections since incorporation in 1992, and was therefore deemed to be ‘coasting’, or ‘stuck’ in the ‘new’ Ofsted language. Success rates were low in 2010 for both 16-18 and adults. The financial performance was consistently rated as good.

In September 2010 a new Principal joined the College with the clear objective to move the College to an Ofsted judgement of good. The governing body were totally behind this ambition and have guided and supported the Principal and senior team to achieve the goal.

Intervention Approach

The approach adopted was to firstly restructure the College so that people were clearly aligned to their strengths and so posts reflected the future needs of the College. This involved recognising where investment needed to be made e.g. to enhance Teaching and Learning. Funding to support new Teaching and Learning Coaches was sourced by not replacing vacant senior management posts.

The next stage was to involve all staff, at every level, with an opportunity to ‘create the vision’ via a series of staff conferences and workshops. The unanimous view was that the College wanted to get to outstanding within five years. The staff feedback was distilled into ‘The Five Big Things’ to be at the

heart of everything the College does. ‘The Five Big Things’ are promoted on posters on all staff room walls, and updates are provided at every staff meeting and in every newsletter – they form the focus of the relentless drive for improvement and include:

1. Learner Success: to achieve outstanding learner success
2. Ethos: develop a culture which empowers staff
3. IT and Estates: to provide the best possible, industry-standard facilities that the College can afford
4. Financial Stability: to ensure the College is financially robust
5. Reputation and Recruitment: to develop the College’s reputation as a good / outstanding provider

The third stage was to develop the operational strategies and tactics to underpin the ambitions for success. Again, staff were involved in each stage of the evolution via workshops focused upon determining and sharing the standard. The College has adopted the practice, wherever possible, of involving staff in determining the change rather than imposing it, which engages staff with the ‘bigger picture of the challenge’ and the role they play in it.

The operational practices that had been determined were clearly laid out, following a ‘Student Journey’ model, and communicated through training sessions to all staff. Clear accountability for the detailed management of student progress was created and risks regularly reviewed. A rigorous, consistent but supportive programme of learning observations, aided by



developmental support and performance management was implemented.

Intervention Outcomes

The outcome of becoming good was achieved in May 2013 and Ofsted noted “*Significant changes and improvements have taken place since the last inspection. Governors, the Principal and the senior management team provide highly effective leadership*”. Staff at the College have demonstrated their commitment to improving all aspects of the learner experience and ensuring year on year improvements in learner outcomes. With regard to the ‘Five Big Things’ the intervention at the College has seen:

- The success rates on long courses improve by 12% in three years, with the Teaching and Learning observation profile improving significantly to 85% good or better
 - Staff are ambitious for learners at Rotherham College and contribute to the strategies and practices which facilitate year on year improvement
 - The College has invested £15 million in the Estate and IT to ensure the facilities and learning resources benefit learners and equip them with strong employability skills
 - Financial stability – the College continues to effectively manage its finances and be classified as having good financial health whilst managing budget cuts and developing efficiency measures to ensure the investment in the estate and IT is affordable
- As a result of the above outcomes the Marketing and PR department are able to promote the excellent achievements and the major stakeholders in Rotherham and the ‘Learner Voice’ has confirmed the changing perception of the College

SET 3: RESPONDING TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES

Case Study 7

Walsall Adult and Community College – Managing a Merger

Walsall Adult Community College (WACC) was formed by Walsall Council in 2009 following a merger of the College of Continuing Education, an adult learning division of Walsall Council, and the Walsall Community College, a third sector consortium of further education providers. WACC is now recognised as an outstanding provider but its improvement journey required it to overcome significant challenges.

Weak Foundations

Between 2002 and 2009 a number of failed attempts to secure a merger agreement had distracted each college's leadership from focusing on the core business of teaching and learning, and meeting the economic and social needs of the borough. At the point of formation both college's facilities were in a poor state, provision was viewed as mediocre, and staff morale was extremely low due to poor remuneration, uncertainty about the future, and insecure and short term contracts.

The weakness of the parent organisations meant the board of the new college had little experience of engaging in self-assessment and monitoring quality standards. Furthermore, past board appointments had not been made according to skill sets and minutes were not available for public scrutiny. The new college lacked highly trained staff and improvement structures, and had inherited weak and inconsistent quality assurance

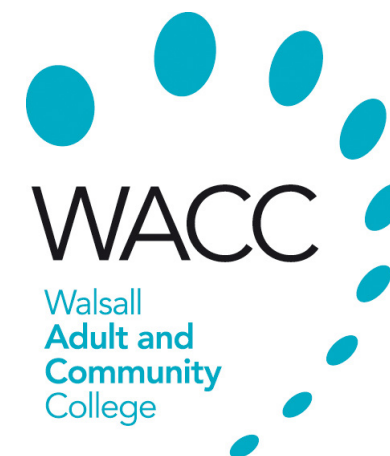
procedures regarding the use of subcontractors.

