college improvement

the voice of teachers and managers

Paul Martinez

College improvement

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teachers and managers

*The majority of the strategies adopted might easily be transferred
and apply both to other programme areas within the institution
and also to other colleges.*

West Thames College

Paul Martinez

Note
The Learning and Skills Development Agency
was formerly known as FEDA.

Raising Quality and Achievement Programme
Run by the Learning and Skills Development Agency
in partnership with the Association of Colleges (AoC).

- We aim to reach all colleges and all levels of staff.
- We offer extra support to colleges that are receiving
  Standards Fund money to improve their practice.
- All our activity themes are backed by a
  programme of research and evaluation.
- The Raising Quality and Achievement Programme
  is sponsored by the DfEE and all activities
  are subsidised.

Contents

Acknowledgements

This report would not exist without the dedication of people who carried out the development work in colleges. The participating colleges are listed in the appendix.

Thanks are also due to those who commented on earlier drafts:

Introduction

Our aims

This report aims to summarise findings from the first round of Raising Quality and Achievement (RQA) development projects established in 1999.

The RQA development projects took place in over 80 colleges. They created an opportunity for a large-scale study of how teachers and managers interpreted their efforts to improve retention and achievement. In this case it is about the *meaning* they give to their experience.

The main purposes of this report are to:

- summarise what seems to work in successful strategies to raise achievement and improve retention
- explore the meaning of college improvement
- give voice to the teachers, tutors, managers and student services staff who have implemented strategies to improve their college.

The need for serious research

A large and growing body of research explores the experience of learning from the point of view of learners (Bloomer and Hodkinson 1999, Davies 1999, FEDA 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Responsive College Unit 1998, Unwin and Wellington 2000).

A body of literature also exists which explores the views of college teachers and managers, but it tends to take a somewhat different perspective. The investigation of staff perceptions often concentrates on what could be termed 'bad news stories', ie on the impact of changes to funding, rapid and externally imposed curriculum shifts, bureaucracy, etc (Hill 2000, Lucas et al 1999, Martinez and Pepler 2000, Gibbons 1998, Lucas 1998).

The need for some serious research on staff views of effective strategies to improve retention and achievement has already been signalled (Spours 1998). 'Success stories' are quite well represented in the literature but usually take the form of individual and often small-scale action-research projects about innovations in teaching and curriculum design or technology-based learning.

How it came about

The RQA Programme was launched in the summer of 1999 as part of the standards programme for further education sponsored by the DfEE (now the Department for Education and Skills). The Standards Fund was initially confined to Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) sector colleges in England, but has been extended to include specialist colleges and other providers that receive funding from the Learning and Skills Council. The RQA Programme was developed by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (formerly FEDA) in collaboration with the Association of Colleges (AoC) and comprises several strands of activity:

- development projects based on an action-research approach to improve student achievement and retention
- a quality improvement team to provide consultancy support
- a benchmarking and information service
- networks to disseminate effective practice
- leadership for achievement: research, publication and training
- a quality information and advice service (QIAS) to provide front-line information, advice and referral.

Further information and contact details for all these strands can be found at the RQA website: www.rqa.org.uk

Following a number of rapid, informal consultations with senior curriculum and quality managers, the specification for the development projects anticipated that they should:

- be open to all English colleges
- include as many colleges as possible.

Given the limited time available for the first round, it was agreed that they would concentrate on development activity which was already being implemented and which could therefore be evaluated, and the results reported and disseminated as quickly as possible.

The objectives of the first round of development projects were to:

- involve the largest possible number of colleges in evaluating strategies to improve student outcomes, notably retention and achievement
- enlarge our knowledge base of what works and why
- produce a variety of practical materials for use in colleges
- disseminate experience, knowledge and materials as widely as possible.

The second and third rounds of development projects were established in autumn 1999 and summer 2000. These comprise action-research projects from their inception and are being supported by a team of consultants. A separate report will focus on the action-research approach of the second round projects.

Finding out more

The projects have been written up as case studies and can be searched and downloaded from the RQA website. Some of the case studies are also included in *Raising achievement: a guide to successful strategies* (Martinez 2000).

A note on method

All English colleges were invited to take part in the first (and subsequent) rounds of development projects. Small sums of money were offered, primarily to offset the cost of evaluation and the creation of the case studies. The only support for the first round of projects comprised:

- a detailed guidance note on the creation of the case study
- briefing seminars
- support for networking through the provision of information and contacts from other colleges taking part.

Case studies are quoted liberally to give the flavour of their meanings as fully as possible. Quotations are used without alteration from case studies, unless otherwise indicated. Occasional errors of spelling or grammar have been corrected.

Making sense of case studies

Case studies have a number of strengths including:

- a common evaluation framework
- a focus on solving specific problems
- empirical evidence of successful strategies
- high involvement of practitioners
- reflection on the process of improvement, as well as on the outcomes.

The weaknesses of case studies are that they:

- sometimes lack methodological rigour
- do not always identify cause-and-effect relationships
- cannot necessarily be transferred to other contexts.

The experiences on which this report is based have been drawn from a reasonably large sample of different types of college. Particular weight has been given to the meanings and interpretations assigned by the project leaders to their own experiences. The approach is qualitative rather than quantitative. Retention and achievement are often calculated in the case studies in different ways and colleges have applied different measures of success. It has not, therefore, been possible to explore quantitative relationships between different types of strategy and, say, different degrees of success. A new research project, *How colleges improve,* is currently exploring college improvement issues using quantitative methods.

Types of case study

2

The group of colleges that created case studies was self-selecting. Nevertheless, it is broadly representative of the college sector as a whole. Just over half (44) were general colleges of further education. Over a quarter were tertiary colleges (22). Sixth form colleges comprised a fifth of the sample (17). The remaining colleges were two colleges of art and design and a land-based industry college. See Figure 1 below for a breakdown of the participating colleges by type of college.

FIGURE 1
Round 1 development projects by type of college (percentage)

sixth form colleges
20 %

specialist colleges
3 %

tertiary colleges
26 %
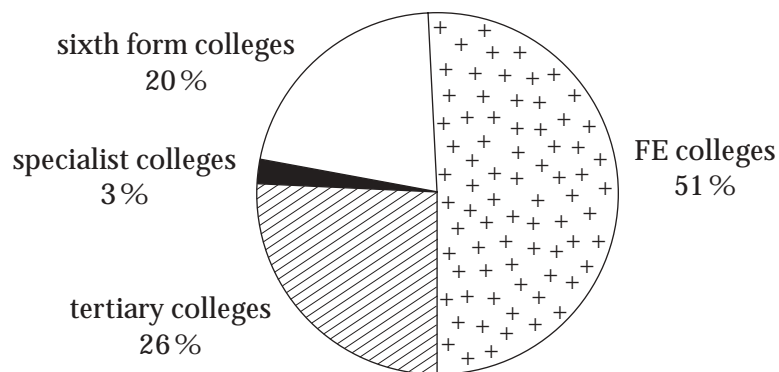
FE colleges
51 %

The widening participation factor

It has been suggested elsewhere that social and educational disadvantage do not prevent colleges from improving retention and achievement (Martinez 2000). This view tends to be supported by the present study. Almost all the projects could identify improvements to retention rates, achievement rates or both. Colleges serving the most deprived communities were significantly *over-represented* in the sample.

Since 1998 every college has been allocated a widening participation factor. This is based on the proportion of students recruited from areas with different levels of deprivation, using a modified version of an index originally created by the Department of the Environment. There is a group of 54 FE, tertiary and sixth form colleges (with a widening participation factor of 1.025 or above) that recruits a particularly high proportion of students from deprived communities. This group constitutes some 12% of all types of college. Such colleges were significantly over-represented in the sample of colleges taking part in this project. The number of colleges with widening participation factors of 1.025 or above was 18 (21%).

Types of process: top down, bottom up or shared

Just over half of the case studies (28% in each case) could be characterised as either 'top down' or 'bottom up'. Strategies that were developed by senior managers and either comprised cross-college initiatives only or prescribed actions for course, programmes and departments are categorised as top down.

At the other extreme, strategies that were developed by course or programme teams or by departments without any strong reference to cross-college strategies, are described as bottom up.

Twenty-nine colleges (34%) reported a 'shared' approach. Typically, this involved the creation of a strategy embracing all or most of the college with some specific cross-college initiatives, combined with strategies developed by course teams, programme areas or departments.

Finally, there was a small group of nine colleges (10%) that reported 'student services' strategies. These strategies were identified, developed and delivered largely by student services teams and without any significant reference to curriculum areas.

The shared and bottom-up strategies almost all focused on both retention and achievement issues. The top-down and student-services approaches focused more strongly on retention. Over a third, (38%) of the top-down strategies did not include any achievement objectives. Two of the student-services strategies had no achievement focus. It is very difficult to draw inferences from this data but it perhaps suggests that at the end of the 1990s, senior managers were rather more preoccupied with retention than with achievement issues. Practitioners, by contrast, tended to see the issues as two sides of the same coin.

