

REPORT OF THE REVIEW OF LEARNING AND SKILLS BEACON STATUS

Summary

This report sets out the results of the review of Learning and Skills Beacon status and the next steps to be taken. A number of significant changes have been agreed by Ministers including developing the innovation role of Beacons, and ensuring that, as models of excellence, they reflect the priorities of Success for All. The scope of the status has also been widened to include all LSC funded education and training that is inspected by Ofsted/ALI.

The fine detail of these changes is being developed. These will be finalised in November 2003 and an announcement will be made.

It is expected that the next awards will be made early in 2004, opening up the status to a wider range of providers across the learning and skills sector.

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Introduction

1. When Learning and Skills Beacon status was launched in March 2002, the Department made a commitment to carry out a review after the first full year of operation. Subsequently, in November 2002, the Success for All strategy was published setting out a reform strategy to raise standards, improve outcomes and increase participation in learning across the post 16 sector. The review therefore considered the role, benefits and selection of Beacon status providers in the light of a year's operation and also of these new policy priorities.
2. Following the review, Ministers have agreed changes to the Beacon role to reflect progress on Success for All and to reposition Beacons to play a critical role in taking forward innovation and leading edge development work in the sector.

Background

3. There are a number of ways of recognising excellence in post 16 learning, including Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) which focus on responsiveness to employers skills needs and the Association of Colleges has its own long-standing and highly valued Beacon Awards for particular curriculum or thematic areas, such as use of ICT or widening participation.
4. However, Learning and Skills Beacon status was designed to recognise excellent institutions that deliver high quality teaching and learning, and which demonstrate excellent or good leadership and management. As a condition of the status, Beacons are expected to share their good practice and participate in collaborative activities.
5. The original selection criteria for Beacon status were based on inspection evidence and the LSC's assessment of performance, including financial health, and the potential to share good practice and participate in collaborative activities. On the basis of this evidence, a recommendation for approval was made to Ministers.
6. In the first year of operation, Learning and Skills Beacon status was awarded to 25 providers. These included 13 colleges and 12 work-based learning providers. Only one Beacon is a General FE college and a further two are tertiary colleges. In work based learning, the majority of Beacons are employers which, in addition to their core business, deliver learning in single occupational areas, such as fire service and health care. One work based learning Beacon is a training provider.
7. While effective partnerships have been achieved, for example between SFCs and GFEs, there is currently a limited range of provider types to act as role models for the sector as a whole. It has generally been agreed that a broader mix of provider types could enable Beacons to have more impact across the sector.
8. It was against this background of a year's operation, with a limited mix of providers gaining the status, the potential for developing the role of Beacons, and the announcement of new policy priorities, that the review process was undertaken.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REVIEW

The following recommendations have been agreed by Ministers.

i) **Role of Learning and Skills Beacons**

9. It was agreed that to maximise the contribution of Beacons to raising standards in the sector we must ensure that their good practice has influence beyond their local partnerships. The Standards Unit regional network will provide a means of supporting and integrating Beacon activity within their broader good practice strategy and linking it to their national agenda. This will enable Beacons to engage proactively with good practice and improvement activities at a regional and national level as expert practitioners, and ensure that their good practice reaches the widest possible audience.

10. Meanwhile, the Standards Unit will also develop national linkages with Beacon providers through membership of the National Learning and Skills Beacon Forum, ensuring that Beacons develop their national role in good practice within the context of Standards Unit strategy.

11. Current and future Beacons are well placed to take forward leading edge activity in the sector, developing radical approaches that build on and go beyond Success for All priorities. Through the review, consideration was given to the role of Beacons in innovation, building on their good practice activity, as proposed by Success for All.

12. Beacons are institutions that are highly effective. As such, key characteristics are their capacity for reflection, self-criticism and commitment to continuous improvement. Many Beacons are finding that their involvement in good practice activity is generating fresh thinking on innovation that would contribute to and stimulate debate within the sector. These fresh approaches would also help meet the challenges of the post 16 agenda.

13. However, it is important to allow some flexibility for innovation to take us in unexpected directions or in directions that have not been considered at all. There is also an element of risk associated, as not all innovations will translate into successful outcomes.

14. Whilst it is for the Beacons themselves to develop innovation activities drawing on their reflections on good practice, some possible themes are:

- **developing curriculum specialisms** through innovative approaches to teaching and learning, encouraging colleges, work-based learning and other providers to build on their strengths and to focus on their distinct mission. This would enable Beacons to develop specialisms, focusing on their excellence in particular curriculum areas to meet learning priorities locally and nationally, including the Standards Unit priority areas. Within the specialisms, innovation would include aspects of leadership and management and staff development at all levels to strengthen approaches to curriculum delivery; meeting learner needs through new approaches to curriculum delivery such

as ICT; enrichment activities and differentiated approaches to learning styles and developing the quality of teaching and learning.