The Journey of Improvement Post-Merger

The College began its process of improvement with the creation at board level of a new vision “*to be the best provider of adult learning and skills*” and a mission statement, which included a commitment to outstanding Teaching and Learning by 2013. This was followed by the adoption of a new strategic planning framework with priorities built around:

- Responsiveness in curriculum
- Effectiveness in delivery
- Efficiency in application of resources
- Performance management of people
- Sustainability in education and business practice

To encourage a greater focus on learners and the learner journey across the College, the hierarchy was simplified to a flat senior management structure. Individual senior leads (Directors) were appointed with responsibilities for quality assurance, learners, curriculum, and finance and resources. A new performance management strategy was implemented alongside the restructure. No-notice lesson observations with referrals to required training and re-observation for underperforming teachers were also introduced.



To accompany this, the staff development budget increased four-fold and an extensive staff development programme with required attendance elements was also rolled out. The College also employed three expert practitioners as learning coaches to support improvement in Teaching, Learning and Assessment through coaching and thematic training. Partnerships with the University of Warwick, and Sunderland University, were secured to research accelerated learning programmes and train teachers to level five. A Year of the Teacher was also launched in 2011-12 to celebrate good quality teaching.

A significant review of WACC's board was made which resulted in a reduction of members, training around engaging with Teaching and Learning, and clarification around the terms of appointment for new governors based on skills and expertise. Seven new board members were then recruited through formal and rigorous interview process.

The commissioning process for partner provision was significantly overhauled. Formal sub-contracts based on key performance standards and rigorous quality checks were implemented resulting in four out of eight sub-contracts not being renewed. The College also reassessed its own curriculum, closing down poor performing courses and establishing new learning pathways that reflected local economic needs were established.

To strengthen the College's relations with local employers an 'Employer Gateway' was launched as one-stop-shop for

employers and SME employment support. An Employer Pledge was also made to increase employer influence over curriculum design and delivery including work experience. Apprentice delivery contracts were secured and the Walsall Works initiative was launched to support apprenticeship take up by offering a pre-apprenticeship programme along the lines of a traineeship model.

Amongst the key aspects identified as significant and contributing to the College becoming an outstanding provider are:

- A relentless drive for excellence and self-improvement by governors, leaders, managers and teachers
- Rigorous performance management
- Innovative approaches to staff development
- Commitment to creating progressive curriculum pathways that reflect the local economic assessment

Case Study 8

South Thames College – Focusing on Teaching and Learning Provision Post-Merger

South Thames College is a large general further education college in South London with campuses in Wandsworth, Merton, and Tooting. In August 2009 the College merged with Merton College to form one of the largest colleges in London. At merger the profile of good and better Teaching and Learning at Merton was much lower than at South Thames, 45% and 69% respectively.

Because of its direct impact on learners, significantly improving Teaching and Learning at Merton was a major priority for the first year post merger. This was achieved alongside ongoing improvement in the professional practice across the whole college. Ensuring learners experience high quality and innovative teaching and learning is central to the approach to improving quality and ensuring success for learners.

Intervention Approach

The overarching aim was to achieve a step change in the daily learning experience for students and teaching staff. The approach taken was to prioritise raising professional practice and standards. This was achieved by providing clarity about standards and expectations, a rigorous but supportive approach to monitoring the quality of teaching and learning and delivering innovative and inspiring professional development. Learning walks were introduced and working with curriculum teams and individuals particular themes and development needs were highlighted, individual improvement plans identified and coaching skills developed. The main focus was

to develop the everyday culture in a way that would create a positive learning experience for both students and staff.

The key focus of the intervention centred on the development of Learning Communities. This programme was led by a full time Teaching and Learning Coach working with expert practitioners working together to support and develop teachers' skills and confidence.