Success and failure

Retention and achievement have improved in almost all of the areas addressed in the improvement projects. The sample is too small to provide conclusive evidence, but the bottom-up and shared approaches seem to have been the most successful in achieving their objectives.

Success or failure in this context is defined in terms of the objectives set by the colleges participating in this round of the development projects. Full details are given in Tables 1 and 2, which deal respectively with retention and achievement.

TABLE 1
Success or failure: against student retention objectives

Type of approach Success or failure	Top down No.	%	Shared No.	%	Bottom up No.	%	Student services No.	%
Succeeded	15	(63)	22	(76)	22	(92)	6	(67)
Not known	4	(17)	2	(7)	—	—	1	(11)
Failed	2	(8)	3	(10)	—	—	2	(22)
Not relevant	3	(13)	2	(7)	2	(8)	—	—
Total	24	(101)	29	(100)	24	(100)	9	(100)

Thus, of 24 colleges which adopted a broadly top-down approach, 15 (63 %) succeeded in improving retention. In four colleges (17 %), the outcome was not clear. Two colleges (8 %) did not succeed. Three colleges with a top-down approach did not seek to improve retention.

TABLE 2
Success or failure against student achievement objectives

Type of approach Success or failure	Top down No.	%	Shared No.	%	Bottom up No.	%	Student services No.	%
Succeeded	10	(42)	25	(86)	22	(92)	4	(44)
Not known	3	(13)	2	(7)	—	—	1	(11)
Failed	2	(8)	—	—	—	—	2	(22)
Not relevant	9	(38)	2	(7)	2	(8)	2	(22)
Total	24	(101)	29	(100)	24	(100)	9	(99)

In relation to achievement, 22 (92 %) of the colleges with a bottom-up approach were successful in making improvements. Two of the bottom-up approaches focused exclusively on retention and did not seek to improve achievement.

Determining strategies for improvement

3

Colleges were reporting strategies that had been or were proving to be successful. Within the broad constraints of funding and inspection frameworks, they had had an entirely free hand to determine those strategies.

A number of generalisations can be inferred from the case studies concerning:

- innovation
- self-belief
- types of strategies
- combinations of strategies
- no one best way.

Innovation

One surprising point is how few of the case studies report innovations that are wholly new or without precedent in British further and adult education. In fact, only one – the motivational interviewing initiative at Knowsley Community College on page 21 – really falls into this category.

However, a considerable sense of professional achievement and accomplishment is conveyed by the case studies. The reason behind this apparent paradox seems to be that they represent the views of practitioners rather than researchers. Their primary focus is 'how can we improve colleges and make things work better'? It is not the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. Innovation in this context seems therefore to have five meanings:

- abandoning or changing teaching approaches or management strategies that have exhausted their usefulness or lost their relevance
- re-visiting the application of well-established principles of teaching and curriculum design
- working out how to apply tried-and-tested general principles within specific contexts
- trying out new combinations of strategies
- transferring practical strategies from one context to another.

Self-belief

Without exception, teachers and managers clearly believe that they can achieve improvements. This belief is so general that it was scarcely mentioned within the case studies themselves. Those managers who do acknowledge the pervasive difficulties of educational disadvantage, poverty and the personal problems of students, are still confident in their ability to secure measurable improvement.

> *Social disadvantage may explain lack of achievement in the past but it must never be allowed to excuse poor performance in further education. The college is unlikely to be able to act directly to overcome social disadvantage, but it can take responsibility for helping students to access whatever support is available and for providing students with strategies to enable them to achieve despite those disadvantages.*
> Hugh Baird College

This confidence is not exactly surprising given the self-selecting nature of the sample. However, the belief in college efficacy and in the ability of teachers and managers to continue to secure improvements in achievement emerges even in those case studies where the initial impact of improvement strategies was less than originally anticipated.

Types of strategy

The strategies are directed mainly at teaching, tutoring and curriculum issues.

> *All curriculum teams need to re-visit curriculum design and assessment procedures along inclusive learning (ie student-focused) principles.*
> West Kent College

> *In retrospect, the successful strategy for transformation of the GNVQ Foundation Course in Health and Social Care has demonstrated how it is possible to use a simple approach to improve performance in the teaching and administration of a course. Providing that appropriate opportunities are created for improving quality, then a course team can adequately cope with the inherent difficulties of poor retention and achievement.*
> Lewisham College

Over half (58%) of the case study colleges worked on tutoring issues. The next two most widely reported strategies related to curriculum design and teaching, respectively. These were identified by 29 colleges (34%) in each case. A significant group of 18 colleges (21%) focused on target setting and value added. Slightly more colleges (24%) included initial assessment and additional learning support. The same number (21), developed a focus on monitoring attendance and following up absence. Twelve colleges (14%) improved their recruitment and selection or student support procedures.

Less frequently reported strategies were categorised as 'other' and included induction, student motivation, learning styles, guidance, student mentoring, student preparation, management information systems (MIS) and quality assurance. Most colleges applied two or more strategies and over a fifth (18 colleges; 21%) applied several types of strategies.

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which the different strategies were applied.

FIGURE 2
Number of colleges reporting different types of strategy
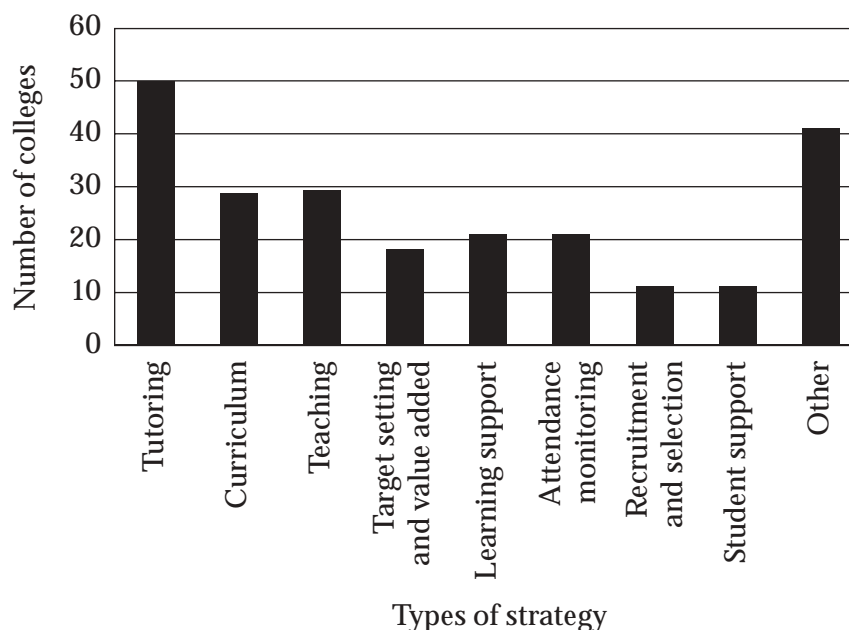
In terms of the focus on different areas of the curriculum, the most frequently reported improvement strategies involved a cross-college approach. The work of 34 of the 86 colleges (40%) could be described as cross-college initiatives. The second most widespread focus comprised A-levels in 17 colleges (20%). The remaining initiatives tended to be focused on one or two of a wide range of curriculum areas including engineering, geography, English (as an additional language), hair and beauty therapy, Access, maths, and motor vehicle. Of the colleges involved in the first round, 40% developed projects focused on one or more curriculum areas.

The percentage comes to more than 100 because several colleges combined a cross-curriculum focus with an initiative within a specific curriculum area.

There were a significant number of strategies that concentrated mainly on curriculum issues but also included interventions to improve support to students, their learning or both. Indeed, there is widespread acknowledgement by teachers and curriculum managers of the need for an increased entitlement to support.

The increase in additional learning support hours, to name but one (crucial factor), has had a profound effect on less able students' achievements in the past two years.
East Surrey College

[It is important to realise] *the value of structuring learning support so as to ensure that all students benefit from it.*
Brockenhurst College

In the past, it has been recognised that only one or two areas of the college are involved in the welfare and guidance of students. However, it has become obvious that student services and tutorial provision are so intertwined that there are now many members of the college in a supporting role…
Capel Manor College

Finally, five colleges (6%) undertook projects that were not only led by, but focused within student services. They included development work on support for students, guidance, welfare and financial advice and support.

Combinations of strategies

Some colleges reported strategies with a single focus. Typically, these involved the creation of a small team to monitor attendance and intervene where there were problems of unauthorised absence. However, even where colleges concentrate on reporting and evaluating a single strategy, it is often evident from their case study that other strategies were being pursued.

More usually, practitioners and managers seem to believe that retention and achievement require a mix of strategies that will be unique to their own college.

> *A combination of measures worked best. An overall retention strategy incorporating a number of different measures or procedures is needed in order to target the different issues that need to be addressed.*
> Bradford College

> *Significant improvements in student achievement depend upon a combination of the right curriculum, curriculum delivery which promotes learning, appropriate student support and a facilitating culture.*
> Hugh Baird College

Two very different case studies (cross-college on the one hand and course-focused on the other) illustrate this point. One was a course-focused project in Redcar and Cleveland College; the other at the City of Bath College developed a strategy incrementally over a five-year period. As each strategy led to improvements, new approaches to supplement or extend it were devised and implemented.

