



Why colleges succeed

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Executive summary

The two parallel reports *Why colleges succeed* and *Why colleges fail* are based on evidence drawn from the inspections of 307 further education sector colleges carried out between April 2001 and June 2004 and 42 independent specialist colleges (for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) inspected from January 2002 onwards.

The 29 highly successful colleges constitute 8% of this total. They comprise 17 sixth form colleges, 9 general further education or tertiary colleges and three specialist institutions. All these colleges were awarded a grade 1 (outstanding) for leadership and management, had an average curriculum grade of at least 2.1 and the following inspectorate judgements in common:

- very good retention and pass rates
- highly effective teaching
- extremely successful learning
- excellent support and guidance for students at all stages in their programme
- an exemplary response to educational and social inclusion
- outstanding strategic leadership and governance
- consistently good curriculum management
- rigorous quality assurance processes which include accurate self-assessment, a detailed and regular focus on classroom practice and effective performance management of staff.

These colleges are to be found in all areas of the country, including the inner city, although a fifth of the colleges in this very select group are in Hampshire. All have a clear understanding of the particular nature of their mission and pursue its realisation single-mindedly. The success of their learners informs everything they do. While it would appear to be easier to achieve quality of this kind in a sixth form college where the parameters of the work are more clearly defined than in more diverse institutions, the general further education and tertiary colleges in the group illustrate that high quality need not elude institutions which are larger, more complex and more challenging. It is particularly significant that all these colleges devote considerable energy to ensuring that they are inclusive communities.

This report should be read in conjunction with *Why colleges fail* (HMI 2408).

Introduction and method

1. The purpose of this report is to explore the reasons for the success of those colleges judged at inspection to be of outstanding quality, characterised by the provision of excellent education and training for their learners and exceptionally good leadership and management. Throughout the report, illustrations in italics are taken from published reports of the colleges included in the sample.
2. The colleges which form the basis of this report are drawn from all those inspected in the period from the beginning of the summer term 2001 to the end of the summer term 2004. This comprises a total of 29 colleges of which 17 are sixth form colleges (SFCs), 9 are general further education (GFE) or tertiary colleges and 3 are specialist colleges, including an independent specialist college for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. One of the specialist colleges is now a higher education institution offering a significant amount of further education in its specialisms of food, tourism and creative studies. Only its further education provision was inspected by Ofsted/ALI and contributed to the evidence for this report. These 29 colleges represent 8% of all those colleges inspected during the three years in question.
3. The colleges chosen for this detailed scrutiny have in common the following inspectorate judgements:
 - very good retention and pass rates
 - highly effective teaching
 - extremely successful learning
 - excellent support and guidance for students at all stages in their programme
 - an exemplary response to educational and social inclusion
 - outstanding strategic leadership and governance
 - consistently good curriculum management
 - rigorous quality assurance processes which include accurate self-assessment, a detailed and regular focus on classroom practice and effective performance management of staff.
4. All colleges in the sample were awarded a grade 1 for leadership and management at inspection and have an average curriculum grade of at least 2.1, with two colleges obtaining grade 1 for every curriculum area. In all cases, percentages of teaching and learning are well above the benchmark for the type of institution in question; in the college with the best teaching grades, 91% of teaching is good or better and no teaching is less than satisfactory. In all cases, financial management is excellent, as is their value for money.

Context

5. The reasons for the success of these 29 colleges are, despite their different roles and locations, very similar. All have a clear understanding of the particular nature of their mission and pursue its realisation single-mindedly. Geographically, these 29 colleges are located in all parts of the country, with 14 in the north of England and 15 in the south. The colleges are not restricted to affluent areas: 3 are on Merseyside, 4 in Greater Manchester, 1 in Tyne and Wear, 1 in Tees Valley, 1 in inner London, and 2 in Luton. Interestingly, a fifth of this very select group, including the independent specialist college and the land-based college in the sample, are in Hampshire.

6. It would be disingenuous, however, to ignore the fact that 17 of these institutions are SFCs. It may well be the case that the size of SFCs and, in most instances, the relative narrowness of their range of provision make it easier for them to perform so well. In addition, students enrolling at these colleges generally have higher levels of prior attainment than those in GFE or tertiary colleges and are there as a result of self, if not overt institutional, selection. Nevertheless, the fact that some GFE colleges, albeit a small number, are among this high performing group suggests that success is not simply about size, mission and student ability. The attributes of a high performing college are not incompatible with institutions that are large and complex; it might just be more difficult to achieve exceptionally good quality in these institutions.