Key elements of the programme included:

- A robust lesson observation scheme to both to raise standards and inform ongoing targeted support to develop teaching practice
- Bespoke 1:1 targeted training and support for teachers to enhance their skills and confidence
- Mentors were allocated from the core team to observers undertaking graded observations to provide ongoing informal guidance and advice
- Coaching skills workshop were provided for advanced practitioners to enable them to better support individuals and curriculum teams
- Refresher & motivational feedback workshops were run to further develop teachers' skills, knowledge and expertise and to disseminate good practice
- Peer observations were introduced to improve rigor, ensure professional development was embedded and encouraged a cultural shift towards an enhanced learning experience

- Review workshops were run for observers to share experiences and reports as the basis for learning and validation. This allowed identification of further development needs for individuals and/or curriculum areas
- An ILT Advanced Practitioner was appointed to target the development and embedding of ILT in Teaching and Learning

Intervention Outcomes

Over 200 teachers went through this programme in the first year. Although some found the approach challenging, the overwhelming majority embraced the programme and were both inspired by the support and personally encouraged by the improvement in their skills and professional practice. By the end of the first year post merger the College had achieved:

- a 40% increase in the number of good or outstanding grades for the Merton campus
- improved Teaching, Learning and Assessment that meets the learners' needs
- improved structured lesson observation process embedded across all areas which informed CPD and professional practice in the classroom to raise standards
- improved planning and delivery of Teaching, Learning and Assessment and tutorial support
- improved assessment providing constructive feedback to promote learning, raise aspirations and drive up standards
- significant improvement in the use of ILT to enhance learning

Case Study 9 Hopwood Hall College – Adapting to a Changed Role and Focusing on Learner Engagement

Hopwood Hall College is a medium sized General FE College based on two campuses in Rochdale and Middleton. Hopwood Hall had previously been a tertiary college offering both A-levels and vocational pathways for learners but following a Strategic Area Review by the LSC undertaken in late 2004, Hopwood Hall decided to transfer its A-level provision to the new Rochdale Sixth Form College and focus on providing vocational qualifications. The College formed a partnership with the Rochdale Sixth Form, which was established on the College's Rochdale campus in 2010 and caters for 1000+ A-level students.

Key to Hopwood Hall's success in adapting to its new role and improving its Ofsted rating to good in 2010, was the holistic approach taken by the College encompassing all aspects of performance, an approach which according to Principal Derek O'Toole, reflected the College's values and involved everyone in the improvement process.

The Improvement Journey

The shift from a mixed curriculum to a focus on vocational qualifications, recommended in the Strategic Area Review, presented Hopwood Hall with both opportunities and challenges that required some significant changes at the College.

To start with, the changing role would have potential financial implications and there were already questions over the sustainability of the College's financial arrangements, with the

College buildings requiring work and the reserve funds already being depleted. In response to this the corporation drafted governors with the necessary experience of financial oversight on to the board and secured capital funding to address the poor quality of some of the College buildings and facilities. Resolving the College's finances was seen as essential step in securing a sound base for future success. Indeed the College now regularly makes an 8-10% surplus and Ofsted recently judged financial management at the College to be outstanding.

If the future of the College was to depend upon the quality of its vocational course provision, ensuring high standards and the relevance of the College curriculum to local needs would be fundamental. Around the time of the Strategic Area Review there was an inconsistency in performance levels across the College and an acknowledgement that the governing board needed to be more fully engaged in all aspects of the College's performance. It was felt by the new Principal that some of the College's structures were inappropriate for Hopwood Hall's changing role and were contributing to a lack of understanding around the College's performance.

To address this, a formal governor's standards committee was established along with a cycle of governor curriculum links to ensure the governors were familiar with all areas of provision. This was accompanied with a special measures panel to improve the worst performing courses and by moves to ensure that all staff were observed whilst teaching and that governors were involved in validating staff self-assessments. As well as the



introduction of curriculum coaches and a programme of peer mentoring, the College has also recently introduced a Teaching and Learning review as part of a performance related pay scheme.

To ensure the relevance of Hopwood Hall's curriculum, the College has developed strong links with external partners including employers, the Rochdale development agency, the third sector and the council. This has been crucial in expanding the College's apprenticeship offer and the considerable investment in Hopwood Hall's facilities, including the Technology Centre at Middleton, the Sports Academy and Services Centre have made the College an attractive partner for local businesses.

As well as fully involving governors, staff and local partners in Hopwood Hall's reconfiguration, engaging students in the improvement process has been a central part of the College's journey. In addition to student representation on the governing board the College has invested heavily in the student voice, setting up a Student Leadership Team (SLT) made up of students from different curriculum areas. The SLT engage with the management team and provide an important insight into the student experience, representing students' views on the campus refurbishment for example.

By acting as a link between the senior management and the students the SLT has embedded a system of dialogue at the College through which problems can be identified, possible

solutions assessed and interventions evaluated from a student perspective. Given the safeguarding issues that have affected Rochdale, the SLT has proven valuable to the College by enabling a two-way dialogue between staff and students. The adoption of a tutoring model to encourage greater pastoral support for students and ascertain the needs of learners has also been useful in helping the College better its student retention rates.