CITY OF BATH COLLEGE
Sustaining improvement over a five-year period

changes in the curriculum offer: development of GNVQs at intermediate and foundation level to displace full-time GCSEs

timetabling: a college-wide timetable grid to enable students to mix and match across the curriculum offer and to transfer more easily between courses

research: the college conducted a survey into retention and drop-out

tutorials: introduction of full-time tutors who devote all their time to the provision of tutorial support for students

coordination: creation of a tutors' forum to share good practice and a support for students advisory group to ensure a 'seamless web' of support including tutoring, counselling and advisory and welfare functions within the college

recruitment and selection: renewed emphasis on guiding students towards appropriate choices, rather than recruitment for its own sake; training for interviewers and the introduction of tutorial observations

course transfers: streamlining arrangements

induction: more extensive induction (usually one week) to include an introduction to the course and its demands

at-risk students: support directed at late enrollers and other categories of 'at-risk' students

student handbook: including advice on college services, the college charter, a diary and possible courses of action in different 'what if' scenarios

attendance monitoring: absences reported to and followed up by tutors; outcomes reported back to teachers

additional learning support: located in the college open learning centre to lessen any stigma and encourage take up

teaching and learning: introduction of standards for schemes of work and assessment plans, college-based observation, staff development and improved internal verification

reporting and monitoring: weekly reports to the College's Executive Committee and monthly reports to the Corporation emphasise the importance of the issue.

Other case studies with a cross-college focus that feature a wide range of strategies include: Accrington and Rossendale, Barnfield, Burnley, Bury, Capel Manor, College of North East London, Doncaster, Enfield, Gateshead, Great Yarmouth, Henley College (Coventry), New College (Swindon), North Tyneside, Peterborough, Regent, Sir George Monoux and South Nottingham colleges.

Teachers and programme leaders, in the case studies from individual courses or programme areas, also developed and implemented strategies with a number of different components and interventions. The main strategies developed by almost all of the individual programme or course case studies can be categorised as 'teaching' and 'curriculum'. Closer examination, however, reveals that a strategy which concentrates on teaching and the curriculum will often involve a large number of separate but linked interventions. The Counselling Courses case study from Redcar and Cleveland College provides a typical example.

No one best way

One important discovery the college has made during its work on attendance and retention is that there is no one solution.
Regent College

It is the nature of the course that determines the methodology.
East Surrey College

Teachers and managers are generally confident that their strategies and experience can be of use to other colleges. What might be transferred, however, are not lists of golden rules. The case studies do not attempt to offer a magic solution to any given situation.

Four specific meanings are attached to successful strategies in the case studies. They are:

- specific
- diverse
- flexible
- renewable.

The specific nature of improvement strategies can be demonstrated by reference to the most common strategy: tutoring. On the evidence of case studies, tutoring is highly effective as a means of improving retention and – when associated with target setting and value added – achievement. What the tutoring case studies have in common are broad educational and teaching principles. Models of tutoring are more diverse, but several types can be identified from highly centralised, full-time 'super tutors' to more diffuse arrangements where all teachers also tutor, and including various compromise arrangements in-between. But beyond these points of similarity, the mix of purpose, objectives, delivery mechanisms, time allocation, personnel, quality arrangements, coordination mechanisms, organisation and administration is different in each college. No two examples of successful tutoring strategies are the same.

This is reflected in the interpretations made by practitioners and managers. First, there is a belief that effective strategies will need form and content **specific** to the type of course and type of student.

Staff involved in the project were able to identify a variety of systems which met some of the needs of three very individual programme areas, their student profile and course portfolio. The diversity of this method of approach allowed investigation of the specific local causes for student non completion and/or poor achievement.
West Thames College

It follows that strategies need to be **diverse**. Even within the same college, what might be appropriate in one curriculum area, might not work in another. Also, what is essentially the same strategy, may need to be adapted and customised to suit the needs of different subjects or students. This belief does not seem to depend on the size or type of a college. It can be found in large, general FE colleges and in smaller, more specialised, sixth form colleges.

The key learning points from this experience highlighted the fact that there is no single or uniform answer to raising student retention and achievement rates.
West Thames College

We have allowed a broad range of approaches to subject study support in order to identify examples of good practice. Practice has varied and includes: targeting students, whole group sessions, general drop-in, and specific topic sessions. Some areas register attendance while others do not. No single model appears to give success across all subject areas.
Shrewsbury Sixth Form College

The absence of simple, universal solutions is associated with a need for flexibility. This can constitute something of a dilemma. How do you ensure that cross-college strategies are driven forward, or student entitlements secured throughout a college, without standardisation and mechanisms to enforce compliance? This tension seems to be resolved in some of the case studies by ascribing a particular meaning to diversity. In this context it is associated with flexibility about the means selected to achieve a given outcome. To put this another way, entitlement or intended outcomes may be standardised, but ways of achieving them are **flexible**.

…the college has had to consider how to achieve the proper balance between consistent practice and the individual needs of the different programme areas. It is essential that students are in receipt of the same entitlement, but how this is met will vary according to unique sets of circumstances. Standardisation as such, therefore, has not been sought, but instead best possible practice within clear parameters for action … has been accepted as the guiding principle…
West Cheshire College

The tutorial system must be flexible enough to acknowledge the diversity of the student population and their needs while still delivering the minimum student entitlement.
Skelmersdale College

Finally, strategies need to be renewable. The case studies acknowledge that if 'solutions' are not kept under review, they may well cease to be effective and become 'problems' in the future.

Anticipate change. What works this year may well be less effective next. Situations and people alter. Effective systems one year, fail the next.
Farnborough College

…colleges and courses need to continually re-invent themselves and their strategies to retain students.
Burnley College

Strategies for improvement

Successful interventions focus on solving problems in specific contexts rather than on innovation for its own sake.

Improvements are associated with a strong belief among teachers and managers that they can influence retention and achievement rates.

Strategies to improve retention and achievement are mainly linked to teaching, tutoring and curriculum issues.

Improvement strategies with a single focus are relatively rare; most combine several different interventions.

Even course-specific strategies tend to be complex and multi-faceted.

There is no magic bullet or single best way.

Successful strategies are seen as highly specific, diverse, flexible and renewable.

Putting students first

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The theme that links all the improvement strategies can be expressed in the phrase 'students come first'. There is a broad consensus among educational researchers that strategies to raise standards are most likely to be successful if they focus directly on students and their experiences of learning (Bosker et al 1994, Creemers 1994, Gray et al 1999, Mortimore 1998, Sammons 1999, Scheerens and Bosker 1997, Somekh 1999, Wang et al 1993).

This research has mainly been conducted in schools. The message from the case studies is that a similar approach can be applied successfully in colleges.

> *…the focus on the individual students by subject and personal tutors and strong pastoral support systems are the most important* [factors]*.*
> Bury College

> *However rigorous the procedures and however effectively they are implemented, the single biggest contributor to high retention is the students' commitment and enjoyment of the course.*
> Leeds College of Arts and Design

The learning points from teachers and managers suggest that students and student motivation are at the heart of all the improvement strategies.

A careful reading of the case studies suggests that this 'student centredness' has a number of separate but overlapping meanings.

There seems to be most agreement that putting students first implies a focus on:

- students as individuals
- the shared nature of learning
- student motivation
- a culture of high expectations.

Students as individuals

Treating students as individuals involves the provision of support, advice and pastoral care through personal tutoring.

> *Students must feel supported and valued. This can be achieved with the provision of personal tutors to give academic support and offer advice, information or suggest other facilities or support services to help with other problems.*
> Bradford College

A focus on students as individuals also means that each student should have clear goals, that their progress should be monitored closely and that remedial action should be undertaken if there are problems.

> *Students react well to sensitive guidance, encouragement, praise and the fact that each individual is important and personal progress is being monitored, with help being provided if goals are not being achieved.*
> Middlesbrough College

It follows that teachers and tutors will emphasise the learning of each individual student and that feedback, instruction and coaching for improvement will be important aspects of teaching.

The principle of valuing students as individuals in the case studies is enacted mainly through tutoring and teaching. In this context, personal tutoring is the process by which students discuss, review and action-plan their progress with support from the personal tutor. Personal tutoring, as reported in the case studies, is usually but not exclusively:

- based on one-to-one discussions
- reserved for full-time or substantial part-time students
- academic, but with a strong focus on pastoral issues.

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College found personal tutoring valuable in improving retention and achievement within the Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy department.