- **developing innovative approaches to institutional improvement** through leading edge activity on leadership and management and staff development to strengthen capacity in managing change; continuous improvement; managing and assessing learning; mentoring and meeting learner needs. This innovation would build on the strengths of Beacon providers in delivering excellence across their institutions.
- Acting as **innovation centres** to build collaborative partnerships to contribute to, and benefit from, leading edge development work, focusing particularly on middle to strong performing providers who would have the capacity to respond. This would also provide an opportunity to extend existing partnership arrangements, for example on 14 – 19 partnerships. Beacons would develop approaches to engaging communities, employers and learners.

15. This approach would be consistent with the schools sector where the Specialist Schools Programme and the Leading Edge Programme are testing out innovative approaches to teaching and learning; curriculum development; school organisation and workforce reform. It would also enable Beacon providers that are not eligible for specialist school or for CoVE status, to be recognised nationally and take forward innovative activity building on their strengths.

16. The Core Principles underlying the Specialist School Programme emphasise the Government's commitment to consistent and coherent system wide reform at all levels. The Principles point to the need to devolve resources to local level to build capacity to innovate and transform the education system and to raise standards through diversity, collaboration, partnership and innovation.

17. It is therefore proposed that innovation funding should normally be made available to "mature" Beacons in their second year of recognition who have a strong platform of excellence and good practice dissemination activity to build on, and who wish to engage in this activity.

ii) **Benefits of Beacon Status**

18. Recognising excellence through Beacon status has clear benefits for the Department and the LSC in helping to drive forward good practice and innovation in the sector. It benefits other providers in the sector who can draw on Beacon expertise to improve their own practice. It is important that there are clear benefits to the Beacons themselves to recompense them for the additional activity they undertake and to give them greater freedom and flexibility as the top performers in the sector.

19. Following publication of Success for All, it is anticipated that under the new funding arrangements being introduced in 2003/2004, Beacon providers in the FE

college sector would be eligible for premium rate funding in 2004/5, assuming they achieve the targets set in their development plans. The LSC is publishing a circular on premium funding in October 2003.

20. All Beacon providers are currently funded to disseminate their good practice to benefit the rest of the sector. Funding is available only to those who actively engage in good practice activity. Funding to support this activity is provided by the national LSC and is allocated primarily in the first year of Beacon status, with small amounts of extension funding in the second year in appropriate cases.

21. For those Beacons moving on to innovation activity, further funding support would be offered. Support would be decided on the basis of short proposals from Beacons setting out where they could innovate around key priority themes. These proposals would be considered by DfES, LSC and key partners and sector peers.

22. Work is underway with the LSC and the Inspectorates to take forward the commitment in Success for All to produce proposals for changes to the inspection and monitoring of providers to reflect the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success in respect of Beacon providers. Adult Learning Inspectorate and OfSTED are working together to produce proposals in 2004 on how these arrangements can be introduced in the next inspection cycle from 2005/6.

23. The LSC is committed, as part of developing the relationship of trust with the sector, to minimising the monitoring of the top performers in the sector. The LSC is currently considering the feasibility of a single, annual performance review assessment for excellent providers instead of the two currently undertaken. Through their Trust in FE Pathfinder arrangements, they are also testing the flexibilities that can be offered to top performers in the sector in terms of other aspects of the accountability system, including funding and management information.

iii) Selection criteria

24. On the basis of the information gained through the review, it has been decided that a 3-tiered selection process be adopted, consisting of inspection evidence, the LSC's performance review, and a proposal from the prospective Beacon.

25. The selection model would be:

Inspection evidence:

- Grade 1 or 2 at inspection for Leadership and Management;
- At least two thirds of learners in curriculum areas with a Grade 1 or Grade 2, and no Grades 4 or 5.

LSC assessment:

- Evidence from the latest performance review;
- Judgements about suitability including confirmation of ability to influence

others.

Provider proposal:

- Identification of particular excellence against Success for All, Skills Strategy or other relevant priorities which can be shared with others in the sector.
- Confirmation of demand for spread of good practice and evidence of partner support.
- Evidence of capacity and capability for partnership working with other providers.

v) Selection process

26. A new selection process will be developed, based on:

- DfES identifying those providers which satisfy the first or inspection element of the criteria from the inspection reports;
- LSC undertaking their assessment of performance and confirming their support for the second element of the criteria;
- The local LSC inviting the provider to submit a short proposal which they are able to support;
- Assessment by a panel. The panel would include representatives of DfES and LSC and other sector representatives. This will provide a strong focus on key Success for All priorities.
- On the basis of the Panel's assessment, a recommendation would be made to Ministers.
- Ministers would then make the award of Learning and Skills Beacon status at a special ceremony.

vi) National Learning and Skills Beacon Forum

27. The National Beacon Forum was established to enable Beacons, policy developers, partners and stakeholders to meet regularly to discuss and consider ways of raising standards in the sector. The review concluded that Beacons had demonstrated their commitment and contributed their thinking to proposals for an innovation role and the development of curriculum specialisms.

28. It is therefore recommended that the National Beacon Forum continue to meet on regular basis, perhaps in February and October, with a national conference in June each year.

NEXT STEPS

29. Further work is underway to develop the implementation and launch arrangements. The next steps are set out at Annex B.

