Evaluation and Good Practice
Quality and Standards

Sharing good practice between colleges
Report and case studies
September 2003

Contents

Foreword

Good practice, effective practice, best practice, excellent practice – however it's termed, learning from the successful experience of others is an accepted approach to improving quality and raising standards.

Our ability to identify and validate good practice has improved significantly, partly as a result of inspection, and partly as a result of research and development work carried out in colleges. Together, these provide a rich pool of knowledge about what forms good practice.

It is disappointing, however, that successful identification of good practice in one institution does not necessarily lead to improvements in provision elsewhere. We may have discovered the right things to do, but we still have some way to go before we carry them out consistently. Identifying good practice and telling people about it are important first steps, but we need to develop a better understanding of how to share good practice if we are going to make the best use of its potential to improve quality and raise standards.

We asked ACL Consulting to research how colleges who had received funding from the Further Education Standards Fund were sharing their good practice. This report presents their findings and illustrates them through case studies drawing on the experiences of 15 colleges. The report is intended to help a range of organisations in post-16 education and training, including colleges and providers and local Learning and Skills Councils, to make judgements about how best to improve quality through sharing good practice and to provide practical guidance based on college experience. We are extremely grateful for the contributions made by the colleges that the case studies are based on and the help given by the people who were interviewed or who helped arrange visits by the research team. Learning from others through sharing good practice will continue to help us improve quality and standards for all learners. This report will help us to make that process more effective.

Avril Willis
Director of Quality and Standards

Introduction

Background

1.1 Sharing good practice is becoming an established way of improving quality in post-16 education and training. While inspection gives us the basis for confirming good practice, our understanding of the most effective ways to share it is limited.

1.2 ACL Consulting has carried out research on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) into ways in which colleges are sharing good practice. This report forms part of a programme of work looking at sharing good practice as a way of improving quality. Other current projects are looking at effective ways of sharing good practice in work based learning, measuring the effect of good practice, and identifying the principles which lie behind the use of good practice to improve quality.

Sharing Good Practice and the Further Education Standards Fund

1.3 This study looks at the experiences of five colleges who have been sharing good practice with support from the Further Education Standards Fund.

1.4 In supporting colleges to share their good practice, it was the former Further Education Funding Council's (FEFC) intention to match good practice to areas of weakness within the sector. Colleges were expected to show that they were using their funding to share their specific good practice with colleges that had weaknesses in those areas.

The approach to the research

1.5 Five colleges were chosen as the foundation of the study so as to provide examples of a range of dissemination activities carried out either in individual, or across several, curriculum areas or cross-college functions. Each college was asked to suggest two 'partner' colleges who had been involved in the dissemination activity. The list of colleges involved in this research is shown in Table 1.

1.6 Information was gathered from people involved in dissemination activities at each college through a series of semi-structured interviews typically lasting between 45 minutes and an hour – a total of 46 individual interviews plus two group discussions. The interview checklist is included towards the end of the report.

Introduction

Structure of this report

1.7 In the report, we:
- review the main findings from the research, grouped under common themes;
- come to an overall assessment on what appears to work well; and
- provide a checklist to support effective sharing of good practice.

1.8 The case studies set out the detail, particularly in relation to what seems to work and what does not work. The purpose of the main text is to summarise the key points that have emerged from the fieldwork.

1.9 A glossary provides definitions of words and phrases used in the text which have a specific meaning within the context of the report.

Table 1: Case study colleges

	Disseminator college	Partner colleges
Case study 1 A conference to share good practice in a single vocational subject	Lancaster and Morecambe College	Nelson and Colne College City College, Birmingham
Case study 2 Consultancy and workshops to share good practice in basic skills	Liverpool Community College	Darlington College The Oldham College
Case study 3 Sharing good practice in cross-college activities and curriculum areas	South Cheshire College	Salford College Newcastle-under-Lyme College
Case study 4 Sharing good practice in an academic subject through a conference and follow-up visits	Winstanley Sixth Form College	Stafford College Solihull Sixth Form College
Case study 5 A regional benchmarking network to support sharing good practice	Cirencester College	Cricklade College Truro College

Main findings

Introduction

2.1   We outline here the main findings from the fieldwork. They reflect the common themes highlighted by colleges and which are further developed in the case studies. They are grouped under the following headings:
● Initial considerations
● Activities for sharing good practice
● Managing the process
● Measuring impact

Initial considerations

2.2   In the colleges who were disseminating their good practice to others, staff regularly referred to the need not to be seen as 'having the solution' or 'being the source of all wisdom' on the topic being shared. Part of being a good disseminator is acknowledging that, although you are sharing your good practice, there will inevitably be aspects of your own performance that you are less than happy with or that could be improved.

2.3   Disseminating colleges were also keen to point out that everyone has something to share. For people in colleges with good practice, talking about it to others helps them to reflect on how it could be further improved.

2.4   There is a tendency to share formal practice (what is written down) rather than informal practice or features of the college culture. It is important to realise that in sharing formal practice, you must also deal with informal practice – otherwise you may incorrectly assume that the informal practice is already in place at the partner college.

What the partner college needs to do

2.5   Dissemination activities take time. Looking around for help can take up a lot of the partner college's time so they may not benefit as much as they could. Partner colleges can use awareness raising activities like conferences to quickly identify a source of good practice which is both relevant to their need and offers the opportunity to develop a longer term relationship in which they can be confident.

2.6   Similarly, making requests for help from many individual disseminating colleges suggests a lack of focus. Disseminators will not know what is expected of them and partners will not know what they really want from the disseminators they are trying to work with.

Who can be helped?

2.7   Generally, those people who were interviewed in the disseminating colleges felt that their dissemination activities were most likely to have greatest impact in colleges who were keen to improve the quality of their provision. The colleges which could benefit will, therefore, include colleges with significant weaknesses as well as those with good or satisfactory inspection grades. For example the south-west benchmarking group (Case Study 5), did include one college which had been designated as 'in recovery'.

'As a new manager, I would not have survived without the benchmarking group and the support of colleagues in it.'

'For a college in recovery to be "buddied up" with a group of "good" colleges is invaluable in the recovery process. It offers rapid access to a wide range of experience.'

Manager, Cricklade College

Main findings

2.8 In helping poor performers reach an acceptable level of performance, sharing good practice needs to be viewed as one of a package of activities which are likely to include other actions, including for example, improvements to leadership and management and changes to the organisational culture.

Distance is difficult – so is being too close!

2.9 Although some disseminators were willing to travel a long way to partner colleges, it was generally easier and more effective to deal with requests from colleges which were nearby.

2.10 Some colleges, however, did have concerns about working with their more immediate neighbours. These concerns tended to focus on competitive issues. Colleges are concerned not to give away too much information about things which they believe give them an advantage over other colleges in their local area.

2.11 Concerns about competition appeared to be less important in the following cases:
- where the good practice being shared relates to either student support, governance and management, or quality assurance and not to teaching and learning in curriculum areas; and
- where the college was a tertiary institution and did not face local competition from other colleges or school sixth forms.

2.12 It is worth noting that the south-west benchmarking group of tertiary colleges does not include colleges which are too close to each other because of the risk that competition for students will reduce the openness of the exchange between members of the group.

Timing dissemination activities

2.13 There are different views on the best time to share good practice. The two colleges who used conferences both agreed that the best time was the summer term.