The valuing and engagement of external partners and learners in Hopwood Hall's development has been a key feature of the College's improvement. Indeed Ofsted has recognised this, rating learner engagement at the college as outstanding.

Case Study 10

Northumberland College – Merger isn't the Only Option

The Northumberland College experience of the process of self-improvement has three distinct phases. The first finds the College being regarded as a 'failing' college by BIS; the SFA and the local community with poor management and weak governance. The next involved a governance led recovery and revitalisation process led by a new Chair and refreshed governing body resulting in an Ofsted Inspection Grade 2 outcome. The third is its pledge for continuous improvement led by a new Principal with a strong executive and governing body to deliver outstanding education and training experiences to students, employers and the wider community.

The Situation

Northumberland College is a medium sized college with its main campus located in the southeast corner of the county, an area with some of the most deprived wards in England. For over a decade the College has been badly affected by the reduction of local employment opportunities, a steady decline in student numbers, a weak financial situation, and poor controls, policies and procedures. No capital investment was made at the two main sites, and ineffective leadership and management alongside an insular governing body, lead to instability with the College going through six principals in four years at one point.

By 2011 the SFA had served the college with three Notices to Improve and the governing body took the decision to merge with another much larger college in the Northeast. The internal governance model was already weak and this proposal

negatively affected the morale of the staff. A formal consultation process resulted in 67% of the responses to BIS being opposed to the merger, and given the strength of public feeling, the decision to merge was rescinded in December 2011. This action resulted in the resignation of the Chair and the majority of the governors, and the College accepted BIS's invitation to take part in their newly initiated Pathfinder process outlined in New Challenges, New Chances.

A new leadership

A new Chair of governors was appointed in early 2012. The Chair's first task was to recruit another six new governors from a wide range of public and private sector backgrounds to help steer the College through the new governance opportunities presented by New Challenges, New Chances. This radical reforming strategy freed colleges from central government control and gave the governing body the responsibility and accountability to allow the governors to take control of the College Structure and Prospects Appraisal process. Throughout the hectic and challenging first six months of 2012, the governing body often met twice a month and also had to re-establish Finance and an Audit Committee, which had been lost in the proposed merger process. A central theme to all of their work was to ensure a new focus on quality and the learner experience.

Over the first four months of the Pathfinder process the governing body undertook a rigorous process of self-assessment and evidence-based analysis including a curriculum review and



examination of all the relevant statistical information. Although at times they felt that they were being strongly nudged toward a specific outcome, after much careful consideration and debate they felt strongly enough to make the independent decision that they believed was right for the County, the economy and the community.

A new Principal with longstanding experience across a wide range of FE Colleges was finally appointed in November 2012. In the weeks before the Ofsted inspection in February 2013 they helped strengthen the leadership team and reinforced a stronger sense of confidence and achievement among the staff.

Outcomes

Throughout all this period of time the governing body and the executive team continued to concentrate on improving the financial situation, the monitoring processes and the experience of learners, leading to greatly increased retention and success rates. Everyone had been aware that a full Ofsted inspection was imminent and considerable attention was being paid to all aspects of leadership and management.

The College was inspected under the new inspection framework in February 2012 and got an overall Grade 2 result with a number of outstanding curriculum areas all of which reflected the wholehearted way all staff and governing body had worked together to achieve this success.

Taking forward their ambitious plan to achieve an outstanding

rating by 2016 the College has continued its rigorous target setting and monitoring process with lesson observations and feedback consistently raising the quality of the Teaching and Learning experience. Governors are actively engaged in the self-assessment process and in the objective setting and monitoring and review of performance. Key performance measures are used to ensure everyone is aware of the College's ambitions and help the College reinforce its commitment to becoming an enterprising college with many examples already contributing to this success including setting up an Employment and Skills Forum with over 60 businesses actively engaged; and a Zoological garden open to the public with a new capital building programme to improve the estate at Kirkley Hall and Ashington.

The College has a significantly improved financial position making a surplus for the past two years. Student numbers have increased year on year and student satisfaction rates are over 90% with the learner responsive success rates that put the College in the top 5% of general FE colleges nationally.

SET 4: SYSTEMS OF IMPROVEMENT

Case Study 11

Landex – Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence: A Quality Improvement Model

Landex was formed out of NAPEO (National Association of Principal Agricultural Education Officers) in 2006 as a response to a rump of underperforming colleges and providers which were in danger of damaging the reputation of the land based sector. Landex has a specific quality improvement agenda and has expanded its membership to include 42 full member and affiliated colleges and universities across the UK.