> *The most important aspect of the strategies that have improved retention and achievement has been effective academic tutoring. Access to effective tutorial support for part-time learners, advances in some tutorial practices and support for new or inexperienced tutors have helped the realisation of the level of service that made a clear impact on student achievement. Some key points are:*
>
> - *early identification of students who are at risk of not completing*
> - *targeting tutorial support at these students*
> - *setting, monitoring and revising achievable learning targets*
> - *case loading and* [the selection of] *most effective tutors*
> - *early identification of students needing additional support*
> - *clear documentation and tracking of student progress*
> - *poor attendance followed through early*
> - *negotiation of individual timetables to meet students' needs.*
>
> North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

It should go without saying that where personal tutors do not teach their tutees, their effectiveness depends entirely upon effective and rapid communication with subject tutors. In the case studies personal tutoring is complemented by a focus on the work of subject teachers and tutors to support the progress of individual students.

Similar points are made about teaching in the West Hertfordshire and Enfield case studies. Students need:

- detailed, regular and clear feedback about their progress
- clear and easy-to-follow assignment guidelines and assessment procedures
- one-to-one support with portfolio building and in tutorials to ensure that they do not fall behind during the year
- the experience of success to boost their confidence.

The shared nature of learning

The second broad meaning of 'putting students first' is that learning and achievement are part of a process that is shared between teachers and students. Teachers cannot learn on behalf of their students and students will not succeed without their teachers. In the words of one case study: 'students and staff depend on each other for success'.

A shared process implies that **student views should inform retention and improvement strategies**. This can be done through:

- surveys of student opinion on attendance or completion issues (Derby College, Wilmorton)
- acting on regular feedback from questionnaires and regular, large meetings with students (Great Yarmouth College).

As the Colchester Sixth Form College case study makes clear, this can extend to sharing teaching and learning processes.

- *Involve students.*
- *Give them ownership.*
- *Be prepared to act on their suggestions.*
  …
- *Accept that sometimes students understand better how they learn, and consult them more often.*
- *See education as a process in which all have a role to play in its delivery and development.*

Colchester Sixth Form College

Methods to implement shared approaches to learning can be located on a spectrum that extends from formal structures for consulting with and involving students, through curriculum design and the creation of options and choices within curricula, to almost intuitive and spontaneous interactions with students during teaching sessions.

The Bradford College case study gives examples of formal structures for consultation and feedback together with less formal opportunities to review progress with heads of section.

Also, students whose attendance and academic performance are affected by their problems are given time and space to discuss and try to resolve any difficulties with the head of section. The course committee enables students to put their, or other students', ideas forward and discuss any complaints, worries etc and to feel that their views and points will be considered.

Bradford College

The case study from East Surrey College is at the opposite end of this spectrum. Here, the programme leader for the Intermediate-level Health and Social Care course derives a number of learning points from his long experience of working with relatively low attaining and sometimes challenging students.

- *The heart of the group must always be maintained … for example, many students will have long periods of absence. Phone calls home may have little effect: what brings a student back is the energy that is the group…*

- *The cornerstone … is the affective side of the learner/tutor relationship, which cannot be underestimated at* [intermediate] *level.*

- *The learning process is dynamic and interactive where change is the only constant state. Sometimes it is the relationship that changes and not the people in it. It's what's happening between them that counts and at what stage this is.* [For example] *the role of an authoritarian may work for a while but may soon become counter-productive to retention and achievement.*

East Surrey College

Student motivation

Student centredness means paying due attention to student motivation. This is not a new finding and several approaches to increasing student motivation have been reviewed elsewhere (Martinez 1997, Martinez 2000). What is perhaps different is the degree of emphasis on this issue in some of the case studies.

Improved student motivation is the key to improving students' achievement and retention rates.
West Hertfordshire College

Improving student motivation seems to have four broad meanings in the case studies:

- democratic: by sharing decisions and responsibilities with students
- affective: by paying attention to the emotional dimensions of learning
- cognitive: by developing students' learning skills and their experience of successful achievement
- social: by extending support for students through their parents and peers.

Efforts to give students greater choice and include students as partners in a shared process of learning have already been mentioned.

The affective dimension relates to a number of different interventions, which range from positive feedback and praise to more experimental techniques derived from counselling practice. Thus, colleges emphasise the affective component of learning (Palmer's College) and the need for praise and encouragement to develop self-confidence and a feeling of being valued (West Hertfordshire College).

An innovative approach to the emotional dimension of learning is being pioneered at Knowsley Community College. This takes the form of 'motivational interviewing' (MI). This technique was developed initially in counselling and therapeutic practice. The college has adopted it for use with de-motivated and at-risk students. Features of the technique are summarised on page 21.

KNOWSLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Motivational interviewing

The basic principle of motivational interviewing is that students will only be motivated to change their behaviour when they acknowledge a problem, recognise that it applies to them, know what action to take and decide that the advantages of the new behaviour outweigh the losses/difficulties associated with making a change.

MI involves assessing the student's current stage of thinking about problem behaviour (eg poor attendance) and acting to move him/her through the stages of change as quickly as possible.

Motivational interviews last 15–20 minutes with a three-to-four week interval between the two sessions.

Methods used by the interviewer are focused around drawing the student into making self-motivational statements, rather than trying to convince him/her to accept the interviewer's point of view.

The cognitive approach to motivation is associated with curriculum re-design and, in particular, to a combination of **highly structured, suitably paced and progressive schemes for teaching, allied with formative assessment and feedback**. At first sight, there might seem to be a conflict between the affective and cognitive approaches to motivation. In fact, the two approaches are complementary.

Rigorous monitoring and follow up of absence, for example, can co-exist perfectly well with strategies to praise and support students, and to celebrate their success. In the same way, discipline and structure can help students to succeed (and hence become more motivated) by clarifying expectations and requirements.

- [students] *need clear policies/procedures/instructions. They need to know exactly what is expected of them*
- [they] *need to know the 'total picture' and their final goal.*

West Hertfordshire College

The Middlesbrough College case study focuses on a cross-college strategy to implement formative value-added processes across the A-level curriculum. The case study emphasises the crucial role of the subject tutor in motivating students. Students will be motivated by success through continual feedback on how to improve.

At the very heart of a successful achievement strategy the student develops the ability to question and understand the process of how to improve. Passive acceptance of 'you will need to do better' is next to useless. Students must be able to ascertain how they can improve by realistic small steps and thus the interview time … is critical. Students cannot accept bland, broad statements, oral and written, that provide no clear direction. Skills necessary for each subject area have to be identified and [within] *the inclusive learning initiative, the understanding of learning styles and the implementation of consequent teaching approaches, will assist this process.*

Middlesbrough College

Strategies to reinforce mutual, peer support are emphasised in a number of case studies, notably those from East Surrey and Redcar and Cleveland colleges, which discuss team-building and group ethos, and peer facilitation, observation and feedback. Other colleges place greater emphasis on a need to involve parents as part of a support and motivational network for their children (Middlesbrough, Winstanley, Enfield, Ridge Danyers and Bradford colleges).

The focus on student motivation also relates to a sense of identity and place. An important aspect of a general duty of care and support with colleges is giving students a sense of identity and belonging.

> [It is important to] … *work hard at giving each student a sense of identification with the department and subject area; in larger institutions students need a sense of place; it is part of the role of tutors within departments to provide this.*
> Colchester Sixth Form College

A culture of high expectations

The further principle of 'student centredness' which emerges from the case studies might be termed 'culture' or 'ethos'. Practitioners interpret this in many different ways but two seem particularly prominent. First there is the teacher and tutor expectation that students can succeed and rise to challenges.

> *To achieve improved student performance, the college needs to have high expectations of both staff and students, and these expectations have to be conveyed to students from the beginning (preferably from the first point of contact).*
> Hugh Baird College

Second, there is what might be termed 'symbolic action' from tutors, teachers, managers and principals. The 'symbolic action' reinforces the message that students not only can achieve but that this is the fundamental purpose and reason for the existence of the college (eg Greenhead College, Carmel College).

The concepts of culture and ethos are elusive and difficult to analyse at the best of times. Some of the case studies provide valuable insights into ways of realising a culture of high expectations. Several case studies focus on target setting and value added systems. These are seen as a significant way of **creating high expectations among teachers for their students, creating both minimum and stretching targets for students and emphasising strongly the importance of achievement and application**. The Learning and Skills Development Agency has recently produced a report that reviews college approaches to target setting and value added (Martinez 2001).

Carmel College provides an example of a strategy designed to create a culture of expectation and application among students through a value-added system (minimum target grades, regular review of and updating of objectives, and parental involvement). This is reinforced by what might be termed 'symbolic action' on the part of the principal.

> *Inculcating a culture among students of self-awareness and self-improvement, using the opportunities available, is an important attitude we aim to convey through the* [formative value added] *review system. Furthermore, the use of* [the A-level information system] *ALIS gives an indication of 'over achievement' … as well as under achievement. The Principal gives verbal praise to high achievers and sends home letters of congratulations.*
> Carmel College

The case study from Solihull Sixth Form College describes a series of linked interventions to develop the curriculum and refocus teaching strategies. This led to the transformation of the ethos and atmosphere of the department.