2.14 For colleges offering consultancy or leading benchmarking groups, starting dissemination activities early in the year or term appears to be most effective – staff have more time to plan the activities into their workload.

2.15 From the partner college's point of view, linking dissemination activities to other events (following inspection, self-assessment and so on) may encourage people to take the necessary action.

Making contact

2.16 Few partner colleges made contact with their disseminator college as a result of responding to direct marketing. Most initial contact came through awareness of outstanding inspection grades or knowledge of beacon or accredited status. Initial contact made at a conference often formed the basis for a longer term partnership.

Activities for sharing good practice

2.17 Most of the dissemination activity which colleges had experienced fell into two broad categories:
- conferences, visits and open days; and
- more interactive, longer term working through consultancy-related activity.

2.18 A small number of the people interviewed had experience of sharing their good practice remotely using the Internet.

2.19 Generally, activities have attempted to cover the following six areas:
- assessing what precisely the disseminator does well;
- showing what the disseminator does;
- showing the context in which the disseminator works;
- considering the context in which the partner works;
- adapting what the disseminator does to the partner's situation; and
- identifying areas where the disseminator can learn from the partner.

2.20 Activities which involved some form of consultancy or one-to-one working can meet all six requirements – this is generally not the case with other forms of dissemination activity. For example, while conferences can deal with the first three, the extent to which it is possible to cover the others at a conference is limited.

Face-to-face contact is important

2.21 Good practice can be shared in many ways, ranging from making materials and documents available remotely through a website to direct one-to-one working between a member of staff at one college and a colleague at another.

2.22 Most of the people who were interviewed thought that activities which involved some form of face-to-face contact were important. Both disseminators and partner colleges spoke positively about the benefits that this brought.

2.23 From the partner college's point of view, benefits focused on the opportunities that face-to-face contact offered for an individual and customer-focused exchange. This increased the chances of the exchange being of real benefit to the partner college.

2.24 From the disseminator's point of view, face-to-face contact allowed it to get something out of the dissemination process in terms of improvements to its own policy or practice. This meant that the dissemination activity became more of a two-way process, with both the disseminator and the partner college benefiting.

2.25 One college had revised its planned approach to dissemination to allow for more face-to-face contact. The original plan had been to develop a series of training packages which would have been tested with each college with whom the disseminator worked, before being made more widely available in response to specific requests. It quickly realised, however, that each set of packages would need to be adapted to meet the particular needs of individual colleges and that a consultancy-based approach would be more effective. (Case Study 2.)

2.26 While there were many approaches to face-to-face working, consultancy was the approach preferred by most of the people who were interviewed. The main alternatives (conferences, seminars and web-based materials) were felt to have a number of weaknesses including:
- an inability to meet the full range of needs of those attending;
- a tendency for the disseminator to 'preach a solution' at the partner college or colleges rather than discuss particular issues; and
- difficulty in securing commitment from the partner to take action.

Main findings

'If you go to a conference you might take one or two points of interest away – these will invariably get "lost" once you are back at your own college. If you sit down for a one-to-one dialogue, you get something that is specific to your needs – and harder to lose.'

'Using a consultancy approach means that partner colleges are touched in real ways that make a real difference – more so than is the case with conferences.'

2.27 By comparison, a college-to-college meeting or consultancy-based contact, because it requires a greater time and resource commitment, often creates more expectation that something will be achieved as a result.

Visits help set the context

2.28 Visits – both by partner colleges to the disseminator and vice versa – were generally considered to provide important information about the situation in which the disseminator and partner were working.

2.29 Visiting partners gives disseminators a 'feel' for the institution they are trying to help. Visiting the disseminator, whether in a conference, open day or pre-arranged visit, allows the partner to see the context in which the disseminator's good practice is working.

2.30 In a sector in which many feel that there are not enough opportunities to see how other colleges operate, visits are considered to be beneficial because they:
- allow staff to see how things happen in other colleges. Even if this just reinforces the fact that 'things are not that different', this can still be a valuable lesson;
- provide reassurance that what people are doing is 'right' or 'reasonable';
- prevent staff from becoming too self-critical; and

- boost the morale of staff in poorer-performing colleges. The fact that others are interested in their work helps staff regain confidence in the value of what they are doing.

2.31 Although visits and face-to-face contact are important to develop relationships, they can be maintained and supported through telephone and email contact. Discussion groups and 'chat room' arrangements on a website are an additional way of supporting networking between colleges who are at a broadly similar level or on the same development path – these colleges are probably struggling with the same issues and networking can help them to come up with appropriate solutions.

Identifying your partner's aims and needs

2.32 Where colleges have undertaken consultancy work, they have learned that agreeing the scope and setting the ground rules before consultancy begins reduces the risk of misunderstandings later on. In doing this, it helps to get a range of views from all staff involved in order to establish clear aims for the consultancy and prevent the work being unduly dominated by one person's (or group's) views.

2.33 In one case study, the disseminator used experienced staff to talk through the issues over the phone with future partner colleges. This helped tailor the type of support offered to individual partners at little cost to the disseminator.

Using conferences

2.34 Disseminator colleges tended to use one of two approaches to identify their conference audience:
- send out detailed publicity and programme information, and let the potential audience decide if it is for them; or

- be specific about who should attend, publicise the event and restrict the attendance to the target audience.

2.35 For curriculum-related issues, the first approach would seem to be appropriate. However, management or quality issues might be dealt with better through a more targeted approach.

2.36 Events need careful planning so that the needs of colleges with grades 2 and 3, and those colleges with grades 4 and 5, can both be met. This might require separate conferences for each group if there is sufficient demand.

2.37 The impact of the conference on those people who have attended can be difficult to predict. Some people will gain little while others will be inspired to change both their overall approach and their practice. However, in spite of their 'hit and miss' nature, conferences are still a very cost-effective way of reaching a large number of people and can be the start of the change process in the partner college. They form an effective means of raising awareness and engaging others in further work.

Be as open as possible

2.38 Colleges running conferences should be prepared to be open in discussing their ideas and practice, and to learn from other people who attend. Although participants expect presentations, it is the interactive and open discussions that often produce the most stimulating ideas.

2.39 Conference participants need to put the good practice in context and to understand the environment within which it takes place. Colleges have found it nearly always helpful, if not essential, to create opportunities within the conference programme to see and experience the practice in action and the specific environment in which teaching and learning take place. The conference, therefore, almost always needs to be held within the college for this to happen.

Managing the Process

Co-ordination and management

2.40 Managing the process of sharing good practice needs a designated co-ordinator particularly where a number of departments are involved or several conferences are planned. This person may also have responsibility for evaluating the impact of the activity on both the college and on its partners.

2.41 The precise role will vary according to individual circumstances and it is important to identify the management task before choosing someone to carry it out. Colleges in the case studies tended to use one of three approaches:
- a fairly 'low-key' approach – effectively monitoring the budget and what was taking place; or
- a dedicated manager working at a senior level who was appointed to manage and deliver consultancy input; or
- a more junior appointment to manage conferences.

Dedicated support for conferences

2.42 Running successful conferences requires management and administrative time. Colleges have found that unless a member of staff can be given time away from their normal work, a designated conference manager is needed. This enables better control over the quality of documents and presentation materials, better co-ordination of the input from others, and greater consistency over a series of events.