THE REVIEW PROCESS

1. The review process began in February 2003 and included:
 - a policy review workshop attended by policy colleagues from DfES, LSC representatives, the Inspectorates and a range of college and work based learning providers. Provider representatives included those who had achieved Beacon status as well as those who had not;
 - further analytical work commissioned to look at options for the selection criteria;
 - feedback from discussions with Beacons, the LSC and Inspectorates at National Beacon Forum meetings in addition to comments received throughout the first year from a variety of colleges, work-based learning and other providers including Ufi/learnirect and Adult and Community Learning.

A. Policy review workshop

2. The main purpose of the workshop was to review the arrangements for the award of Beacon status and to discuss future design and implementation. The event, which took place on 28th February in Sheffield, was attended by over 30 delegates and generated an in-depth debate and consideration of all aspect of Beacon status.
3. The key issues and recommendations raised in the discussion groups and through feedback sessions to the full workshops are summarised below.

Role of Beacon Status Providers

- Workshop participants felt the Beacons' role needed clearer definition, both for the providers themselves and for other providers who might be receiving support or consultancy.
- The potential impact of Beacon activities on a provider's ability to maintain their own standards should be recognised.
- There needed to be a relationship of trust that recognised Beacons as top performers, and allowed them to use their proven expertise to develop new approaches to their business.
- Role of Beacon status providers needed to reflect the priorities of Success for All.

Benefits of Beacon status

- Delegates identified many potential benefits such as status, recognition and influence, together with an effect on staff and learners/potential learners. They felt there were opportunities to 'sell' the Beacon concept more strongly.

- Kudos and the profile gained from achieving the award was a clear benefit to the “business” aims of providers, in terms of attracting and motivating staff and students.
- There ought to be benefits to the Beacon as an institution, enabling them to learn and develop, as well as benefits being passed on to the sector.
- Major burdens were identified in terms of the time of key staff and the danger of ‘turning heads’ away from the core activities of learning delivery. A time limited recognition period might help avoid long-term drain on resources.

Criteria and Selection Process

- There was strong consensus that the criteria for the award must be simple, transparent and be pragmatic, recognising the limitations of sources of information.
- On selection, a combination of quantitative measures, such as inspection grades, and qualitative measures should be used, for example, to take account of provider mission and the social environment in which they operate.
- Selection should enable a fair representation across types of provider to ensure the desirable effects of the Beacon programme permeate all areas of post-16 provision.
- There was also a strong feeling that part of the process should involve a proactive representation by the provider of what they could offer in their role as a Beacon provider.
- It was proposed that by definition Beacon status should be granted to providers that,
 - at inspection, had achieved a Grade 1 or 2 in Leadership and Management, did not have any Grades 4 or 5 for the curriculum areas, and had achieved a grade 2 or better in at least a reasonable proportion of the learning delivered;
 - at LSC performance review, were regarded normally as excellent performers;
 - showed evidence of ability to influence the performance of other providers.

B. Data analysis phase

4. Taking the policy steer from the Beacon policy workshop, more detailed analytical work was undertaken with statistical colleagues in Analytical Services Division inform possible thresholds for the selection criteria.

5. A number of possible scenarios were examined in order to try to establish

whether a “one size fits all” approach was feasible or whether a differentiated model was necessary to identify excellence in the diverse settings and institutions in the learning and skills sector.

C Key findings

6. In considering appropriate criteria to define excellence, a variety of possible options were tested against the available data. The main ones focused on establishing an appropriate inspection threshold that could attest to excellence in delivering successful outcomes for learners and could be applied to a wider range of providers in the learning and skills sector.

7. Consideration was also given to evidence of excellence in delivering Success for All priorities that might be gathered through LSC Performance Review or from seeking provider proposals.

ANNEX B

NEXT STEPS

Activity	Lead	Deadlines
Propose innovative activities for period to March 2004	Beacons	End October 2003
Approve innovative activities	DfES Quality and Standards Team	Early November 2003
Develop the evidence requirement for Success for All priorities in provider proposals	DfES Quality and Standards Team	Early November 2003
Develop national and regional linkages with Beacon providers, within the context of Standards Unit strategy	DfES Standards Unit	November 2003
Develop the arrangements for the new Beacon Unit and selection panel	DfES Quality and Standards Team	November 2003
Arrangements made for announcement of the new criteria, arrangements and role of Beacons	DfES Quality and Standards Team	November 2003
New Beacon unit established	DfES Quality and Standards Team	November 2003
Beacons integrated within regional networks	DfES Standards Unit	January 2004
First awards under new arrangements	DfES Standards Team and new Beacon Unit	Early 2004
Develop proposals to minimise LSC monitoring of top performers in line with Trust in FE	LSC	Early 2004
Develop proposals for changes to the inspection of providers to reflect the principle of intervention in inverse proportion to success which can be introduced in the next inspection cycle from 2005/6	ALI and Ofsted	Mid 2004
National Learning and Skills Beacon conference	DfES Quality and Standards Team and new Beacon Unit	June 2004