Member organisations subscribe to the Landex self-improvement agenda which resembles the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) model in its focus on peer review. Providers are visited each year for two to four days by a Landex quality officer and a senior member of staff from a non-competing Landex college. While the curriculum quality is reviewed on all visits, the rest of the review will consist of an agreed programme of lesson observations, audits of self-assessment, financial, commercial and governance arrangements, tailored to the needs of the provider.

Following a review the quality reviewer will then write a report highlighting a provider's strengths and weaknesses, alongside appropriate recommendations. Unlike an Ofsted inspection report, a Landex review is treated in confidence, but crucially copies are sent to both the Principal and the Chair of governors to ensure that potential issues cannot be buried. Although the review report is for the college management and governors

to use as they see fit, Landex quality reviewers have access to previous reports and can thus assess any change in a provider's performance on that basis.

The Landex model of peer review offers land based colleges a safe way of getting an external opinion on the quality of their provision and is accompanied by a range of continuous professional development (CPD) events and conferences each year, including an annual conference, for the sharing of good practice.

This self-motivated and professionalised approach to improvement, in contrast to a compliance based one, has reaped success with average Ofsted grades awarded for land based provision in member colleges increasing significantly more than in non-member colleges where land based courses have been inspected.



Case Study 12

Birmingham Metropolitan College – Data and Quality Improvement Systems

Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet) embarked upon a radical review of the quality improvement systems and processes over three years ago following a reorganisation of the management structure. The intention was, and still is, to develop a system of continuous improvement that will result in ongoing or enduring improvements in learner outcomes and, in particular, achievement and success rates. As a result a revised systematic approach to quality improvement was adopted that comprised of three main strands:

- 1) A quality improvement cycle of data collection monitoring recording and reporting both to management and governors
- 2) A new performance management system that has learner outcomes as part of the key objectives
- 3) The concept of a total Teaching and Learning College wherein specific time is devoted each week to developing good practice in Teaching and Learning

This case study will concentrate upon the first strand i.e. the quality improvement cycle and data monitoring.

Data Monitoring and Quality Improvement

College success rates and achievements in terms of qualifications gained are reported both locally and nationally at the end of the academic year. In order for senior management and governors to monitor student progress and ensure that all possible educational activities and support are offered to students to improve outcomes, a system needs to be in place to

monitor and report on student progress during the year.

At BMet an in-house system was designed to monitor student progress and project the effect upon outcomes, specifically achievement and success rates at course, faculty and subject sector area. This data was also used to project top level college performance data by level, age, gender ethnicity and other criteria. These projections are made at course level by teaching staff, monitored by their managers, and then scrutinised by senior managers within the quality improvement department at termly meetings called Programme Monitoring Boards. These are held at faculty level with managers from each faculty. The executive then report projections and actions to the governing body at the Academic Standards and Quality Subcommittee meetings on a termly basis.

Data Collection

The College developed their own database following consultation with managers and the data team. Managers and staff were trained on how to use the system, the deadlines for completion and what it meant. Completion of the data was carried out by teachers, based on their knowledge of students and regular checks on progress and ultimately checked by managers. A key training issue was how to forecast accurately, so the forecast was not over optimistic and not too cautious. The results were collated for each course / learning aim and curriculum area and summary reports used at Programme Monitoring Boards with the opportunity to drill down to individual learners as performance for each curriculum area was interrogated.



Programme Monitoring Boards

These are carried out on a termly basis at faculty and / or subject sector area level. The boards are chaired by an executive director, who is a senior post holder and supported by the directors of quality improvement, data management and independent senior manager from another faculty. At the January and April boards, Faculty managers are asked to account for their data projections course by course, and comment upon the effect this would have on whole college data.

These boards are purposely adversarial and challenging. The key to improvement is the challenge senior managers are making to faculty managers on their actions to improve learner outcomes. This includes ensuring that managers are arranging extra support for struggling students, providing opportunities for high achieving students, using rewards and sanctions to encourage attainment, monitoring teaching and learning in faculty, including performance management and in summary utilising all forms of educational techniques to support and improve student performance.

Academic Standards and Quality Development Committees

This is a subcommittee of the corporation and is comprised of five or six governors at least two of whom have a background in education. At these meetings the executive director submits whole college data to the committee who scrutinise the data and the actions that the executive are taking to improve learner outcomes.

These meetings are held after the Programme Monitoring Boards so that the executive can report on the data projections and actions taken at the boards. At the November committee the final outcomes for the previous academic year are scrutinised and compared with projections and the executive are held to account for their performance.