> *We feel that we have shown that students will rise to the challenge of being challenged and produce fully analytical work at a far earlier stage than received wisdom will allow. Equally, teachers' fears of letting go and reducing the didactic, teacher-centred and controlled learning approach are unfounded. Students can be trusted to take increasing responsibility for what they learn and will learn in a variety of ways if given the opportunity, including from their peers … Additionally, all of us – staff and students alike – benefit from working in a department where most students are enthusiastic about their lessons and the subject, and have an expectation of success and progress, and where there is a buzz about the place.*
> Solihull Sixth Form College

Several strategies were employed to achieve this outcome including curriculum re-design, formative assessment and feedback, differentiation, active learning, attention to teaching and learning styles, exam preparation, the development of specific learning skills, the introduction of modular courses and compulsory course work. None of these strategies is in itself particularly unusual or innovative. The case study as a whole, however, provides an exceptionally detailed example of the systematic and reasoned application of a battery of strategies to raise achievement within a particular context. It gives a specific meaning to a rather fluid and elusive concept by conveying a flavour of the transformed ethos of the history department and a step-by-step analysis of how this was achieved.

KEY MESSAGES
Putting students first

Putting students first represents the most widely expressed component of efforts to raise achievement and improve retention.

Colleges emphasise the importance of involving students as individuals through tutoring, teaching, feedback and coaching.

Putting students first is also associated with the view that the learning process is shared.

The shared nature of learning extends from formal mechanisms for consultation, through curriculum design and choice to intuitive and spontaneous interactions within teaching and learning sessions.

Improving retention and achievement usually involves strategies to improve student motivation.

Motivational strategies include a wide variety of approaches with affective, cognitive and social dimensions.

Valuing students as individuals implies that teachers and tutors have the highest expectations of their progress.

A culture or ethos of high expectation is expressed through a mixture of target setting, 'symbolic action' on the part of managers and teachers and the redesign of curriculum and teaching.

Leadership issues

<div style="text-align: right; font-size: 3em; font-weight: bold;">5</div>

Most of the case studies contain reflections on leadership issues along the following main themes:

- whole college leadership and strategy
- the shared nature of college improvement processes
- the importance of teams.

Whole-college leadership and strategy

An eye-catching slogan for the whole college theme can be found in the Burnley College case study: 'Think college, act course!'

The point made by a number of senior managers is that to raise achievement throughout a college, strategies need a cross-college dimension and strong support by senior managers.

> *A whole-college approach is required to make a significant impact on serious issues such as generally poor retention rates and highly variable achievement. Small, localised initiatives may be successful in raising student performance in a given area, but there is no automatic 'trickle down' effect to other areas of the college.*
> Hugh Baird College

> *It is vital for senior management to drive such a large-scale initiative from the front.*
> Winstanley College

> *Major change within colleges requires absolute commitment and clear vision from senior managers.*
> Middlesbrough College

A further meaning of the whole college approach is that general strategies are of limited value unless course teams develop, own and embed their own strategies. This is the 'Act course!' part of the slogan. **Without the involvement of curriculum teams, improvements will be small or non-existent**.

One of the key learning points from the Peterborough College case study is that 'generalised' cross-college strategies have been exhausted. The next stage for the college will locate developments within course teams and require course teams to tell senior managers what they see as key issues and develop actions for continued improvement.

In Accrington and Rossendale College, some of the general, broad-based approaches did not tackle retention issues adequately within specific subjects. The college concluded that it needed to:

- analyse key factors within different subject areas
- analyse grades on entry against retention within specific subjects
- develop more sophisticated diagnostic tools for specific subjects.

Similarly, 'bolt-on' initiatives will only be of limited value. This seems to imply the rejection of cross-college initiatives that are not integrated with existing systems and processes. It also suggests that initiatives that leave the core areas of curriculum and teaching untouched are unlikely to be successful. Substantial improvement will only be gained within courses and programmes.

> *The strategy has been a college strategy, led by a senior member of staff, reported to the governors and management team on a routine basis and has figured in annual reports and strategic targets. There has never been any doubt that this has been … a college policy, however it has been driven at the level of the course.*
> Peterborough Regional College

A number of senior college managers identified a need for **energetic and consistent leadership** to overcome inertia and conflicting priorities. This can apply even to strategies to share and disseminate good practice. Without continuing support from senior college managers, such efforts can run into a barrier of defensiveness (Hugh Baird College).

Leadership to raise achievement is not merely concerned with planning and starting activity. Where change is significant, senior managers will need to provide continuing support and pressure to 'Think college' until the change is embedded.

> *The major learning point from the exercise of implementing a new tutorial system has been that … the implementation of the process needs managing and monitoring over some time in order for the new approach to become embedded in the culture of the organisation.*
> Sutton Coldfield College

> *Keeping middle managers on track with strategic issues and preventing them from sinking in operational firefighting is also essential. So often when opportunities arise to improve or change, the individual manager drowns in a sea of detail, class cover and paperwork. If they cannot see the whole picture, do not expect the whole picture to improve.*
> Dudley College

These observations were made almost exclusively by senior managers and reflect their strategic and cross-college orientation. The same senior managers also make the point, however, that the process of raising achievement will almost certainly be shared between themselves, teachers and other staff.

The shared nature of college improvement processes

> *Improvements in staff motivation may be a key to improvement in student motivation.*
> West Herts College

> *You have to take staff with you…*
> Dudley College

If senior managers tend to emphasise the importance of strategy, policy and leadership from the top, they also emphasise the shared nature of the enterprise. This finding is moreover echoed in a large quantitative research project led by the Learning and Skills Development Agency. In the quantitative research, relatively strong correlations have been established between student satisfaction, retention and achievement and staff satisfaction with the quality of leadership and management in their college (Owen and Davies 2001). The congruence of the qualitative and quantitative research findings is particularly significant. It suggests strongly that exclusively 'top down' or 'managerialist' approaches are not as widespread as has sometimes been supposed (Randle and Brady 1997, Robson 1998). It further suggests that such top-down approaches are unlikely to lead to college improvement.

This emphasis on a shared approach is voiced most fully in the case studies written by senior managers. It finds a strong echo, however, in the views of operational managers and team leaders. Reasons given for a shared approach differ from college to college, but seem to boil down to the following:

- improved problem diagnosis and planning
- better staff motivation
- overcoming inertia and scepticism
- acknowledging boundaries
- securing coherence across the college
- better communications.

A shared approach helps to achieve better outcomes because more perspectives are brought to bear, more knowledge can be shared and problem diagnosis will be improved. In some colleges, this shared process was embedded in task or working groups.

We felt it important to emphasise the involvement of everyone concerned …
a network of individuals – lecturers, tutors, programme coordinators, curriculum
managers and MIS staff contribute to this system.
East Durham and Houghall Community College

Liaison with and the involvement of personal tutors, curriculum managers and
other teaching and support staff is vital to the introduction of cross-college initiatives.
Skelmersdale College

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology sums up the key learning points from an initiative to develop student support:

- the working group model proved effective in gaining understanding of the issues, agreement, ownership and commitment

- in order for the model to work, staff have to be allocated time to participate; there need to be clear terms of reference [and] an action plan and targets to be published

- dissemination formally by the participants to the whole college as well as informally within their schools helps to give weight to the proposals.

Case studies strongly urged the need to enthuse, motivate and encourage staff.

Staff need support in making a major cultural shift. This cannot be understated and
must be provided within a sympathetic understanding of the internal struggle many
face. It can be expected that some staff will oppose change; others, though, can more
easily accept and even embrace the need for change. They need every bit of support
in being confident to voice their approval.
Nelson and Colne College

The other side of encouraging staff motivation is overcoming possible resistance and exhaustion. In the senior managers' reports, a shared approach to college improvement was seen as a significant way of achieving these objectives.

> *The involvement of curriculum staff in defining additional student entitlement within their own areas, contributed to commitment of their delivery.*
> Skelmersdale College

> *The importance of consultation cannot be over-emphasised as this was the key lever to containing buy-in from staff. It also allows for good practice to be recognised and shared.*
> Lambeth College

This is put in a slightly different way in a case study from Brighton College of Technology. In the context of trying to introduce cross-college changes within existing structures and resources, the author advises: 'never fall prey to the temptation to bypass the niceties of formal, old-style FE consultation'.

The 'boundary' issue is another way of expressing both the different roles and mutual dependence of teachers and other staff and managers. This was expressed in two ways by some of the senior college managers. They recognised that the implementation of improvement strategies 'depends on the enthusiasm and goodwill of staff' (North Tyneside College). They also acknowledge, however, the distinctive contribution that they can make in terms of policies, systems and framework.

> ● *A sustained policy focus on raising standards of student achievement combined with comprehensive, accurate data provides a good framework for course teams to raise achievement rates.*

> ● *The framework needs to be set initially by the senior management team and needs to become a constant pre-occupation for the college.*

> *Staff need to feel that poor retention and achievement are not acceptable, but managers are interested in making improvements and not apportioning blame.*
> Henley College, Coventry

A similar point is made in the Peterborough College case study: **teachers and managers have different but complementary contributions** to make. The former provide high quality tutorials, targeted additional learning support and the rapid follow up of poor attendance. The latter provide support and programme statistics to enable teams to reflect on and analyse their own levels of achievement in areas such as retention.