Main findings

2.43 Dedicated administrative support is needed to deal with telephone enquiries, bookings, accommodation requests, preparation of presentation materials, organisation of displays and other tasks that cannot be predicted beforehand. Some colleges have chosen to contract the organisation and running of events to a specialist conference organiser.

Avoid over-burdening members of staff

2.44 Keeping dissemination activities to a manageable level is a particular issue for disseminators using consultancy-based approaches to dissemination. There is a risk that the workload of those involved will become too much for them if workloads are not managed.

2.45 Colleges in the case studies tended to use one or more of three strategies for coping with workloads. These are:
- choosing staff to undertake main roles in relation to sharing good practice and withdraw them from their day-to-day role. While this helps to deliver the dissemination activity, there is a risk that staff will lose some of their skills and experience in the area in which they work;
- limiting the number of partner colleges worked with – most disseminators tried to do this but it is often difficult to refuse requests for help. Senior managers need to be clear about not taking on work they know it will be difficult to complete; and
- involving as wide a range of staff in dissemination activities as possible.

2.46 Involving a wide range of staff has benefits for both the disseminator and the partner colleges. For the disseminator, as well as sharing the workload, it:

- provides the disseminator's team with the opportunity to reflect on how they do their own work;
- can be good for team motivation, raising their profile, both internally and externally and sharing the reward;
- provides development opportunities for staff;
- helps make sure that particular groups of students do not suffer because staff are involved in dissemination activity;
- helps make sure that development work in the disseminator college does not suffer; and
- gives the partner colleges access to a wider range of staff expertise and experiences.

2.47 For the partner college, involving a wide range of its own staff in dissemination activities avoids relying on one or two people. In our research we found examples that suggest there is a danger that a lot of the benefit from sharing good practice can be lost when key members of staff at the partner college either leave or take on a new role.

The skills to share good practice well

2.48 Being good at an activity does not necessarily mean that you will be good at sharing that activity with others. This is often a problem with colleges providing consultancy activities, where the skills needed to deliver effectively are not necessarily the same as those used by college staff in their usual roles.

2.49 Disseminator colleges need to take account of this when planning their dissemination activity. They may need to deal with training or support needs for their own staff if dissemination activities are to have the maximum effect on partner colleges.

Measuring Impact

2.50 The college sharing its good practice often has little direct control over the extent to which a partner college acts on what it has learned. Supporting a college to write a development plan and identifying how the good practice will be implemented helps secure, though doesn't guarantee, a commitment to take action.

2.51 The fieldwork suggests that, as yet, there is little measurable evidence to show the effect of sharing good practice on partner colleges. There are several reasons for this, including:
- disseminators are not in a position to collect evidence – their involvement is generally too short term. Feedback questionnaires after events are often as far as disseminators take things;
- for partner colleges, their involvement in dissemination activity has generally been too recent for any effect to be obvious; and
- where there are measurable effects, it is often difficult to make a direct link to sharing good practice. For example, improvements in retention and achievement may well be due to a combination of factors and not solely to adopting good practice.

2.52 There are, however, examples of colleges looking to measure and attribute the effects of sharing good practice in a number of ways. Many of these use some means of benchmarking against the established good practice. For example:
- one partner college measured the take-up of learner support services against historic levels of take-up and those achieved by other local institutions as a way of assessing the effect of the changes introduced;
- a disseminator college is planning to visit its partner colleges four to six months after completing its consultancy to find out what effect activities have had; and
- student feedback has been used to assess the effects of improvement in learning support at another college.

2.53 Whilst direct effects are often difficult to measure, partner colleges will frequently refer to the contribution to changes in practice which have resulted from their involvement with others. Some, if not all, of these changes are made in the expectation that they will result in improvements in student achievement and retention. In some cases, colleges have felt that changed practice has contributed to the achievement of better inspection grades.

Benefits for the disseminating college

2.54 Dissemination activity has given staff the opportunity to work beyond the limits of their own organisation. This has brought about a number of benefits. For example:
- improved links with colleagues in other colleges where previously contact had been minimal;
- greater awareness of the work of colleagues in other institutions and in other parts of the sector; and
- for the disseminator specifically, an improved profile for the college in the sector – this adds to the profile already achieved through grade 1 inspection results. It is seen as confirmation by the sector of the value of what the college is doing.

Overall assessment

What to do and what not to do

Introduction

3.1 The process of sharing good practice observed during the course of this study consists of seven stages, and these provide a framework for the guidance in this section of the report. They are:
- identification – identifying colleges with good practice which could be shared with others;
- preparation – preparing the approach to sharing good practice and choosing activities;
- promotion – promoting the good practice and the approach to sharing it with other colleges;
- selection – matching disseminators with partner colleges;
- dissemination – activities through which the good practice is shared;
- implementation – taking action as a result of sharing good practice; and
- evaluation – assessing the effect of the whole process.

3.2 The extent to which each stage places a responsibility on either the college sharing good practice or its partners will vary.

Identification

3.3 For the disseminating colleges in this study, inspection was the principal means through which their good practice was identified and confirmed. A grade 1 in one or more curriculum or cross-college areas enabled the college to access funding to carry out its proposed activities. Standards Fund circulars gave examples of areas where inspections had identified a development need.

3.4 These processes and procedures for identifying areas of need and colleges with good practice to share appear to have worked well. They have helped ensure that funding has been used effectively to match good practice to priority needs within the sector.
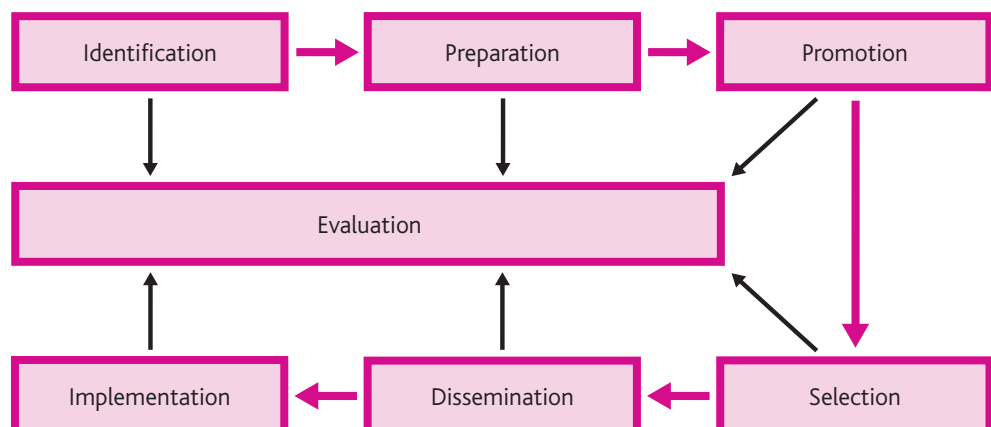
Preparation

3.5 In preparing the approach to dissemination, it is important to distinguish between conferences and one-to-one or small group activities such as consultancy and workshops.