Summary and Affect

Through this system there is an improved culture of peer review and challenge that ensures that governors, senior managers, faculty managers and staff rigorously monitor student performance and that they have the tools to do this.

Learner outcomes in the form of retention, achievements and success rates have improved in each of the last three years and there is 7% increase overall this year which puts the College above national average for overall success rates.

The system was further enhanced this year with the introduction of a more sophisticated target monitoring and in year performance monitoring system. This can give even more accurate data on 'in year projected outcomes', which are presented to senior management through the Programme Monitoring Boards. The benefit and purpose of this is to challenge faculty managers to ensure that all educational efforts are being made during the academic year to support students who are under performing and to help those students who are achieving to perform even better.

Case Study 13

The Hull College –The Teaching and Learning Observation Framework

Teaching and Learning has been judged as outstanding for many years at Hull College, and over the past ten years a dynamic model of self-improvement has been established. In common with most colleges there is a robust Observation of Teaching and Learning process, based on a highly respectful professional process of peer observation which enables clear areas for development and improvement to be identified and acted on.

In Practice

Much work has been done to develop and to consolidate good practice in vocational Teaching and Learning. A robust framework has emerged which fosters the sharing of best practice in dual professionalism. The underpinning philosophy is one of support, coaching and the kind of reflective practice which ensures continued development of teaching skills and techniques. This model has proved to be highly effective in developing confidence and nurturing a culture of creativity and moderate risk taking.

All senior managers are involved in learning conversations, taking the form of 'learning walks' and audits, with teachers and learners. These enable managers and teachers to engage in the process of eliminating each and every barrier to learning which might hold back students from making the best progress. Teachers who are at risk of underperformance are identified through these processes and are provided with highly structured support. Some teachers self-refer for support.

The Teaching and e-Learning Manager together with the Teaching and Learning Coaches, who meet monthly to share ideas and the outcomes of their own supported experiments play a key role in co-ordinating support and encouraging quality enhancement across the College. For example, the Coaches coach teachers at all levels of performance within their schools and deliver short intensive energisers called 15 minute Fixes, and the Teacher Education team has focused its attention recently on promoting emotional literacy when working with vulnerable young people.

To raise standards, there are specific coaching support programmes for teachers, tailored around their needs and level of experience. For example, with new teachers who frequently come directly from the workplace into the classroom, a proper probationary process, overseen by the Teaching and e-learning Improvement Manager, ensures the new staff are given constructive feedback from their observations. The College is clear in its expectations, and aims for probationary teachers to achieve the same high percentage of good and outstanding teaching as more experienced practitioners by the end of their first year.

Similarly, for teachers who have been awarded Grade 4 in their teaching observations, and those whose teaching is deemed to require improvement, the Teaching and e-Learning Manager works with them to rebuild their confidence and improve their performance. During a visit from external consultants, twelve teachers who had received this coaching support emerged with



a profile of 92% good or better teaching based on observations of their teaching.

Alongside work to foster a culture of continuous professional development, the College also harnesses the skills and imagination of its teaching staff by using networks of Teaching and Learning colleagues to explore the ways that technology can support learning opportunities and reduce barriers for students and to achieve greater consistency in the judgement of student work and assessments.

Key Features

- Listening and understanding the human dimension to problems and working to reduce barriers for teachers to produce the best learning environment
 - Developing managers who lead by catching people doing things right, and who celebrate the success of teachers through a lively and interactive T&L Committee
 - Behaviours towards failing teachers that are highly respectful and recognise the contribution that they can still make whilst insisting on processes which enable all teachers to take responsibility to become the best that they can be
 - The use of praise and positive feedback - a concept of teachers as learners and reflective practice
 - Developing a culture among teachers of taking responsibility for students' progress as well as taking care of their wider learning and confidence
 - Coaching by trained coaches that ensures teachers have opportunities to talk about teaching
- Acknowledging that sustained and resilient improvement in teaching practice comes from long term investment in people and not in quick fixes
 - Acknowledging that the very best Teaching and Learning involves confidence, creativity and experimentation rather than compliance

ANALYSIS

The interventions and systems of improvement outlined in our case studies range from concerted moves to achieve transformational change, to descriptions of processes focused on continuously improving Teaching and Learning. The examples are as diverse as the sector itself.

However, across the descriptions and summaries of differing interventions, clear themes of leadership, vision, and accountability emerge. Alongside these, we see a focus on Teaching and Learning and the different ways in which colleges have attempted to embed cultures, systems and responsibilities to achieve continuous improvement.