Colleges – even small colleges – are complex organisations of professionals who have a high degree of discretion in their work. Senior and middle managers identified a shared approach as the best way of ensuring that the whole really is more and not less than the sum of its parts.

> *The critical importance of having a cross-college management group, such as Support Tutor Action Group (STAG) and securing the appropriate membership structure could not be emphasised more strongly. It has been instrumental in securing coherent management, delivery and necessary training and staff support…*
> West Cheshire College

A shared approach both underpins and facilitates good communication. The importance of communication to successful implementation of change is emphasised in several case studies. Indeed one of the smallest colleges that took part in the first round of development projects concluded that effective communication links should not be assumed even in a small institution (Capel Manor College). A parallel conclusion was drawn in one of the largest colleges concerning the need for a variety of modes of communication (City and Islington College).

The importance of teams

In contrast to the case studies written by senior managers, case studies written by heads of departments or programme or course leaders give much greater prominence to effective teamwork. These comments fall into two main types: the purposes and goals of teams and the means by which teams can be effective.

In terms of purpose, teams are seen as a logical grouping of teachers or support staff to **negotiate, set and achieve improvement targets**.

Teams should set realistic targets for improvement year by year, monitor them termly and adopt action plans to keep the course 'on target'.
Barnet College

Teams need to feel ownership of targets and accept them as quality tools and not burdens.
North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Targets are meaningless, however, unless they emerge from a process of critical reflection and review and serve as a prompt for further planning and activity. The second purpose of teams, therefore, is to **secure improvements or maintain high quality** (Lewisham College). Providing there is a safe and supportive ethos in a team, 'it is possible to confront problems, address them and move on' (West Hertfordshire College).

Among the many lessons learnt, the key one was the importance of the ownership of strategies by course teams, who realised that they themselves could affect retention, rather than seeing retention as affected by the action of others.
College of North East London

Teamworking from within is more likely to generate successful strategies than imposition from management and can be the basis for successful staff development.
West Kent College

A third purpose of teams is to **provide professional and personal support** for team members (Lewisham, Redcar and Cleveland colleges).

Teaching can be a lonely profession. Course teams provide an opportunity **to share good practice, explore problems and resolve difficulties.**

Ensuring **coherence and the coordination of teaching and the administration and organisation of courses** is the fourth major purpose of teams in the case studies. The Bradford College case study emphasises this aspect of teamwork in particular. Students become at best cynical and at worst confused if they receive different treatment from different members of staff. It is therefore important that 'all lecturers follow the same procedure with regard to the absence system or in the completion of individual subject reviews which are sent to personal tutors' (Bradford College). The Redcar and Cleveland case study is particularly detailed in its treatment of this aspect of team performance.

How can teams become more effective?

According to the case study writers, some of the most important building blocks for effective teams are mechanisms to regulate team behaviour: structured and regular meetings, minutes of action points and ongoing review of progress (Brockenhurst College, Telford College of Arts and Technology, Enfield College).

According to the Great Yarmouth case study involving two different teams, the importance of the mechanics of teamwork should not be underestimated. The most rapid development occurred in the team that:

- had more regular meetings
- created greater opportunities for informal meetings
- developed and worked to a structured plan
- was relatively small.

The less successful team was larger, met irregularly, lacked a common plan of action and suffered from poor attendance at some meetings.

An effective team requires energy and motivation (Lewisham College). More than this, it needs a team 'ethos' or 'culture'. What this seems to mean in practice is:

- a democratic and participative style of team leadership
- shared ownership of problems and possible solutions
- a commitment to other team members and to team goals (West Herts College).

On a practical note, just as effective teams share problems and solutions, they will also need to share resources.

REDCAR AND CLEVELAND COLLEGE
case study continued

Building a resource bank, using and coordinating existing resources with new materials came about as a result of sharing experiences and discussions about the content and delivery of each of the courses. It became apparent that tutors had individually developed resource materials to aid their teaching and delivery. The respect demonstrated for part-timers' materials and experiences naturally led to the sharing of materials and to the coordination of existing resources. Materials were updated by combining ideas.

Teams can be effective only if part-time members are fully integrated into the team and valued as team members.

REDCAR AND CLEVELAND COLLEGE
case study continued

By being involved in team meetings, evaluation and review, part-time staff have opportunities to share ideas they wish to develop and discuss working practices. They have opportunities to develop and negotiate their roles and responsibilities within the department.

The final aspect of creating effective teams relates to their composition and diversity. Two slightly different interpretations are given:

- It is desirable to put together teams with the optimum mix of skills and qualities among their members (Hopwood Hall College).
- Diverse and multi-skilled teams will be more effective for cross-college initiatives (Basford Hall College).

Leadership issues

Improvements will not occur across a college without a cross-college strategy, strongly supported by senior managers.

This implies a need to 'Think college, act course!'.

Significant change requires energetic, consistent and continuing leadership.

Successful college improvements are based on processes that are more often shared than top down.

Shared processes can be informal or embedded within representative working or steering groups.

Shared processes are associated with improvements to staff motivation and commitment, a greater willingness to adopt change, greater coherence and improved communications.

Programme and team leaders tend to emphasise the importance of teamwork and effective teams.

The main purposes of teams are to set and achieve targets, secure and maintain high quality student experiences, provide professional and personal support and coordinate teaching and administration.

Teams can be made more effective by developing a team ethos, fully integrating part-time team members and paying attention to the 'building blocks' of regular and well-run team meetings.

Professional development

6

The importance of staff and professional development in strategies to improve retention has been signalled elsewhere (Martinez et al 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that both senior managers and teachers agreed on its significance for their own projects. Several meanings were associated with professional development.

Professional development is regarded as an integral part of strategies to raise achievement (Greenhead, Holy Cross, Bede, South Birmingham, Sutton Coldfield, Isle, Sir George Monoux, Shrewsbury Sixth Form, New College – Swindon, Nelson and Colne and Kendal colleges).

The primary focus of staff development for teachers is on learning and teaching. This finding is very similar to that made in an extensive survey of business studies teachers and curriculum managers (Martinez 1999).

> *Teachers want to engage in ongoing debates about pedagogical issues and refine their teaching skills.*
> Ridge Danyers College

> *Staff development programmes (linked to peer lesson observation), encourage departments to explore learning and teaching.*
> Sir George Monoux College

The most effective professional development has what might be termed an 'action orientation', where the action addresses specific problems. This emerges most clearly in the Lambeth College case study. Here, tutoring arrangements were supported by training derived from a very precise needs analysis rather than 'a more traditional approach providing skills training which does not necessarily transfer into work in practice'. The outcome was a 'radical clarification of the purpose of tutorials'.

Staff development does not only take the form of training. Involvement in **self-assessment and teaching observations, particularly peer observations, are powerful forms of staff development**.

The sharing of good practice is facilitated through a quality assurance system which has assessment of teaching and learning against agreed criteria at its heart. We have also found that the discussions following an observation can be very rewarding in terms of identifying and sharing of good practice and we intend to focus on this as a development area.

Ridge Danyers College

…raising the quality of the learning experience by peer observation, the sharing of good practice and honest self-assessment.

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Staff development is itself an ongoing process. New development needs emerge as the context of improvement initiatives changes.

With 20/20 vision, we would have done more staff training. However, in practice, it has been the process of trial and error that has clarified what teacher development is needed.

Burton upon Trent College

Finally, staff development is not a passive process. It requires openness to new ideas, **active participation and learning** and willingness to experiment with, and transfer, new learning to the classroom or workshop.

In considering ways of managing change in teaching and learning, we had to ensure that teachers themselves go through the very same learning cycles that the students should, if they are to learn effectively. They should also learn within a motivational context, interact with others, be active in their learning and build on their existing knowledge and expertise.

Holy Cross College

KEY MESSAGES
Professional development

Professional development is an integral part of strategies to raise achievement.

The primary focus of professional development for teachers is teaching and learning.

Professional development for college improvement has an action orientation and may take many forms besides training.

Professional development needs to change and evolve as the context of improvement initiatives changes.

Effective professional development for college staff resembles teaching to promote effective learning by students.

Systems for college improvement

7

Systems do not achieve; they only provide a structure within which people flourish – or not.
Carmel College

Practitioners, whether teachers or managers, are virtually unanimous in their emphasis on the need for effective systems to support student learning, track student progress, coordinate improvement efforts across the college, and avoid unnecessary waste of resources (including teachers' time). Learning points about systems fall mainly into three areas:

- general observations
- quality assurance
- information systems.

Perhaps the most striking interpretation of systems is that they are not important in themselves but rather as a **means to an end in improving achievement**.

'Monitoring', 'reviewing', 'advocating' and a commitment to continuous improvement are not passive activities or empty phrases: they pre-suppose energy, will and determination to change unsatisfactory practice.
Winstanley College

A logical extension of this perspective is that systems will only be as good as the people who run them. This would apply to all systems but particularly to those, like tutoring, which need to involve learners directly.