3.6 Preparation for conferences can be time-consuming and needs to be thorough. Colleges need to consider the following:
- Content – Where the college has several recognised areas of good practice, are there particular aspects that the college is good at which it should focus on? What definitely cannot be dealt with? Does the 'offer' need tailoring to different audiences, parts of the sector and so on?
- Timing – When does it make most sense to run a conference? If a series of events is planned, how will these be staged over the year?
- Management – Running a series of conferences is a major task. Experience suggests that this needs dedicated staff if it is to be delivered effectively.
- Location – This study shows that there is a clear preference for the conference to be run at the college rather than at an external conference centre. There are realistic limitations, however, on the extent to which people are willing to travel and, in these circumstances, some regional focussing may well be appropriate.

3.7 Conference planning should take account of the different problems that those attending are likely to have. The programme may need to be flexible to meet their different needs.

3.8 For consultancy, a structured process is needed within which the particular needs of individual colleges can be met. Time spent establishing need will make sure that the activities offered are appropriately matched. Failure to clearly identify need can result in an open-ended commitment which it is difficult to conclude and evaluate.

3.9 In general, the fieldwork shows that activities which use face-to-face interaction should be encouraged, with less emphasis given to those that do not.

Promotion

3.10 Promoting those colleges that have good practice to those that need to improve appears to be a fairly simple task. Most of the colleges that need to improve will turn to readily-available sources to identify those who have good practice to share. These sources include inspection reports and websites, as well as existing networks, reputation or other local knowledge.

3.11 There would appear to be little need to spend extensively on promotional activities – in most cases, a simple mailshot is enough.

Selection

3.12 Matching disseminator colleges with partner colleges is often unplanned. Generally, it relies on partner colleges contacting disseminator colleges, either in response to a specific piece of promotion or through more general awareness that the disseminator is good at what it does.

Overall assessment

3.13 There is a place for some form of external 'brokerage service'. This would allow a college to be put in touch with another college who would be able to offer relevant and specific help. The service might also maintain a database of main contacts and sources of expertise in individual colleges.

3.14 This more structured approach could help to ensure that colleges are put in direct contact with those who could best meet their needs, whilst at the same time helping to put those colleges sharing their good practice in touch with those who could benefit most.

Dissemination

3.15 Staff who were interviewed felt that the process of sharing good practice appears to work best where disseminator and partner colleges have face-to-face contact. Both conferences and consultancy can support this, although conferences are not as effective as consultancy or networking activities which offer more interactive support over a longer period.

3.16 In spite of their time limitations and their limited ability to meet individual needs, conferences still represent a highly cost-effective way of sharing good practice with a wide audience. They often form the first stage of a longer term process of sharing by providing a way in which awareness of the good practice can be raised. They give people the opportunity to learn from each other as well as from the disseminating college, and are often the only chance that staff from different colleges have of getting together.

3.17 Colleges (both disseminator and partners) appear to get more out of dissemination activity that is carried out on a one-to-one or small group basis. This is mainly because:
- the dissemination is more likely to be specific to the partner college's needs; and
- there is likely to be greater pressure on the partner college to act as a result of the dissemination activity than is the case with conferences.

3.18 As part of the dissemination process, it is important that partner colleges see the context in which the disseminator is working and, in the case of consultancy-based dissemination activities, that the disseminator sees the context in which the partner is working.

3.19 Benchmarking between a network of colleges gives a high level of interaction which can be continued for a long period. Research shows, however, that benchmarking networks often need external support and assistance to get started.

3.20 More widespread use of benchmarking as an activity to support sharing good practice might be achieved by doing the following:
- publishing more widely and more positively the benefits of benchmarking;
- better coordination of the existing local, regional and national benchmarking networks;
- identifying a number of colleges that could work together in benchmarking groups – this would remove what appears to be a potential blockage at the start of the process (that is, identifying colleges with similar concerns and interests); and
- providing funding to support

benchmarking work. For colleges who do not naturally work together, funding may encourage a greater interest and emphasise the benefits of benchmarking.

3.21 Benchmarking may be a particularly appropriate approach for working with poorer performing colleges. It gives an opportunity to compare how things are currently done against good practice and gives mutual support for change and improvement from colleagues who may well have faced similar problems in their own colleges.

3.22 The fieldwork shows that from the partner college's point of view, sharing good practice through websites can provide a means of raising awareness or a facility for accessing and downloading materials and resources. However, the effect is often limited – other activities are needed to help others change their practice.

Implementation

3.23 Implementation means action taken by the partner college to change as a result of the dissemination activity. This is clearly something that is difficult to guarantee. However, there are features that, where present, mean that it is more likely that change will occur.

3.24 The following are important in this context:
- the involvement of senior management in dissemination activities – this makes it more likely that, for example, the resources that are needed for any change are considered;
- an appropriate level of leadership. This could be at course, department or whole college level, depending on what is being shared. Effective leadership results in effective use of resources and

a determination to see change through;
- the involvement of a wide range of partner college staff in dissemination activities – this reduces the risk that the benefits to the partner college will be lost if staff leave or take on new roles; and
- where possible, linking dissemination to inspection – this encourages people to take action and, if the dissemination activity takes place after inspection, develop an agenda for action that the disseminator can help achieve.

Evaluation

3.25 Assessing the success of dissemination activities can be difficult. For example it may be too early to do, too difficult to identify the effect or too difficult to find the cause. However, measuring the effect is important in order to show that sharing good practice is an effective way of improving quality and standards, and worthwhile supporting.

3.26 The evaluation process need not be complicated. As a minimum, partner colleges should be asked to record the activities in which they've been involved and what has happened as a result. This could include:
- a summary of the problems or issues that led them to take part in dissemination activities;
- the type of dissemination activities they were involved in;
- what they received from these activities;
- what they changed as a result of taking part;
- what other changes might have contributed to any improvements; and
- a measure to relate the effect of dissemination activities on changes in the partner college. This might use a simple four or five point scale to record the extent of any effect.

Key questions

The main themes outlined in the previous sections are summarised here in the form of a checklist of matters for consideration for colleges sharing their good practice and guidance for others who are seeking to benefit.

- [ ] What are we intending to achieve by sharing our good practice?
- [ ] How will our activities be managed and delivered?
- [ ] When is the best time to share our good practice?
- [ ] Are we intending to raise awareness, develop understanding and/or change practice?
- [ ] Should we work with a wide range of other organisations or focus on meeting the needs of one or two?
- [ ] Will we share practice across several curriculum and cross-college areas or concentrate on just one?
- [ ] How will we establish the needs of those we intend to work with?
- [ ] How will the approach be tailored to suit different partners' needs?
- [ ] Will we make contact with others through a series of promotional activities or rely on our existing knowledge and networks?
- [ ] Are the activities we've planned appropriate for the needs of our target audience and the outcomes we intend?
- [ ] What assumptions have we made about the need for cultural and organisational change?
- [ ] What can we do to secure a commitment to take action?
- [ ] How will we know what impact we've had?
- [ ] Will our staff need to develop new skills to enable them to share their good practice effectively?
- [ ] What arrangements have we made to ensure that our existing practice doesn't suffer as a result of time spent sharing it?