Leadership

Common to many of the case studies was the role new leadership played in identifying the need for change and galvanising the support for that change. In three of the colleges that underwent some of the biggest transformations following inadequate Ofsted ratings, the arrival of a new Principal was key. At both **South Worcestershire College** and **Riverside College Halton** rapid ‘turn arounds’ were achieved as the arrival of a new Principal helped re-establish confidence in the leadership. Similarly after improving to satisfactory from inadequate, **Swindon College** which also saw the appointment of a new Principal in 2010, went on to become one of the first FE college to be graded outstanding under Ofsted’s new common inspection framework.

Renewing the broader leadership team beyond the Principal also featured in the improvement journeys of some colleges. Four new senior managers were appointed at **Riverside College Halton**, and **City of Bath, East Kent**, and **Northumberland College** all secured new Chairs of governors. The role of the board and the senior management in sourcing suitable individuals for positions of leadership should not be downplayed here. To ensure the best appointments were made Riverside recruited nationally, and **Walsall** and **Hopwood Hall** describe appointing governors for the board based on specific skill sets such as financial oversight, and local labour market knowledge.

Crucially, it is the calibre of the appointments that matters over the novelty value of ‘newness’. While the new arrivals were able

to offer a fresh pair of eyes to identify problems and new ways of doing things, many case studies indicated that instability at the top had been an historic issue at the colleges, and that once the new leadership had settled in, stability enabled improvement.

A vital feature of leadership across our case studies is an openness and honesty applied to the organisation's performance, driven from the top. This can be characterised by a willingness to shine a light on, and critically examine, performance in order to uncover weaknesses and obstacles to improvement. At **East Kent College** for example, the new Principal instigated a robust self-assessment to identify underlying problems before initiating an intervention directed at developing leadership and management, which had been identified as a barrier to delivering improved standards of performance.

The best leaders implement and update systems and structures always with a view to fostering openness and honesty at all levels. Ensuring that colleges have suitable in-house systems and structures in place to enable the senior management and the board to detect underperformance is vital to ensuring that appropriate interventions can then take place.

It is also worth noting that several of the colleges focus on encouraging their student leadership as well. **Hopwood Hall's** Student Leadership Team, for example, provided the senior team with a greater insight into college proceedings at student level, and also gave learners a chance to develop their own leadership skills and have a say in how their college runs.

Vision

Once a college's problems have been identified, the importance of setting a vision and reiterating the college's mission and values reoccurs throughout the case studies. This was especially true in the case of **Northumberland College** after the governing body rejected the merger proposal.

As a new entity created from a merger, **WACC** set out its vision to be 'to be the best provider of adult learning and skills'. This was followed by a strategic plan to achieve this goal across all areas of the College, which in some cases meant closing down poorly performing courses and establishing new pathways that better reflected local need. A renewed vocational ethos at **City of Bath College** and its subsequent strategic plan had similar consequences for the curriculum offer.

At **Riverside College Halton**, reaffirming the College's values was an important step by the senior management in changing the culture. A draft vision statement was created which outlined the moral purpose of the organisation and the intention to 'be outstanding in everything we do'. Staff at the College were then invited to comment on the draft and provide their ideas for how these could be achieved. This ensured staff were brought along on the College's journey of improvement.

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology adopted a similar approach to setting a vision and assessing how it could be achieved. At a series of workshops, staff were invited to determine the College's values. They set an aim to be recognised as outstanding and also created 'The Five Big Things': five

key areas for all staff to consider in the College's drive for improvement. These were promoted across the College through posters, updates and publications.

Involving staff in this way was seen as an important feature of achieving improved outcomes across the case studies. With greater staff buy-in, change felt less imposed and staff were reminded of their role in the 'bigger picture'.

Accountability

Improvement plans are most successful when strong lines of accountability are put in place. Ensuring ownership of improvement and responsibility for it at all levels comes across strongly in the case studies. The post inspection action plan put in place at **South Worcestershire College**, for example, was given to a committee which developed a series of milestones for the board to judge its progress against. By being clear on what actions needed to be taken and who was responsible for them the College managed to raise success rates by 9% within a year.

At several colleges new management structures were introduced as part of the interventions. **Riverside College Halton** describes rationalising the middle management tier to ensure responsibilities were clear and not too complicated at the middle management level. Similarly, **Rotherham College** simplified their chain of command by not replacing some of the management positions once their previous post holders moved on. The hierarchy at **WACC** was also simplified to make a flat management structure where individuals would each take the lead on a particular area.

At **East Kent College**, where a new management structure was also introduced, further clarity around roles and expectations was achieved by codifying the behaviour expected of managers and assessing this at quarterly performance reviews. The College cites developing this clarity as an important factor in Ofsted awarding outstanding status to Leadership and Management at the College.