7. What has already been alluded to is that a significant common feature of all these colleges is their clear understanding of the parameters and potential of their assigned role. They know exactly what they are there for, what they can provide well, which students they need to work with, what they have to do to ensure success and then judge critically what they have achieved. In particular, they understand the importance of investing in qualified specialist staff to whom they give ample opportunities for continuous professional development. Moreover, very many of these colleges have an exemplary response to educational and social inclusion, understanding that equality and equity are not about empty rhetoric and glossy policy documents, but about practical action which results in success for their learners.

Commentary

Very good retention and pass rates

8. In all these colleges, retention rates for both 16–18-year-old and adult students are above the national average, sometimes remarkably so. Where, in previous years, there has been some less successful retention at particular levels, problems have been recognised and tackled, improvement has been swift and is being sustained:

The Level 1 retention rate has improved significantly, from being well below national averages in 2001 and 2002 to being in the top 10% of colleges in 2003.

9. Pass rates are uniformly good, usually very good. Students are enrolled on the right courses and their progress is carefully monitored. They attend punctually and regularly. In all colleges, target setting, based on an accurate understanding of students' prior achievement and future potential, is accorded high priority. In a majority of colleges, value-added systems demonstrate the significant progress made by students during their course of study:

Data which compare students' results at GCE A level with their previous achievements at GCSE show that overall they are achieving higher grades than were predicted on the basis of GCSE results.

There are very few sixth form colleges with similar levels of deprivation among their students. Given this, the students' performance at Level 3 is even more credible. The college makes very good use of two nationally recognised systems for measuring how well students perform in relation to their qualifications on entry. These show that on just over half the courses students perform better than predicted on the basis of their GCSE scores.

10. One GFE college which offers a large number of vocational courses, for which there are as yet no commercially available value-added systems, has developed its own, with similarly good outcomes:

The college's internal value-added system enables students' progress to be measured from their individual starting points. Most students make good progress at the college.

11. As well as monitoring students' performance in the light of their prior achievement, the best of these colleges monitor performance according to gender, ethnicity and disability and, where necessary, intervene appropriately:

In line with national trends, [the college] has identified gender differences in achievement rates with 83% of females achieving at least one qualification compared with 76% of males. It has recently appointed a learning mentor who will focus on male underachievement.

12. Good retention and subsequent high pass rates do not, therefore, occur by accident. On the contrary, they are the result of rigorous and regular monitoring, self-critical analysis and speedy intervention where necessary:

Attendance and punctuality are monitored closely through the electronic register system. Students identified as being at risk or underperforming are given appropriate support, as necessary. Many are given specific workshop time with access to teachers on an individual basis and attendance at these workshops is monitored carefully. The system is robust and effective and clearly understood by students.

Students at risk of dropping subjects, or who are not fulfilling their potential, are identified early. Their progress is discussed at weekly meetings of staff, the additional help they require is determined, and comprehensive action is taken to assist them.

13. A large part of the success of these colleges is in fact due to hard and sustained work which, from a variety of angles, keeps them well informed about how their students are responding to what is on offer. When things go wrong, they can act rapidly to instigate change; when things are going well, they are collecting reliable evidence of why this is so, in order to inform their future activity. Most importantly, all these colleges are aware of the primacy of the learners' experience and of their responsibility for its quality.

Highly effective teaching

14. Teaching is of very high quality in all these institutions. Teachers demonstrate an enthusiasm for their subjects which inspires and motivates learners:

Teachers are knowledgeable and enthusiastic, and the best are inspirational, skilfully imparting their passion to students.

A feature of many of the effective lessons is the enthusiasm teachers show for their subject.

Expectations are high:

There is a pervasive culture of high expectations of both students and staff.

Students work in a purposeful atmosphere, within clearly defined parameters of what is acceptable:

Discipline is good, and students recognise that the learning culture of the college enables them to make the most of their abilities.