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Case studies

Case study 1 **Lancaster and Morecambe College with City College, Birmingham and Nelson and Colne College**
A conference to share good practice in a single vocational subject

Case study 2 **Liverpool Community College with Darlington College and Oldham College**
Consultancy and workshops to share good practice in basic skills

Case study 3 **South Cheshire College with Salford College and Newcastle-under-Lyme College**
Sharing good practice in cross-college activities and curriculum areas

Case study 4 **Winstanley College with Stafford College and Solihull Sixth Form College**
Sharing good practice in an academic subject through a conference and follow-up visits

Case study 5 **Cirencester College with Truro College and Cricklade College**
A regional benchmarking network to support sharing good practice

Case study 1   A conference to share good practice in a single vocational subject

Lancaster and Morecambe College with City College, Birmingham and Nelson and Colne College

Introduction

Lancaster and Morecambe College has been involved in dissemination activity in:
- sharing good practice from the School of Hotel, Catering, Hairdressing and Beauty Therapy (HCHBT); and
- membership of a local benchmarking group of colleges that shares good practice among its members.

The main focus of this case study is spreading good practice from the School of HCHBT where the college received a grade 1 for hospitality and catering. The college's involvement in the benchmarking group, however, shows a different approach and is presented separately.

Background

Both the college and the School of HCHBT were keen to share good practice after the inspection. They both felt that the School provided a good example of the college's overall good practice in terms of teaching and learning, and student support services.

News of the grade 1 spread through several informal networks and through publication of the inspection report on the FEFC website and inclusion in the FEFC's good practice database. Similar departments in other colleges approached the School for advice, particularly those who were due for inspection and were keen to improve their current grades. The requests came from two main categories of colleges:
- those departments that wanted to improve from grade 2 or 3 to grade 1; and

- those departments that had been graded 4 or 5 and were urgently looking for ways to improve.

The Head of School and the college management discussed and agreed the approach to sharing good practice. The Head of School then drew up a more detailed action plan and put it into practice.

Approach

It was decided that a series of one-day conferences would be the most efficient way to share good practice given the large amount of interest shown by departments from other colleges. The School did not have the resources to be involved in a consultancy programme. This would have involved staff spending a lot of time away from their main departmental and teaching duties and could have had a negative effect on teaching and learning. A series of one-day conferences would allow the School to use its resources in a planned and managed way while not leading to open-ended commitments that it would struggle to meet.

It was also felt to be important for staff from other colleges to see the School in operation so they could put into context the issues that were being presented and discussed. An open approach was used where all records, systems and documents were made available for people to look at.

Awareness

Even though the college's grade 1 created a lot of immediate interest, it still went ahead with a mailshot. (City College, Birmingham responded as a result of the mailshot – the college was due to be inspected later in the year.) However, the response was overwhelming so the mailshot was quickly abandoned. The problem was not in creating interest but in dealing with it.

Case study 1

Delivery

The Head of School was responsible for co-ordinating the dissemination activity. This included:
- drawing up an action plan;
- preparing the Standards Fund application;
- selecting and leading the dissemination team; and
- managing the programme of conferences.

The dissemination team was made up of four teachers (members of the department's teaching staff) and one administrator (to deal with enquiries and help with preparing PowerPoint presentations). Standards Fund support allowed the team to be released from their main duties to do this work.

At first, no attempt was made to differentiate between partner colleges, but as the programme of conferences progressed (there were 15 in all), it became clear that the needs and expectations of departments with grades 2 or 3 were different to those with grades 4 or 5. As a result, later conferences tried to group the people attending to better meet their needs.

The 15 conferences followed a similar format with presentations on:
- NVQs and the needs of the sector;
- quality assurance (based on practice within the School of HCHBT);
- teaching and learning strategies; and
- quality assessments.

The team believed that the conference should be set in the context of the School so that people attending the conference could compare the learning environment of their own college with that of Lancaster and Morecambe. Most of the afternoon session was set aside for a tour that gave people a chance to see the School in operation and to look at documents, including schemes of work and quality frameworks.

There was a final session devoted to an open discussion on issues raised in the presentations and arising from the afternoon's tour. This often proved to be a particularly successful and productive part of the day.

People left with a conference pack that included:
- copies of the presentation slides;
- documents about how staff prepared for the inspection;
- lesson plan formats;
- documents about sharing good practice within the college;
- documents about internal meetings;
- copies of the School's mentoring programme;
- the college's continuing professional development (CPD) programme;
- key skills assignments;
- tutorial folders;
- documents about induction and diagnostic testing; and
- student booklets.

The people who came to the conference were also given the opportunity to inspect and take away documents about a range of other activities and systems.

Impact

The evaluation sheets that were filled in at the end of each conference showed high levels of satisfaction with the conference programme, but no further evidence was gathered on how many colleges had improved their performance or whether this was reflected in inspection grades. This is partly due to the difficulty of attributing improvements to the specific activities in which the colleges were involved but also to the fact that a conference does not provide the means to support putting the good practice into effect.

The approach to sharing good practice had a major effect on the School of HCHBT. They underestimated the effort involved in putting on a series of 15 one-day conferences, particularly the strain on the staff who were involved. As a result, they would not share their good practice in the same way again. They are currently involved in sharing good practice as a Centre of Vocational Excellence and have chosen to share their experiences through a website and a much more limited series of seminars and individual college tours. After finishing the conference programme, the School decided to take a break from further dissemination activity to make sure that the quality of their own work was not affected. Following the conferences, staff from the School were asked to form part of a larger consultancy team to help another college in the North West prepare for its inspection. Both the director of the School of HCHBT at Lancaster and Morecambe College and a senior colleague went to the college for a week to work with other consultants with inspection experience.

For City College, Birmingham, the conference helped them to:
- reflect on and compare its own practice across a range of areas (realising that they had many strengths as well as areas to improve);
- re-assess its approach to teaching basic skills;
- adopt a more energetic and imaginative approach to solving problems particularly in relation to gaining outside sponsorship and making more use of resources, for example, opening the training restaurant to outside agencies and companies for conferences and training events;
- re-assess its approach to learners in terms of learner consultation and work placement issues;
- have more confidence in its pre-inspection documentation, having used Lancaster and Morecambe College as a standard;
- network more; and
- realise that in areas like key skills and IT, change can take one or two years to happen.

What did the colleges learn?

- Not to share good practice from a position of superiority but recognise that everyone has something to contribute, even those from a less successful college.
- Have a dedicated group of staff to prepare and deliver dissemination activities with enough administrative support to help prepare materials and organise conferences.
- Recognise that even with dedicated administrative support and cover for staff, there will still be demands on staff that are more than has been predicted and planned.
- Recognise the importance of context and environment, and allow the people who come to conferences to experience this.
- Realise that both the formal (systems, documents and so on) and the informal (teamwork and sharing) are connected. It's easy to concentrate on sharing one and not the other.
- Be open and make everything available for questioning or inspection (or both).
- Have presenters who understand the appropriate level of detail and try to be specific.
- Not to have a programme that is too long. Fifteen Fridays in succession was too demanding and put an unwelcome extra burden on presenting staff.
- When it comes to preparing for an inspection, or trying to improve after an inspection, it is not a good idea to mix departments that are trying to achieve a grade 1 with those that are struggling to escape from a grade 4 or 5. Their needs are too different.
- In spite of the time taken up in planning, conferences still represent a highly cost-effective way of starting the process of sharing good practice with a wide audience. They also present a valuable opportunity for

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people to learn from each other as well as from the college that is sharing good practice. They are often the only chance for staff from several different colleges to get together. Discussing and exchanging ideas may not just be confined to the conference agenda but will almost always include other, related and unrelated, issues.

● Conferences can inspire the people who come to them. While all people attending may take back ideas and documents, some may find a conference especially revealing in terms of overall approach and philosophy.

