



Learning+Skills Council

Common strengths and weaknesses of the self-assessment reports and development plans from independent specialist colleges for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities

**EVALUATION AND GOOD PRACTICE TEAM
QUALITY AND STANDARDS
LEARNING AND SKILLS COUNCIL NATIONAL OFFICE**

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Introduction

1. Effective self-assessment and development planning can help providers to improve quality and raise standards.
2. Independent specialist colleges, like all providers funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), are required to carry out annual self-assessment of all aspects of their provision, and agree a development plan with the LSC. The development plan should clearly relate to those areas of provision identified in the self-assessment report as being in need of improvement.
3. The national office of the LSC has been responsible for judging the rigour of a provider's self-assessment process, reviewing the effectiveness of a provider's development plan and deciding whether or not to agree it. From March 2003, these tasks are carried out by local LSCs in respect of the independent specialist colleges in their area.
4. The national office contracted a team of development planning advisors to carry out evaluations of the self-assessment reports and development plans produced to date by independent specialist colleges. Development planning advisers wrote reports on the quality of each college's self-assessment report and development plan. In a number of cases, they followed up their reports with visits to the colleges concerned.
5. This report highlights the key issues set out in the development planning advisers' reports and provides recommendations on ways of helping independent specialist colleges strengthen their self-assessment and development planning processes.

Methodology

6. At the time when the development planning advisers compiled their reports, there were LSC-funded learners at 72 independent specialist colleges. This report is based on the findings set out in the development planning advisers' reports on the self-assessment reports and development plans of 30 of these colleges. The sample included a range of different sized colleges.
7. The development planning advisers completed a form which contained the following sections:
 - The self-assessment process
 - The structure, comprehensiveness and coverage of the self-assessment report
 - The judgement and evidence in the self-assessment report
 - Overall summary of the self-assessment report

- Key strengths of the self-assessment report
 - Key weaknesses of the self-assessment report
 - How well the development plan responds to the self-assessment report
 - Quality and effectiveness of the development plan
 - Overall assessment of the potential of the development plan to bring about significant improvements
 - Key strengths of the development plan
 - Key weaknesses of the development plan.
8. The summary sections of the development planning advisor reports include comments that are included in other sections of the report.
9. Overall, there was some inconsistency in the extent to which development planning advisers highlighted particular issues. For example, in their reports, some development planning advisers commented specifically on the involvement of employers in the self-assessment process. Others did not.

The Self-assessment Report

The self-assessment process

10. The self-assessment process should involve all staff, learners and their parents/carers and those with a vested interest in the college, such as employers. The self-assessment report should be approved by the college's board of governors (or equivalent body). The self-assessment process should relate closely to the strategic and business planning cycle and be an integral part of the quality assurance system.
11. The following key issues were highlighted in the development planning advisers' reports:
- In most colleges, staff were involved in the self-assessment process in a variety of ways, including staff meetings, year-long consultation and training days. One college organised a self-assessment week led by external consultants, during which evidence was collected and verified. Staff also produced self-assessment reports for their individual subject areas. In some cases, these supplementary reports were included as annexes to the main self-assessment report.
 - In most colleges, the self-assessment process included the gathering of learners' views. Learners were asked to respond to questionnaires, and their views were also obtained at meetings and during tutorials. In a few instances, the self-assessment report states that the views of learners have been obtained but does not say how.
 - Some colleges sought the views of parents/carers. In most instances, parents/carers were asked to reply to questionnaires and their views were also gathered at meetings with staff.

- Some colleges sought the views of external organisations, such as local further education (FE) colleges, employers and local community groups. Views were usually gathered at meetings and through use of questionnaires.
- In a few colleges, the self-assessment process is closely aligned with the institutions' quality assurance and strategic planning processes.
- In a minority of cases, the self-assessment report does not provide any details about the way self-assessment is carried out. The college fails to explain whether self-assessment is separate from, or an integral part of, the quality assurance process.

Self-assessment report structure, comprehensiveness and coverage

12. A self-assessment report should contain all the required sections and background information and have a clear structure. It should cover all aspects of the organisation's activity, provide necessary background information, and focus in particular on the quality of the learners' experience. It should address the quality statements and the key questions in the *Common Inspection Framework*. Most reports:
 - Have a clear and appropriate structure. For example, one particularly well-written report had a clear structure, was concise, included an introduction with relevant information about the college and had sections dealing with learners' achievements, standards, leadership and management, and the quality of education and training.
 - Focussed on the quality of the learners' experience.
 - Addressed all the key questions in the *Common Inspection Framework*.
13. In a few instances, the report covered teaching and learning as a whole and did not deal with the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of learning in individual curriculum areas.

Judgements and evidence

14. A self-assessment report should be honest, rigorously evaluative and thorough. The key strengths and weaknesses of provision should be identified clearly and where possible, appropriately weighted. Strengths must relate to practice and provision which are exceptional and not merely normal. Judgments in the report should be adequately substantiated by firm evidence that has been internally verified or validated. Where possible, the report should make effective reference to the college's key performance data and compare these with national averages.
 - Many reports describe at length the action providers take but say little about its impact or effectiveness.
 - In a few instances, colleges have applied weighting to the identified strengths and weaknesses. For example, one development planning adviser's report states that "all areas of the curriculum on offer are addressed ... and there is a logical weighting of strengths and weaknesses that appears to contribute to the grading".