15. The learning and achievement of students are at the heart of teachers' planning and are the central purpose of all classroom/workshop activity. Teachers do not plan in a vacuum, but on the basis of a detailed knowledge of their learners' prior attainment and potential, acquired through initial assessment and induction and recorded in individual learning plans. Lesson plans become an active means of orchestrating the sequence of the proposed activities, according to the needs of the individuals within the group, but with sufficient built-in flexibility to be able to respond to the unexpected, should it occur. Differentiated approaches are planned for all students, not just the less able:

Many lessons contain specific strategies for differentiation. Extension activities are provided for the more able students and extra support for the less able.

A feature of many of the effective lessons is appropriately detailed planning that takes full account of the individual needs and preferred learning styles of the students.

Teaching is focused on the needs of the learner. For example, on ESOL courses, there is effective differentiation in lessons that allows the development of oral, written and ICT skills at a pace that is appropriate for the individual student.

Teachers keep the learning and achievement of their students at the heart of their planning and teaching, with a clear emphasis on the successful progress of each student's different learning aims in each lesson.

16. Teachers understand that what is important is not simply their performance in front of the class, but by the effectiveness of their students' learning. They therefore concentrate attention on the quality of this learning, by ensuring that students are, from the outset, clear about the lesson's purpose, and by regular checking of what has been understood. In some colleges, students are even set specific targets for individual lessons:

Teachers recap previous learning, explain new ideas clearly and are skilled at ensuring that students understand them and contribute meaningfully in class. Understanding is checked regularly and thoroughly.

Students understand the purpose of lessons and what is expected of them.

17. A variety of ways of reinforcing the lesson's subject content results in a swift pace which holds students' interest. Activities are devised to involve all students and give teachers frequent opportunities to check progress. Lessons are never viewed as self-contained entities, but as part of a continuum, with explicit links made with what has gone before and what will follow. In theory lessons for practical subjects, students are always reminded of the practical application of what they are being taught. In the best sessions, frequent use is made of students' own experiences in the workshop or the workplace:

Teachers use a wide range of strategies to help students to learn, and manage learning effectively. They produce materials and learning aids of excellent quality.

18. In these colleges the regular monitoring of students' progress is a key priority as is comprehensive feedback, both through rigorous marking of written work and detailed one-to-one discussion. The need to identify potential difficulties at an early stage in the year is well understood:

Particular attention is placed on monitoring students' performance in their early course assessment because tutors are conscious that difficulties at this stage have a marked effect in reducing student motivation.

19. The most distinctive characteristic of these very good teachers is that their practice is the result of careful reflection, of advance planning which predicts what might occur and which accommodates the particular needs of all their students whose strengths and weaknesses they know intimately. Nothing is left to chance. Moreover they themselves also learn lessons each time they teach, evaluating what they do and using these self-critical evaluations to adjust what they do next time.

Extremely successful learning

20. Since teachers in these colleges are effective managers of learning, it follows that their learners usually display high levels of autonomy and self reliance, taking charge of what they are doing and demonstrating excellent study skills. They respond very positively to the high expectations set and to a context in which they are encouraged to think for themselves:

Teachers have high expectations of students and expect them to do their best in both their written and oral work. Students respond to these expectations by giving considerable thought to the work they produce and ensuring that it is well presented and detailed. The high quality of the many displays produced by students around the college and the classrooms demonstrates students' justified pride in their work. The college has successfully established a culture in which engagement in intelligent debate and sophisticated written work are valued.

21. Where a culture of learning exists, it invariably permeates the whole college and is self-perpetuating, being quickly adopted by new students:

A particular strength of the college is the students' attitude to their studies. Learning is exceptional. Students are highly motivated, are intrinsically interested in learning new information and are enthusiastic about extending their understanding. They quickly develop good study habits, including independent research skills, and work hard to improve their knowledge. Much collaborative work in lessons is outstanding, with students co-operating most effectively on tasks set by the teacher.

22. Teachers in these colleges work hard to inculcate a spirit of enquiry in their learners, encouraging them to think things out rather than always be told, to challenge received wisdom and to develop the right language to articulate their views:

Students learn how to be critical and analytical as well as gaining good subject knowledge.

Students are given confidence in their growing autonomy as learners. They aspire to achieve beyond their previous expectations or predictions, and have both the curiosity to ask questions and the maturity to admit difficulties.