As well as clarifying management roles, many of the colleges established committees and working groups at board level to ensure the governors were better able to understand and engage with operations at the college and thus challenge those responsible when needed. Upon deciding that many of the College structures at **Hopwood Hall** were no longer suitable for the College's changing role a formal governors' Standards Committee was established alongside Governor Curriculum links which gave governors a role in validating staff self-assessments.

Improving links between the board and course managers led to higher organisational expectations of staff in many colleges and allowed governors to become increasingly focused on standards in Teaching and Learning. Key to this is facilitating a culture of effective scrutiny. At **Birmingham Metropolitan** for example, this was aided by new structures built around the student progress monitoring systems the College devised. A chain of accountability from students and teachers up to senior managers and governors was created with forums for 'purposefully adversarial' challenge created to ensure learners were getting the best from their teachers and course managers.

A Focus on Teaching and Learning

Improving and enhancing Teaching and Learning has been the primary concern for many of the colleges. Through drafting or renewing their mission statements several colleges identified Teaching and Learning as the key area at which to focus, and two colleges even declared a ‘Year of Teaching and Learning’. Following their merger with Merton College, **South Thames College** made improving teaching practice on its new sites their absolute priority.

Robust performance management strategies aligned with sophisticated data monitoring systems are not just useful for maintaining standards in teaching and learning. They can also enable course managers and teachers to see what approaches are delivering positive results and where further support may need to be targeted. The in-year student progress monitoring system designed by **Birmingham Metropolitan** for example allows senior managers to assess progress against projections and ask faculty managers what opportunities are being provided for high achieving students and what extra-support is being arranged for struggling students.

Such monitoring of student progress has helped many colleges develop a greater understanding of the learning experience from the students’ point of view. By enabling colleges to analyse course performance data, student progress, and learners backgrounds, both areas of underperformance and high achievement can be considered in detail. Using such data **Hull College** describes ‘learning walks’ taken by departments to eliminate the barriers to learning students may be facing.

Suring up the observation process was also mentioned repeatedly as a method to ensure high teaching standards throughout the case studies. Ensuring that all teaching staff were observed and placing professionalised frameworks around observations including guidelines around how they are conducted and followed up were all cited as key features in improving teaching practice. At **WACC** re-observation of any teaching at grade three was introduced and strict measures were introduced around any teaching deemed inadequate.

This combination of a focus on Teaching and Learning, with an emphasis on accountability particularly through new tools to aid performance management saw teaching performance being more closely linked to pay in the case of **Swindon College** and **Hopwood Hall**. Several of the colleges also mention adopting an attitude of intolerance to mediocrity and removing staff if they failed to demonstrate improved practice after challenge and support.

Support and Training

More robust measures around performance monitoring and the greater attention given to Teaching and Learning were accompanied and complemented by increased support given to staff.

Some of this was achieved through increased financial investment in support for staff. **South Thames College** funded a full time Teaching and Learning Coach to work across its campuses to boost teachers' skills and confidence. **WACC** took the opportunity during its merger to increase qualified teachers pay by 26% and increased their staff development budget four-fold. While tightened finances may make such investment harder, WACC's journey to outstanding does demonstrate the progress that can be made when staff development is taken seriously.

The majority of the actions taken to support staff however needn't be financially demanding. The lesson observation frameworks at **Hull** and **South Thames College** for example, are accompanied by tailored programmes of support for teachers at different stages of their careers. Separate programmes are run for improving practice amongst new teachers, and for those whose observations have resulted in the need for improvement. Tailored coaching and one to one support is seen as vital in ensuring that best practice is maintained especially when it comes to achieving dual professionalism in vocational teaching.

Observations are equally valued as a means to identify and spread good practice. Indeed, harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of staff for improvement is a common theme across the case studies. After all, as the Principal at **Swindon College** said "*most staff want to improve*". Creating supportive culture around improving teaching was achieved in a variety of ways from team competitions, through to establishing networks for best practice, celebrating good practice through college publications, and giving 'champions' or outstanding practitioners timetable space to mentor their colleagues.

As well as creating an environment that encouraged staff to seek support and even take risks to deliver teaching that went beyond mere compliance, the use of peer review from external institutions for support, as well as from co-workers, featured in several examples. **South Worcestershire College** cited creating links with 'exemplar colleges' as a useful way accessing support on a tight budget. The **Landex** model of peer review, with its goal of achieving, at the least, "*good quality teaching, learning and assessment in all Landex colleges*" provides a very useful example of how similar colleges may work together to improve their provision.

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