The benchmarking group

The principals of Lancaster and Morecambe, Nelson and Colne and South Trafford colleges set up the benchmarking group to provide an additional means of sharing their good practice. They were joined later by Skelmersdale College. Benchmarking activities involved looking at processes as well as data.

One of the main issues that the colleges faced was preparing for and acting on inspection findings. Related activities and issues to do with self-assessment of support services triggered the involvement of quality assurance managers. Standards and benchmarks were set for finance, customer care and resource management, and then applied across the colleges. It has become normal practice for the colleges to share documents and practice both before and after inspections.

Activity has spread in two ways. They are:
● vertically from principals to senior managers to curriculum leaders and finally to full-time and part-time teaching staff; and
● horizontally, to include an ever-widening range of functions and activities. For example:
 – cross-college management seminars and training;
 – presentations to governors;

– forming a professional development group and management information services group;
– curriculum teams;
– joint validation exercises;
– work shadowing – especially for work-based learning staff; and
– developing and reviewing job specifications.

Also, staff from Nelson and Colne College have helped another college prepare for Investors in People and the Charter Mark by spending time with their staff and sharing documents.

A management development event was held in a college outside the group but using the group's staff to look at issues surrounding a move to a single campus and managing the changes associated with this.

A series of off-site events has been held using either college staff or outside consultants to look at:
● benchmarking issues and mentoring; and
● staff development for the 220 or so part-time teaching staff at Nelson and Colne College. The results of this exercise were then shared with other group members.

Finally, the group have held a conference on benchmarking activities and issues, attended by 83 people.

Case study 2

Consultancy and workshops to share good practice in basic skills

Liverpool Community College with Darlington College and Oldham College

Background

Liverpool Community College (LCC) is one of very few colleges nationally to be awarded an inspection grade 1 for basic skills. The interviews focused on Liverpool Community College's basic skills dissemination activity, although the college also received funding to share good practice in student support and governance.

Approach

LCC staff wanted to avoid any suggestion that their approach was a quick fix to the sector's apparent difficulties in teaching basic skills. Care was taken to ensure that the activities which were planned for each college that they worked with met an identified need.

> 'It takes time, flexibility and an understanding of your own students and particular environment to develop the best provision for your college or agency.'
>
> (Extract from LCC's marketing material produced to support its Standards Fund dissemination activities.)

The original intention had been to develop a series of training packages. These would have been tested with each college LCC worked with. However, it quickly realised that the packages would need so much customisation to suit the needs of individual colleges that this would not be worthwhile.

The approach which LCC finally adopted is outlined in the flow chart on the next page and developed in the related paragraphs.

Two members of staff (a literacy specialist and a numeracy specialist) were recruited to work specifically on dissemination activity. However, the college concluded that its partners would get the most out of working with staff who were more experienced in working in basic skills at LCC. So, they decided to use the new members of staff to cover the teaching duties of others to allow them to work on the dissemination activity.
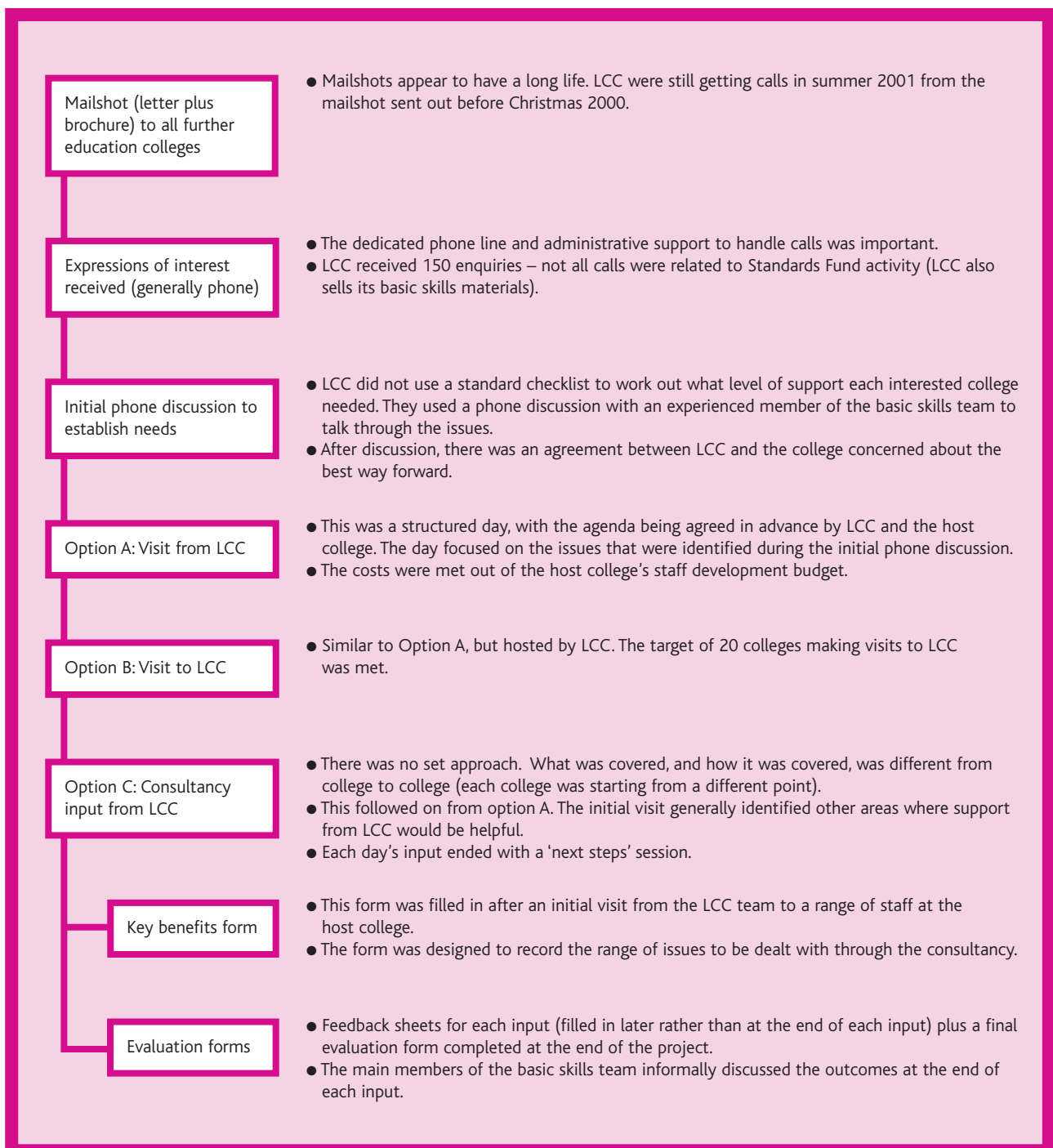
Care was taken to make sure that LCC students did not suffer through staff involvement in dissemination activity – for example, input into visits and consultancy were scheduled to avoid clashing with contact time (visiting staff from other colleges were not allowed to observe lessons in progress).

Awareness

The mailshot generated enough interest for the college to be able to meet its targets of 10 five-day consultancies plus 20 other visits from colleges to Liverpool. The initial phone discussion correctly identified the sort of support which colleges needed. Only one college changed its initial preference for a visit to a consultancy.