23. Discussion is a frequently used teaching strategy for checking learning as well as for ensuring that students can express themselves lucidly and persuasively and that they can reach conclusions, however tentatively at first, for themselves:

Teachers encourage students to contribute fully to class discussions, and students are able to speak confidently and knowledgeably about their subjects. Many students ask, as well as answer, pertinent questions... Some teachers display very good listening skills and are adept at helping students to focus on key points.

In an excellent lesson, students challenged the teacher, who enjoyed the lively debate that ensued and used it to steer learning and broaden the students' knowledge.

24. Indeed, the development of articulate, self-confident students is a common characteristic of many of these colleges:

Students are expected to articulate answers to questions in some depth, and are generally discouraged from monosyllabic responses.

Students are confident and fluent in their oral work.

Excellent support and guidance for students at all stages in their programmes

25. In all these colleges support and guidance for students are at least good, often outstanding. Whatever the size of the college, students are treated as individuals and can expect effective support throughout their studies. A major strength is the rigour of initial guidance:

The college goes to great lengths to ensure that students enrol on appropriate courses and the proportion of students who change their courses after enrolling is small.

A team of student advisers offers high-quality impartial advice and guidance which are effective in directing students onto appropriate courses.

26. Enrolment is followed by effective and comprehensive induction, which usually includes assessment of all learners' levels of literacy and numeracy and additional learning needs. A priority for these good colleges is to ensure that necessary support is set up speedily, involving students as equal partners in whatever support strategies are proposed:

Students with specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, receive effective assessment and support. Their needs are carefully and sensitively assessed and the students are actively involved in agreeing and setting their own targets and learning aims.

27. Most importantly, the effectiveness of support is regularly monitored:

Managers evaluate the impact of learning support by monitoring students' achievements and the progress such students make in relation to their prior attainment.

28. Great importance is also attached to tutorial systems which are well managed and consistently applied across the institution. In several colleges, every full-time student has a weekly group tutorial for each subject they are studying:

The majority, in particular those taking science subjects, speak very highly of weekly subject tutorials, where they receive additional support for specific concerns and areas of weakness. Students are also helped in their preparation for the advanced extension awards.

29. Tutorials are also where regular progress reviews are carried out and short- and long-term targets set. All colleges take this aspect of their provision extremely seriously and ensure that personal tutors are as expert in this specialist work as are subject teachers. The setting of targets is approached sensitively, but also challenges students to exceed what is predicted:

Many students enter the college with little prior achievement and low self-confidence. The system identifies a minimum level to which students should aspire, based on an analysis of their abilities, and monitors their progress against this. Students understand that these are minimum targets and are motivated to exceed them.

30. Although in all these colleges students are well prepared for transition to the next stage in their lives, this transition is particularly well managed in the independent specialist college where options might be more restricted but are nevertheless dealt with in the most comprehensive way possible:

There is a very good leavers' programme that prepares and supports the students effectively. The leavers' pack is individually tailored to meet the needs of students. The college works with other agencies to ensure that students have the opportunity to move into appropriate living, learning and working environments when they leave the college.

An exemplary response to educational and social inclusion

31. Almost all these colleges have a commitment to equality of opportunity and equity, which manifests itself in an exemplary response to social and educational inclusion. This commitment is not merely theoretical; the colleges devote considerable energy to practical activity and staff training which ensure that they are inclusive communities, valuing each individual's contribution and celebrating diversity:

There is strong promotion of equal opportunities through staff development events and in governor briefings and training. There is also much emphasis on equal opportunities at student induction and through the taught curriculum. Equal opportunities content in

courses is examined during programme reviews as a standard quality assurance check.

32. For the GFE and tertiary colleges, this commitment frequently means reaching out to groups under-represented in further education in order to widen participation and serve all the learning needs of their local communities. Such aims are common to most colleges in the sector. However, what marks out the GFE and tertiary colleges in this group is that widening participation is seen as an opportunity to raise standards, not as a threat to standards:

The college's response to educational and social inclusion is outstanding... Teaching staff give attention to the individual needs of all learners in their schemes of work, lesson plans and teaching. There is provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities, for both 16–18-year-olds and for older learners. About half of these students progress onto mainstream courses or into employment.

33. Almost all the SFCs are similarly strong on issues of equity and equality, within the context of their mission. Their efforts to widen participation are of necessity dependent on students having the necessary qualifications for advanced level courses, but are nonetheless reported on very favourably, most particularly in their response to students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and their efforts to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds through effective links with partner schools:

Inclusiveness and equality of opportunity have been adopted as key foundations for strategic planning. The principal has provided strong leadership in implementing the strategy and applying its key principles to all areas of the college's work. These principles are well understood and supported by staff of the college.