Whatever systems are put in place, the initial identification of the right people for the job is paramount … most important … are the personal and professional attributes of those appointed. The application, motivation and capacity for self-starting have made the role essentially what it is and sold an originally little understood job – super tutors – to the vast majority of staff.
West Cheshire College

Further, **systems will not work unless they inspire trust in their users**. Trust, in this context, implies more than a need for transparency and faith. It seems rather to relate to the real purpose of systems and whether they serve the needs of college staff and students. In the words of Doncaster College, 'Everyone needs to see and benefit from the systems so they participate in and own them'.

Nowhere is this more relevant than in relation to register and attendance procedures. Ultimately, such procedures depend on teachers to operate them. To secure their wholehearted commitment, teachers need to be supplied with timely, accurate and useful information. By implication this will help them to see the purpose of registration and student tracking procedures (Enfield College).

Quality assurance

Quality assurance represents one of the two systems which were associated strongly with raising achievement. Indeed, several cross-college case studies gave accounts of improve- ment efforts based directly on their college's quality assurance system. The three main themes to emerge are the:

- central importance of quality assurance systems to improvement strategies
- key components of quality assurance systems
- importance of 'hands-on' management.

The Holy Cross case study presents the detailed outcomes of an investigation into quite different achievement and retention performance in two similar A-level courses.

This investigation unearthed important quality management issues. What emerged from my analysis was the need for a coherent quality system in relation to teaching and learning, the need to set agreed quality standards within areas, to redefine our existing performance indicators and to set targets for improvement.
Holy Cross College

Similar points emerge from other case studies.

Improvement in quality assurance procedures and compliance with these is an essential factor.
Leeds College of Art and Design

Both rigour and support should be key features of a quality assurance system. If self-assessment is to be meaningful it needs to be regular and part of the planning process.
Ridge Danyers College

In terms of the key components of quality assurance systems, comments from managers reflect a broad consensus between colleges that the heart of any quality assurance system will comprise:

- agreed standards
- performance indicators
- improvement targets
- a calendar of activity (Holy Cross College, Farnborough College).

One learning point made by practitioners which was not anticipated – at least by the author – concerns the importance of direct supervision and intervention on the part of managers.

Face-to-face meetings between subject area heads and senior managers have invigorated the self-assessment process and avoided the feeling that self-assessment is simply a paper chase and then the paper disappears down a black hole.
Shrewsbury Sixth Form College

Where strategies were closely monitored by a manager, they appear to be more effective.
College of North East London

Information systems

Good information is the key to sound quality assurance systems
(no one can argue with sound data).
Ridge Danyers College

In contrast to the pervasive references to quality assurance systems driving improvement strategies, only one college – Rotherham College of Arts and Technology – created a strategy that involved a detailed and explicit focus on information systems. Practitioners do have strong views, however, on the subject and these are expressed in a number of the case studies.

The Rotherham case study provides a very useful account of efforts extending over several years to reform and revitalise the college's management information system (MIS). The four key learning points that emerged from this experience are set out below.

- *Turning a college management information system round takes three years or more.*

- *Kit and software are necessary, but they pale into insignificance compared with the human factor.*

- *If senior managers aren't prepared, indeed keen, to give consistent drive and support – then forget it.*

- *Things will get worse before they get better; the first years involve stone turning.*

Rotherham College of Arts and Technology

More general points concerning information systems emerge almost in passing, often in relation to improvement strategies that are directed towards curriculum development and change. The four key themes remarked on by practitioners are:

- purpose
- importance
- requirements
- problems of structure.

On most points, practitioners' views tend to bear out findings from parallel research conducted by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (Owen 2000).

The overriding purpose of the college's MIS should be to serve the management and improvement needs of the college. The general principle should be to define and meet the college's own information needs first and then to ensure that the resulting system satisfies the requirements of external inspection and funding agencies (City College Norwich).

Once this prerequisite has been achieved, information can become a key element in supporting quality improvement strategies.

Improving the quality of course performance data improves the quality
of self-assessment.
Ridge Danyers College

We now use the substantive evidence and accurate data to evaluate difficulties
rather than rely on anecdotal evidence, so much the history of further education.
Dudley College

Several requirements need to be met if information systems are to support improvement efforts. These include:

- wide access to the data (Doncaster College)
- accurate and timely information (East Durham and Houghall Community College)
- information in a form that can be readily used (Sir George Monoux College).

A further aspect of information systems relates to what might be termed 'structural problems'. Anecdotal evidence from colleges suggests that misunderstanding, mistrust or even mutual recrimination may strain relations between MIS and teaching staff. Where the central information system supports and assists the implementation of improvement strategies, it can lessen administrative demands on teachers, facilitate change and encourage good working relationships within the college (Middlesbrough College).

KEY MESSAGES
Systems for college improvement

In the context of college improvement, systems are a valuable means to the end of improving retention and achievement.

The technical requirements of systems are far less important than the 'human factor'.

The two college systems that are most closely related to improvement strategies are quality assurance and information systems.

Quality assurance systems benefit from a continued hands-on approach by senior managers.

Information systems need to serve internal purposes first, external purposes second.

Information systems can support improvement strategies as long as they provide wide access to data and accurate and timely information in a user-friendly format.

The more widely college staff are consulted about the design and operation of quality assurance and information systems, the more effective such systems will be.

Investing in achievement: resources and research

8

Be prepared to resource changes.
City and Islington College

The investment recommended most often by practitioners is 'time'. Four different meanings are associated with this aspect of resourcing:

- contact time for students
- working time for teachers and tutors
- development time
- implementation time.

Given the very substantial reductions in time available to teach – in particular on full-time courses, it is perhaps surprising that none of the case study writers urges a return to previous levels of taught hours. On the other hand, in specific contexts and for specific purposes, extra contact time is required to improve achievement:

- more staff hours to allow one-to-one sessions with subject tutors, as students rarely seek to discuss problems spontaneously – a trigger or opportunity is usually needed (Bradford College)

- more time for an enhanced tutoring system (Enfield College)

- extra class time for an English as an Additional Language (EAL) course to allow Muslim women part-time students to achieve accreditation (Nelson and Colne College)

- time for additional learning support for specific groups of students (Sir George Monoux College).

Working time can involve reassuring teachers that they will not be disadvantaged by adopting a more flexible approach to their teaching. Telford College of Arts and Technology radically re-structured its curriculum, substituting learner-managed for teaching time every sixth week. The innovation is designed to meet the learning needs of students. It was accepted all the more readily by teachers because it did not involve any reduction in their recorded contact time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, some colleges acknowledge that workload and responsibilities are increasing, particularly in relation to tutoring. This creates a need either to review time allocation or tutor priorities or, sometimes, both.

Token gestures towards individual interviews by subject staff and tutors must be avoided. Time needs to be built into the subject provision as well as the tutorial in order to achieve this section of the process. It will not work if tutors are expected to do this with no concessions at all. Some will find time, others will not, especially once absentees confuse the whole process. We have identified a week built into the whole reporting pattern where it is expected that the series of interviews monitoring progress is completed. Recognition also must be given to staff who write (after negotiation with each individual student) thorough reports on progress which, in effect, become action frames.

Middlesbrough College

The third aspect of time relates to investing in staff time to undertake development work, for example in the maths projects at City and Islington College.

A number of practitioners remarked that there are no 'quick fixes', that changes need time to be implemented and to show results, and that spreading 'good practice in teaching and learning is a slow process' (respectively Leeds College of Arts and Design, City and Islington College, Shrewsbury Sixth Form College).

Relatively few college managers explicitly refer to money in their learning points. Two interpretations can be suggested. Given the declining levels of resources in many colleges in the late 1990s, it seems likely that colleges needed to invent improvement strategies that did not require significant extra resources. Equally, the very focus on teaching and curriculum interventions would tend to emphasise the importance of resourcing student and teacher time rather than identifying money resources. Both interpretations are broadly compatible with evidence from the case studies. Thus, the one case study that does refer to significant money resources, involved the expenditure of a relatively large sum (£100,000) to help meet student travel costs (Derby Tertiary College, Wilmorton).

The further resource that is commended by – mainly senior – practitioners is administrative. This relates primarily to the use of administrative staff to support teachers and more often tutors.

The use of the administrator to help with the tracking of student attendance has been vital, especially as we have no electronic methods for tracking attendance. She has alerted the personal tutor to unsatisfactory attendance patterns as subject tutors are slow to advise of missed lessons. It was especially useful to use the same member of staff to process the UCAS paperwork as she was already familiar with the students both from personal contact and from register checks.

Great Yarmouth College

College-based research

The case for the importance of college-based research as a foundation for strategies to raise achievement and improve retention has been argued elsewhere (Martinez 2000). Such research features in a number of the case study accounts of improvement strategies with a wide range of meanings. Research seems to have been undertaken for four main purposes:

- problem diagnosis and formulation
- problem solving and decision making
- learning from others and sharing good practice
- to inspire action.

Thus, a number of managers associate their own or their college's research efforts with understanding the nature of the problem, usually drop-out or student failure.