A total of 150 enquiries were generated by the mailshot (many of these were for LCC basic skills publications which were also advertised). The two partner colleges in this case study became involved with LCC for other reasons. For Darlington College the involvement came as a result of a suggestion from the college's principal. At Oldham, it was through a new senior manager looking for sources of good practice.

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Mailshot (letter plus brochure) to all further education colleges	• Mailshots appear to have a long life. LCC were still getting calls in summer 2001 from the mailshot sent out before Christmas 2000.
Expressions of interest received (generally phone)	• The dedicated phone line and administrative support to handle calls was important. • LCC received 150 enquiries – not all calls were related to Standards Fund activity (LCC also sells its basic skills materials).
Initial phone discussion to establish needs	• LCC did not use a standard checklist to work out what level of support each interested college needed. They used a phone discussion with an experienced member of the basic skills team to talk through the issues. • After discussion, there was an agreement between LCC and the college concerned about the best way forward.
Option A: Visit from LCC	• This was a structured day, with the agenda being agreed in advance by LCC and the host college. The day focused on the issues that were identified during the initial phone discussion. • The costs were met out of the host college's staff development budget.
Option B: Visit to LCC	• Similar to Option A, but hosted by LCC. The target of 20 colleges making visits to LCC was met.
Option C: Consultancy input from LCC	• There was no set approach. What was covered, and how it was covered, was different from college to college (each college was starting from a different point). • This followed on from option A. The initial visit generally identified other areas where support from LCC would be helpful. • Each day's input ended with a 'next steps' session.
Key benefits form	• This form was filled in after an initial visit from the LCC team to a range of staff at the host college. • The form was designed to record the range of issues to be dealt with through the consultancy.
Evaluation forms	• Feedback sheets for each input (filled in later rather than at the end of each input) plus a final evaluation form completed at the end of the project. • The main members of the basic skills team informally discussed the outcomes at the end of each input.

Delivery

LCC worked with colleges who had inspection grades ranging from 4 to 2. The initial phone discussion was used to find out the most appropriate way in which LCC could help.

Colleges involved were spread out across the country. LCC found it difficult to work with colleges who were far away. At one stage, LCC experimented with a 'distance learner', telephone support approach for the more distant colleges. However, this proved to be a less than satisfactory way of passing on good practice – face-to-face contact was crucial to success.

No college who wanted help was turned down. However, some staff felt that the number helped (30 in total) was too much for the time and resources available. The Faculty Manager is now restricting the outside work that staff get involved in.

The college used part of Standards Funding to put a curriculum manager in charge of its dissemination activity (as 'Basic Skills Development Manager') on a full-time basis. This meant the manager lost day-to-day classroom contact with basic skills learners. The manager has some concern about this as she does not want to lose her own teaching skills or not keep up to date with new developments in basic skills teaching.

As well as the Development Manager, the project operated with a small team made up of an assistant (also qualified in teaching basic skills) and two administrators.

All basic skills staff (over 60 full- and part-timers in total) were involved in dissemination activity at some point. This allowed them to share the development opportunities that the Standards Fund gave and also reduced disruption to an individual's usual job. The involvement of a range of experienced practitioners was felt to be important if the colleges were to get the most out of their visit or consultancy.

Work with Darlington College comprised the following activities:
- an initial whole-day visit to Darlington College focusing on the inspection followed by another visit after the inspection;
- a visit to LCC by four staff – this was designed to cover areas of interest to Darlington College (mainly about community development); and
- ongoing support by email and phone.

Work with Oldham College, included the following:
- an initial visit to Oldham College to identify specific areas of need and provide guidance (for example, the relationship between basic skills and what is provided for students with learning difficulties or disabilities, and the approach to managing the basic skills curriculum);
- a visit to LCC by staff – this was designed to cover areas of interest to Oldham College (mainly about the approach to community outreach);
- staff development activity at Oldham College; and
- two more support visits to the Head of School at Oldham, reviewing progress and providing input on planned developments.

Case study 2

Impact

Disseminators and partners filled in feedback sheets after each activity and at the end of LCC's input. These show that all involved were generally satisfied with the programme of work. However, they do not show what effect the activities have had in any of the partner colleges.

A small number of partners have been inspected after receiving input from LCC (for some, this was the main motivation behind getting involved). Those that were inspected have improved their grades since the previous inspections, but it is not possible to say whether this is as a result of dissemination activities alone.

Working with LCC helped Darlington College to:
- prepare for inspection – this confirmed that a lot of what the college was doing matched LCC's good practice but also provided some helpful guidance about what inspectors were looking for and how to present information to them (basic skills subsequently received a grade 2);
- draw up an action plan for achieving the Post-16 Basic Skills Quality Mark. Using LCC's action plan as a guide saved Darlington College a lot of preparation time;
- highlight staffing issues. Darlington College was able to compare the amount of non-contact time that their staff received against an external and independent benchmark;
- develop its own approach to teaching basic skills in the community;
- remodel the way the college offered learning support (there are now curriculum representatives for basic skills in each area and a direct link to a named member of the basic skills team); and
- introduce new resources.

Working with LCC helped Oldham College to:
- raise the profile of basic skills across the college – following staff development work with LCC, the basic skills staff have held sessions for other college staff to raise their awareness of teaching basic skills and providing basic skills support;
- introduce basic skills teaching in the community – five centres have been set up;
- raise the profile of basic skills – all staff teaching basic skills now have to have (or be working towards) appropriate basic skills qualifications;
- separate the delivery of basic skills programmes from teaching and support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities;
- place responsibility for basic skills delivery within the main curriculum areas (so it was no longer seen as someone else's responsibility); and
- argue the case for getting more resources for teaching and learning in basic skills.

Working with LCC saved Darlington College and Oldham College a lot of time on the learning curve – things were done that either would not have been done due to the pressure of work or would have been done less effectively. Both partners appreciated the value of having an informed person contributing to the development of basic skills in their college.

What did the colleges learn?

- The more quickly that an open relationship between the disseminator and partner develops the better (the partner will then get more out of the dissemination activity).
- Visiting the partner college helps to achieve a better understanding of the context in which the good practice will be used.
- It is important to see a wide range of

people at the partner college in order to get different points of view on what the issues are. This helps to avoid being side-tracked by internal politics or other problems.

- Working with a wide range of staff – both disseminator's and partner's – builds interest and creates motivation.
- Involving senior managers at the partner college helps to move things forward and enables it to get the most benefit from the dissemination process.
- Restrict input to areas where the disseminator college knows (and has external confirmation) that it is good. Be honest – if you don't know everything don't be afraid to admit it.
- Take steps to cause as little disruption to normal teaching and learning activities as possible – for example, by restricting times when dissemination work can take place, by spreading the load across a number of staff, and by restricting access to actual delivery situations.
- From the partner's point of view, three things helped to make the project a success:
  - the staff from LCC. They had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the issues at both practitioner and at a more strategic level, and were able to plan their input accordingly;
  - the opportunity to visit LCC to see how they delivered basic skills in the community; and
  - the ability to tailor the input to suit the particular needs of the partner college.
- The consultancy style of input was felt to be far more useful than other forms of input. Conferences are not generally helpful because they don't always match the needs of those attending, and materials brought back from them tend to get 'left on the shelf'. By comparison, consultancy needs a commitment to make time to attend the sessions and creates more pressure to actually do something as a result.