A minority of the SFCs, particularly those in the inner city, also reach out beyond their traditional cohort:

Excellent teaching and support enable many students from under-represented groups to succeed.

They create a community where the values of tolerance and respect are much in evidence:

The college's response to educational and social inclusions is outstanding... The college's ethos fosters a strong social, academic and spiritual atmosphere, enabling all students to work together with a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect. The college is strongly committed to a policy of inclusiveness and has attracted students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities who have been well integrated into the curriculum. The college responds well to the needs and interests of students, in particular those from minority ethnic communities, who benefit from qualifications in relevant languages.

34. The colleges' internal arrangements for monitoring equal opportunities and promoting inclusion and diversity are usually exemplary. Senior managers and frequently governors play an active role in overseeing the development and implementation of policies and practices. These are well communicated to both staff and students, and there is explicit reference to issues of equality in the everyday life of the college and through the taught curriculum. For example, in one SFC, a key strength highlighted at the beginning of the report is the 'celebration of difference and diversity by teachers and students':

Equality of opportunity permeates the life of the college. The equal opportunity policy is carefully explained to students during induction and the values within the policy are reinforced through specific activities during tutorial and lessons... Teaching takes explicit account of students' varied backgrounds and encourages a multi-cultural perspective... A successful equal opportunities week included a competition to find the best-written work, artwork and performance from students. Attendance, retention and achievement in each subject are monitored very carefully and the data are analysed by gender and ethnic background.

Outstanding strategic leadership and governance

35. In these colleges, the principal and senior management team are successful in creating a culture where students are at the heart of the college's work. There is an unrelenting focus on students and their achievements, subscribed to by all staff. For example, in one tertiary college:

A determination among staff to provide the best possible service to students permeates the college and reflects its mission statement.

Similarly:

The college's one corporate objective which pervades all aspects of its work is to improve students' achievement.

There is a firm focus on students and the standards they achieve.

36. To ensure that the focus on students is retained, and that staff morale is high, these colleges are characterised by an open and consultative style. Without exception, communication in the colleges surveyed is a strength. Communication and consultation with staff help to create a culture in which staff morale is high, staff feel valued and share a common purpose with their managers. This shared vision is a critical prerequisite for success. Staff are consulted regularly and contribute to the development of policy, and to the strategic planning process. Communications through meetings, briefings, and electronic methods are used effectively to keep staff informed and to listen and respond to staff views. For example, in a tertiary college:

Staff morale is high...The management structure is simple and effective. Staff trust their managers and consider them to be very supportive. Senior managers maintain close contact with students. Communication throughout the college is excellent. Staff are consulted on day-to-day issues and on the future direction of the college.

37. Effective communication and consultation in the context of a large, multi-site college are more difficult but, as the following examples show, not impossible:

Communications within the college are very good. Staff are kept well informed through regular meetings, email, the college intranet and a Principal matters' newsletter. Minutes of senior management reviews are circulated to staff with notes on the relevance of issues for individual areas of work. Senior managers are approachable and know the staff well. They are very willing to consider the views of staff and students...Teachers and support staff enjoy working at the college and form effective teams.

Communication is particularly effective across the college sites, through a weekly bulletin, email, and regular meetings and briefings include the principal's twice-yearly briefing to staff.

38. What is also a consistent feature in these colleges is the very 'hands-on' approach of senior managers to the college's core work which they make it their business to understand fully. Effective college principals are those who do not spend huge amounts of their time away from their institutions, but who are highly visible, talking with students, walking the corridors, making themselves accessible. While successful managers in industry are well aware of the need to walk the shop floor, there has been an increasing remoteness of some college principals post-incorporation, to the detriment of their institution's performance. There is no such remoteness in these colleges:

The principal is highly visible around the college and senior managers are very accessible.

The presence of the senior management around the college at key points during the college day is beneficial in maintaining the friendly and orderly atmosphere which characterises the college.

College managers are readily accessible and respond quickly. The principal regularly visits each area of the college.