- In a few reports, there is some contradiction between the strengths and the weaknesses
- In the majority of reports, there are weaknesses relating to the use of evidence. For example,
 - the source of the evidence is provided but the actual evidence is not
 - there is not enough evidence
 - the evidence does not relate clearly to, or substantiate, the judgments made,
- The development planning advisers seldom say whether the evidence has been internally validated.
- National benchmarks are seldom available for specialist providers. Some colleges determine their own benchmarks based on internal data and evaluate their performance against these.
- Some of the strengths cited in some reports relate to what should be normal practice.

The Development Plan

Responses to the self-assessment report

15. A development plan should identify how the key weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report will be rectified. The plan should selectively identify action to sustain, and build upon, strengths. It should also identify action that should be carried out immediately and action for improvement in the long term. The plan should address national priorities and reflect the provider's own strategic and current priorities.
- Most development plans address all key weaknesses in the self-assessment report.
 - In a few instances, the plan has a good cross referencing system that relates action for improvement clearly to the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report.
 - Most development plans address weaknesses relating to the quality of the learners' experience.
 - Most plans do not specify action for sustaining and building on strengths.
 - Few plans identify actions to be taken over a two-year or three-year period.
 - In a few instances, plans identify how action relates to national priorities. For example, some plans specify action to improve learners' basic skills.
 - In a few instances, the self-assessment and development-planning processes were part of the college's strategic planning activities and where this was the

case, action specified in the development plan usually related to the college's strategic objectives.

Quality and effectiveness

16. A development plan should include all the headings specified by the LSC. The outcomes/targets should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). Each action should relate to a particular issue and be described in detail. Responsibility for carrying an action out should be designated to one named post-holder. Timescales for action should be realistic. Priorities should be clear and action to ensure these are met should follow a logical sequence. The plan should also specify how its implementation will be monitored and reviewed and how its effectiveness will be evaluated.
- Few plans meet all the requirements specified by the LSC and where this is the case, the development planning adviser usually states that the plan is insufficiently robust.
 - Few plans specify clear targets relating to learners' performance.
 - In some plans, a named post holder is given responsibility for ensuring that each action is carried out. In other plans, this responsibility is designated to a team. In some plans, one individual, for example the principal, is made responsible for too many actions. In one plan for example, the person named as responsible for ensuring the implementation of all the actions is also given responsibility for checking that the plan is carried out effectively. This is bad practice.
 - In only a few of the plans has action been prioritised in a logical sequence.
 - In some plans, arrangements for reviewing and monitoring action are clear and this is particularly case if the plans also specify SMART targets.
 - Only a few plans specify how arrangements for monitoring the implementation of action will be audited and evaluated.

Potential of the development plan to bring about significant improvements

17. Action specified in the development plan should be sufficient to bring about significant improvements. The plan should be realistic and achievable and the improvements should be sustainable.
- Most plans are realistic and achievable but only a few specify SMART targets
 - In a few instances, action specified in the plans was insufficiently detailed or the timescales for completion of action were too brief.

Conclusions

18. The following features of independent specialist colleges may impact on self-assessment and development planning:

- Independent specialist colleges have been monitored by a team from the national office of the LSC and not by their local LSC.
 - An independent specialist college may only have a small percentage of its learners funded through the LSC and will have to meet the requirements of other funding agencies in respect of the majority of its learners.
 - Several of the independent specialist colleges are very small and may not have staff with skills in, and experience of, self-assessment and development planning.
19. Self-assessment and development planning are carried out competently in some independent specialist colleges. These colleges have a comprehensive self-assessment process and substantiate judgements with clear evidence. Findings from self-assessment are taken into account in a development plan which specifies SMART targets for rectifying the weaknesses identified in the self-assessment report. The plan also sets out action for monitoring and evaluating its implementation.
 20. Links between self-assessment, development planning, strategic planning and quality assurance are weak. Often self-assessment and development planning are not an integral part of the college's business planning strategy but are 'bolt on' activities undertaken to meet the requirements of the LSC. Few colleges demonstrated any awareness of the benefits of the self-assessment process for improving their business.
 21. Staff in a number of colleges would benefit from further guidance on ways of ensuring that evidence to substantiate judgements in the self-assessment report is appropriate, detailed and secure..
 22. A number of colleges did not set SMART targets in their development plans or targets relating to learners' performance. Staff in many colleges need help with target setting in order that they can monitor performance more effectively.
 23. There are no national benchmarking data for independent specialist colleges and no plans to introduce these in the near future. Some colleges use their own data to benchmark their performance year on year and evaluate the effectiveness of action to bring about improvements. It would be helpful for colleges with a similar client group to set up benchmarking consortia. Such consortia could prove useful to colleges when monitoring their own performance, and as a means of identifying and sharing good practice.