> *Knowing why we lose students, knowing when we lose students and knowing what effect, if any, our actions have, has been the key to all our activity.*
> Burnley College

Problem formulation is not necessarily straightforward. Shrewsbury Sixth Form College remarks: '…it has been difficult to collect reliable data on students who have left the college – their real reasons for leaving – though we do have information as to their stated reason for leaving'. The problem here is that information provided by students may not be accurate. A further aspect of the problems of research is that information may be accurate but misleading: 'Statistics are not enough; they have to be put in the context of the whole experience.' (Doncaster College)

Assuming that these difficulties can be overcome, the second meaning associated with research is that it can provide an aid to problem solving and decision making. Both practitioners and managers look for research to provide hard evidence on which to base improvement strategies. Such evidence will displace, 'surmise' and 'anecdote'. Indeed, there seems to be a double implication here. On the one hand, research will serve to challenge complacency; on the other it will point to strategies for improvement (City of Bath, Palmer's colleges).

A number of colleges undertook a search for transferable successful practice. Typical approaches involved a literature search, networking with another or other colleges, and facilitating the exchange of information concerning effective strategies internally. These types of research were usually carried out separately but occasionally in combination.

College-based research is not primarily an academic exercise to be conducted for its own sake. Rather, it implies a predisposition to action. This is implicit in the meanings discussed above but managers make the point explicitly in some of the case studies. Useful data needs to be identified and then communicated widely across the college (West Kent College). Furthermore, it is not only ineffective, it may be distinctly counter-productive to engage in research without a commitment to make changes in the light of the outcomes of the research (Doncaster College).

Can strategies be transferred?

This is the big question. In the main, managers and teachers are confident that their learning and experience can be transferred to other colleges. Where improvement projects are based on specific courses or programmes, practitioners also believe that they can be transferred to other areas within the college.

> *All of the strategies employed could be (and probably are) used in other colleges.*
> East Durham and Houghall Community College College

> *The strategies employed within the Hairdressing and Beauty Section are easily transferred into other curriculum areas. Hospitality and Catering tutors have adopted similar strategies and have experienced similar improvements in retention and achievement.*
> North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

A number of practitioners had some reservations about, or established parameters for, transfer. In the main these set limits to the transfer of successful practice:

- selection of strategies relevant to specific problems
- establishing a fit between strategy and internal capability
- adapting and customising strategies.

The first limit is selection. Case study writers acknowledge that some aspects of their experience will transfer more readily than others. For one college, it was the changes to its tutorial system that would be most easy to transfer (Capel Manor College); for another, it was a strategic policy focus on standards and high quality data (Henley College, Coventry). For a third, it was a new entry-level programme, timetabling, monitoring of student attendance and behaviour but not 'the stage of college development' (Burton on Trent College). This implies a requirement on the part of providers seeking to learn from others. In essence, they will need to be selective and give active and critical consideration as to which strategies, or parts of strategies might be borrowed from elsewhere. Presumably they will need to make particular reference to the sorts of problems that are being addressed and also the fit between the solutions and their own context.

Context creates a second limit. Some case studies identify prerequisites for the transfer of experience. The Henley College focus on policy would require 'appropriate support from the senior management team and a good management information section' to be replicated elsewhere (Henley College, Coventry). This suggests that colleges will need to consider whether they have the capability to implement a strategy developed in another institution.

The third limit – or perhaps this should be opportunity – relates to the need to adapt strategies developed elsewhere. According to the senior managers who made this point, strategies need to be adapted to suit local circumstances, needs and distinctive ways of doing things (respectively North Tyneside and Carmel colleges).

One relatively small college (Shrewsbury Sixth Form College) noted that even within a mainly A-level curriculum, 'there are issues regarding the transferability of teaching and learning styles between subjects'. This third limit implies the need for a willingness to commit time and energy to the process of adaptation.

KEY MESSAGES
Investing in achievement

Contact time for students and time for teaching and tutoring staff represent the two resources for college improvement that are mentioned most frequently.

Extra contact time for students needs to be allocated on a case-by-case basis.

Time needs to be found to research, plan, design and implement improvement strategies.

Money and administrative resources were identified as important elements of strategies to improve retention, but by a relatively small number of colleges.

Research can be seen as a further investment to support improvement efforts.

Research for improvement is undertaken to formulate problems, identify solutions, learn from others and inspire action.

Case study writers are confident that the learning from their experiences can be transferred to other contexts.

The transfer of successful improvement strategies is a creative and active process.
To learn from the experience of others, colleges need to select strategies that are relevant and fit with their own context and capabilities.

Time and energy need to be committed to adapting strategies developed elsewhere.

Conclusions

Practitioners associated a number of meanings with their efforts to raise achievement and improve retention. At the risk of over-simplification and over-interpretation, several broad conclusions can be drawn.

Improving retention and achievement is not 'rocket science'. It is not about re-inventing teaching or principles of curriculum design. It is rather about how to select and apply these principles in specific contexts.

College improvement is about putting students first by valuing them as individuals and by paying attention to the affective dimensions of learning. It is also about striking the right balance between high expectations, on the one hand, and seeking to develop, reinforce and deepen student motivation on the other.

As might be expected, senior managers tend to associate college improvement with strong leadership, cross-college strategies, policies and structure. Team and programme leaders tend to locate improvement efforts in effective, skilled and supportive teams. Both groups, particularly the senior managers, emphasise the importance of shared approaches, where the efforts of teachers and managers are complementary.

Improvement implies development. Practitioners identify professional development not only as a means of enhancing and developing skill but also as a means of identifying issues, developing solutions, sharing effective practice and motivating staff.

Quality assurance and information systems are generally identified as ways of supporting improvement strategies. The emphasis consequently is on the people dimension of systems and their fitness to support college staff.

Resources for improvement are defined largely in terms of time: for students, for teaching and tutoring, for the development strategies and for their implementation. Research is also strongly associated with success in raising achievement. Research in this context is highly pragmatic and involves formulating problems, searching for possible solutions, sharing good practice and inspiring change.

Practitioners are optimistic that their experience can be learned from and can be transferred. This is not a passive process, however, it demands a skilled exercise of judgement to select and adapt strategies that have been developed elsewhere. This applies both to transfers between curriculum teams within the same college and, with even more force, to transfers between different colleges.

Finally, the teachers, tutors and managers whose views are described here have a strong belief that retention and achievement rates in colleges can be improved. This does not necessarily say anything about the sector as a whole, since the sample of colleges is self-selecting. This optimism does seem to be widely shared within the college sector. Around a fifth of all colleges were involved in this work. They included a number of colleges recruiting significant proportions of their students from deprived communities.

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Appendix

Alphabetical list of colleges which took part in round 1 of the RQA development projects

Accrington and Rossendale College
Barnet College of Further Education
Barnfield College
Barnsley College
Basford Hall College
Basildon College
Bede College
Bolton Sixth Form College
Boston College
Bradford College
Brighton College of Technology
Brockenhurst College
Burnley College
Burton College
Bury College
Capel Manor College
Carmel College
City and Islington College
City of Bath College
Colchester Sixth Form College
College of North East London
Coulsdon College
Derby College – Wilmorton
Doncaster College
Dudley College of Technology
East Devon College
East Durham and Houghall Community College
East Surrey College
Enfield College
Exeter College
Farnborough College of Technology
Gateshead College
Great Yarmouth College
Greenhead College
Halton College
Henley College, Coventry
Holy Cross College
Hopwood Hall College
Huddersfield New College
Hugh Baird College
Isle College

Kendal College
Kensington and Chelsea College
Kent Institute of Art and Design
King George V College, Southport
Knowsley Community College
Lambeth College
Lancaster and Morecambe College
Leeds College of Art and Design
Leeds College of Technology
Lewes Tertiary College
Lewisham College
Loughborough College
Middlesbrough College
Nelson and Colne College
New College – Swindon
North Hertfordshire College
North Tyneside College
North Warwickshire and Hinckley College
Norwich City College
Oldham College
Palmer's College
Peterborough Regional College
Redcar and Cleveland College
Regent College – Leicester
Richard Huish College
Ridge Danyers College
Rotherham College of Arts and Technology
Royal Forest of Dean College
Shrewsbury Sixth Form College
Sir George Monoux College
Skelmersdale College
Solihull Sixth Form College
South Birmingham College
South Devon College
South Nottingham College
Southwark College
Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College
Sutton Coldfield College
Telford College of Arts and Technology
Truro College
West Cheshire College
West Herts College
West Kent College
West Thames College
Winstanley College

What is college improvement? It is not about re-inventing
teaching or principles of curriculum design but rather about
how to select and apply these principles in specific contexts.
It is about putting students first and striking the right balance
between high expectations and deepening student motivation.
And teachers and managers all over the sector are confident
that they have discovered strategies that work, and can
be adapted and transferred.

Drawing on evidence from over 80 colleges, including
many with significant proportions of students from deprived
communities, this report summarises some of those successful
strategies to raise achievement and improve retention.
It gives a voice to the teachers, tutors, managers and
student services staff who have implemented strategies
to improve their college.