39. Leaders and managers also set a framework where staff roles, responsibilities and accountabilities are clear. The management structure is simple, with straightforward reporting lines based on coherent curriculum areas that link directly to senior managers and to cross-college functions. Staff know what their job is and are given autonomy to carry it out within a framework of clear accountability. Managers at all levels are clear about their functions, and responsibility is vested in them to make decisions. For example, in a large GFE college:

There is a good level of delegation to site principals and heads of department who, although accountable, feel empowered to make decisions within their areas of responsibility.

40. Another feature of all the colleges is their strong and effective governance. In each of the 29 colleges, governors play a significant role in providing strategic direction and monitoring the academic and financial performance of the college. They share the vision for the college with senior managers and staff, and are active in pursuing the vision, being both supportive and acting as a 'critical friend'. The extent to which governors have direct links with curriculum areas varies; but in all cases governors are knowledgeable about the curriculum, have a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college and are well informed about students' achievements. In many cases, governors play a significant role in the college's quality assurance procedures, particularly through reviewing and evaluating self-assessment reports. Positive reports about the role played by governing bodies are perhaps the most consistent message emerging from this survey. Examples of the support given by governors extrapolated from the reports are as follows:

Governors closely monitor academic achievement through the standards committee. They have an excellent knowledge of curriculum issues. Governors chair the curriculum area review groups that meet three times each year to monitor the standard of provision.

Governors have made an outstanding contribution to the development of the college. Their knowledge of the key issues facing the college is thorough. Governors monitor the performance of the college closely and have a strong interest in the success and welfare of the students. The work of governors in supporting improvement has been very effective. They have a good awareness of areas that are under performing and monitor progress effectively against targets for improvement.

41. Both senior managers and governors have access to reliable data which they use to inform their planning and to monitor progress against strategic targets on a regular basis:

Effective use is made of accurate and reliable management information...Governors, managers and course teams use a wide range of statistical reports to judge the quality of provision. The information is updated regularly to monitor recruitment, retention and pass rates, and to inform planning.

The college has well-developed management information systems that provide excellent online access to reliable and up-to-date retention rate, attendance and punctuality data by course module and student. Information is used well by managers at all levels to take prompt action to support students and bring about

improvement and to inform judgements about the quality of provision.

42. Close interpretation of data is a central plank of college managers' activity. The importance of this task cannot be overestimated. Senior managers and governors in high performing colleges ensure that they are kept fully briefed about the past, present and potential performance of their current students and of the courses which they are attending so that, if they need to intervene to keep things on track, they are able to do so authoritatively and effectively.

Consistently good curriculum management

43. Consistency of performance across all curriculum areas is a challenge which usually eludes less effective institutions. This is not the case with these colleges. The same clear vision of the college's purpose and the centrality of the achievement of students subscribed to by senior managers has been transferred seamlessly to all curriculum managers who have been given appropriate autonomy for the decisions within their departments. Accorded this level of trust, curriculum managers acknowledge and fully accept their accountability for the performance of staff and the achievement of their students whose needs are paramount.

44. Central to the good curriculum management encountered in these colleges is effective teamwork where teaching staff meet regularly and good practice is disseminated as necessary:

Teamwork is often outstanding with much effective co-ordination of good practice.

There is uniformity of practice in relation to the use of schemes of work and lesson plans:

Schemes of work are well structured, give details of resources and suggested learning activities and are implemented consistently across course teams.

There is support for struggling or newly qualified staff at departmental level:

Good support is in place to improve teaching and learning...and the mentoring system provides effective support for newly qualified teachers.

45. As with senior management, curriculum managers make regular use of information data to monitor current performance and develop future strategy. As part of the quality assurance framework clear and precise target-setting, again based on reliable management information, is used at curriculum area and subject level to set challenging performance measures for staff and students alike. The use of such targets encourages high expectations among both students and staff. Target setting is an important part of the colleges' strategy to improve retention and achievement. All staff are fully aware of the targets set for their particular course

and how present performance compares with national averages and the college's own performance in preceding years:

Courses are reviewed on a continuous basis and areas of underperformance identified.

Staff are familiar with course data on attendance, retention and pass rates compared with national averages. Effective course review and action planning result in appropriate changes to course content and assessments.

Indeed a constant feature of all these colleges is the self-aware and self-critical culture which permeates all areas of the curriculum, replicating the high standard set at senior level.

Rigorous quality assurance processes

46. Not surprisingly quality assurance processes are highly developed in the colleges in this group. Self-assessment is rigorous and reliable, and reflects the focus in the colleges' strategies on students' achievement and on the quality of teaching and learning. With judicious use of the highly efficient management information systems described above, course teams can make judgements on the quality of provision based on sound evidence. The process of self-assessment encourages critical self-reflection, both at an individual and a team level. Curriculum self-assessment reports are discussed with and validated thoroughly by appropriate interested parties: these may include senior managers, the principal, governors, representatives from other colleges, and external consultants. All staff are involved in the production of self-assessment reports and the development plans arising from the findings. Good use is made of the views of students, and where applicable, of employers and other stakeholders:

The college has a well-established quality assurance system which is both thorough and highly effective in raising standards.

47. Staff engagement with and support for the quality assurance framework is strong, and self-assessment is seen as a productive means of evaluating and improving the quality of provision. Validation is taken seriously:

All staff are involved in self-assessment and the process is thorough and rigorous. Amongst all categories of staff there is a commitment to continuous improvement and strong support for the quality assurance framework.

Members of the governors' standards committee oversee the implementation of the quality assurance procedures. The production of self-assessment reports is at the core of the quality assurance framework. The validation panel consists of governors, staff, parents, an external consultant, heads of partner high schools and a principal from another sixth form college.

48. Accurate self-assessment is premised on a rigorous internal lesson observation scheme. With their primary focus on student achievement, all these colleges understand the need to concentrate, in their observation activity, on what and how well students are learning rather than whether or not teachers are following the right sequence of procedures. Several also realise that there is a need for a subject specialist dimension to observations if standards reached are to be evaluated accurately. Thus they involve subject leaders or specialist external consultants in their observation programme, as well as encouraging peer observation within particular curriculum areas.

49. What is also taken for granted in these institutions is that the results of an observation will both inform that member of staff's programme for continuous professional development and contribute to annual appraisal. Performance management of staff is accorded a high priority, as befits the common insistence on individual accountability by all staff for their work:

Observation helps identify staff development needs and informs staff appraisal which is carried out regularly.

50. All these colleges benefit from the services of well qualified specialist staff. The percentage of staff who are both qualified as teachers and who have qualifications in the subjects they are teaching is extremely high. In addition, the high value placed on staff development ensures that staff are given every opportunity to keep up-to-date and to enhance their existing skills. Training is both extensive and systematic, being clearly linked to the college's strategic objectives, and to the thorough identification of individuals' training needs. Precisely because these colleges put the student experience at the heart of their strategy, staff development frequently focuses on classroom practice and curriculum issues. In several colleges, advanced practitioners are used to disseminate good practice and to intervene swiftly where teachers are in difficulty:

Staff development is well organised. It is used effectively to support college-wide strategic objectives as well as those of teams and individuals. There is dissemination of good practice through events linked to themes derived from lesson observations and reviews. Appraisal is used to determine the individual development needs of staff. Each subject and tutor team prioritises their needs, which are aligned to college-wide priorities before being fed into the staff development plan for the year. Teachers value the staff development provided.

51. These colleges also insist on a thorough evaluation of training and staff development events with a particular focus on their impact on subsequent practice and behaviour:

There is an extensive programme of staff development which is thoroughly evaluated and reported to governors.

An annual staff training plan addresses training needs that have been identified as a result of appraisal activities and college

development priorities. Systematic evaluation of the plan results in a cost-benefit analysis of each staff development activity.

Conclusion

52. The features identified in this report as common to high performing colleges will be widely recognised as good practice; there are no startling revelations, although the frequent recurrence of an inclusive and effective response to the needs of disadvantaged or under-represented groups is unexpected.

53. What singles out all these colleges is a realisation by their leaders that an educational establishment's central purpose is to place the education and success of their learners at the heart of what they do. Self-evident as this may seem, less effective colleges can often give the impression of being organised primarily around the needs and sensibilities of staff rather than learners. No such confusion exists within these colleges. On the contrary, there is a clear and well-understood consensus that all aspects of the institution must be equally effective in contributing to the success of every learner. There can be no weak links, but simply a relentless drive for continuous improvement and a great deal of sharply focused and dedicated work. That these colleges, in a range of different circumstances, can be so successful is a tribute to their staff, an inestimable bonus for their students and a confirmation that they are worthy beacons for the sector.