- The effect from sharing good practice solely through distance learning is also limited because it does not allow people to discuss the suitability of the practice for their situation and what they would have to do to make it work. However, further support via email may be appropriate once a college is clear about what it has to do to adapt the good practice. A 'chat room' facility on the Internet could help to encourage networking between colleges who are at a broadly similar level or on the same development path following the initial input from LCC.
- It is easy to get involved in doing more than has been agreed. For example, taking into account preparation time, LCC staff generally exceeded the planned number of days on each dissemination activity.
- Staff changes and college mergers caused difficulties for both disseminators and partners. There are significant problems in the relationship when one person moves on and a lot of the benefit of what has happened so far is lost (this is especially the case for one-to-one activities such as work shadowing). All of those who were involved in working with LCC have now left Darlington College (or are about to leave).

Case study 3 — Sharing good practice in cross-college activities and curriculum areas

South Cheshire College with Salford College and Newcastle-under-Lyme College

Background

South Cheshire College (SCC) achieved grade 1s in three curriculum areas as well as in management, quality assurance, resources and support for students in its inspection in 1999. Subsequently it was designated a Beacon College and was awarded accredited status by the former FEFC.

Approach

The college anticipated carrying out a number of different activities – consultancy (including dissemination on Management Information Systems), conferences and seminars, teaching observation and research projects.

Two conferences were run which focused on cross-college functions and services. The college also ran a series of conferences and seminars which it promoted as 'High Quality-Low ALF' (Average Level of Funding).

The people who came to the conferences were given a CD of the presentations and related documents rather than a conference pack of printed materials. This meant that a lot of information could be given out providing better value to the partner colleges.

However, as dissemination activity progressed and demand for individually tailored support increased, conferences to raise awareness were no longer needed. Subsequently, all good practice was shared through consultancy work. SCC's approach was to set itself as a benchmark against which other colleges could assess themselves rather than as a blue print to be copied.

Awareness

SCC used its existing lists of email contacts to publicise its Standards Fund-supported activity. The conferences generated some consultancy work, but most of the demand for consultancy came as a result of word of mouth.

Being a Beacon College and having good inspection grades were felt to be more significant factors in generating interest in SCC than any formal marketing activity. Salford College, for example, knew about SCC through a local quality network

Delivery

SCC's Quality Manager co-ordinated the project. This included:
- preparing the Standards Fund application;
- logging each activity carried out by SCC staff;
- co-ordinating some of the visits;
- making sure that materials were produced to meet agreed deadlines; and
- making sure that the activities met the needs of the partner colleges.

SCC made a conscious decision not to build in separate arrangements for managing the dissemination activities. Apart from monitoring the budget, responsibility for the projects was left to those who were working on them. Curriculum managers were asked

what good practice they were willing to share. The decision to become involved was left to them – they were not expected to be involved if they did not want to be.

The consultancy-based approach allowed the SCC input to be very customer-focused, allowing the college to provide real support to its partners. It also allowed the college to get something from the process – it felt it was often possible to learn from what staff saw in the colleges they worked with.

Impact

While SCC would have generally met specific requests from other colleges without support from the Standards Fund, limits on staff time would have inevitably restricted:
- the number of colleges it was possible to work with;
- the level of input that could be given to each one; and
- the areas involved in sharing good practice work.

SCC's own assessment of the impact from its work has included use of participant feedback sheets for some activities and 'thank you' letters from partners for others.

The effect has been assessed more by general observation than by strict tests. For example, proof of the value of the experience is in the number of follow-up visits and regular visits on other matters from the same college. This shows, albeit indirectly, the importance that partners attach to the activities. In particular, the amount of consultancy work coming out of the conferences and referrals from other colleges helps to show the value of the work done.

SCC expects that its sharing good practice work will continue but on a smaller scale, probably focusing on those colleges that SCC has worked with recently. This is partly due to limits on the budget. Colleges more recently inspected against the Common Inspection Framework are also likely to want to visit.

Working with SCC has provided Salford College with a sounding board for new ideas and helped it do the following:
- emphasise the importance of quality assurance across the college;
- re-write out-of-date policies and procedures using SCC as a model;
- advise staff on writing self-assessment reports – SCC ran two sessions with Salford College's programme managers on how to write a self-assessment report and carried out a follow-up visit to Salford College to provide more support;
- run a staff development session on inspection;
- spend a day with student services staff to look at how they collect information; and
- provide continuing input – SCC's Quality Manager is a member of Salford College's Quality Improvement Committee. In this role he has provided valuable input and offered documents as a framework for Salford College where this would be helpful. Support has also been provided by email and phone.

While it is difficult to pick out the effects of sharing good practice with SCC from other activities, Salford College considers that it has achieved a lot over a year. Being able to work with SCC has certainly enabled the college to develop more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

Case study 3

What did the colleges learn?

- While local colleges are generally willing to share good practice, especially in non-curriculum areas, partner colleges have got much more out of the close links they have developed with SCC through Standards Fund-supported activity than through the other networks to which they belong.
- Using a consultancy approach means that partner colleges are helped in ways that make a real difference (or stand more chance of doing so) than is the case with conferences.
- Marketing does not need to be expensive. Emails sent to an existing list of college contacts and referrals from other colleges should be able to generate more than enough dissemination work. Inspection reports and grades seem to matter most to future partners.
- Consultancy sessions can occupy more time than has been originally planned. It may take someone at least a week to set up, do and report back on.
- Keep the workload under control and do not compromise teaching, learning and support for students. This may limit the commitment that the college can make to sharing good practice.
- It's also important that further development work to continuously improve the practice doesn't suffer either.
- When dealing with partner colleges, it is important to get a range of views on the issues that will be investigated.
- Use more than one member of staff. This avoids giving just one person's view on a preferred approach.
- Set the ground rules for the relationship and agree the input. This reduces the risk of problems happening later.

- Use dissemination activities as a staff development opportunity for your own staff wherever possible. This gives those involved in sharing good practice time to reflect on how they carry out their own jobs and can also be good for team motivation (raising their profile, both internally and externally).
- Visiting partners (and getting them to come to you) gives those involved a feel for the place they are trying to help. It is also important for the partner to see the context in which the disseminator's good practice is working.
- Most of the colleges that SCC visited were already satisfactory or good (inspection grades 3 or 2) but wanted to improve. South Cheshire's approach worked well for them.
- A few wanted more guidance and help. This group (inspection grades 4 or 5) were more difficult to help through sharing good practice alone. They needed an approach that has greater personal involvement (for example, mentoring or senior staff secondment) over a longer time period.

Case study 4

Sharing good practice in an academic subject through a conference and follow-up visits

Winstanley Sixth Form College with Stafford College and Solihull Sixth Form College

Background

Following a highly successful inspection, the college received support from the Standards Fund to share good practice. It made a commitment to develop a website and to hold conferences in Science, Art, English, History, Geography, Economics, Politics and General Studies.

The application to the Standards Fund identified four key elements. These were:
● teaching and learning;
● raising achievement;
● quality assurance; and
● support for students.

The main activities to support these areas were:
● developing a website; and
● delivering conferences based on the main subject areas plus quality assurance.

A website was developed to show the main features of good practice in the college and was further supported in teaching, learning and quality assurance with a pack of materials for other colleges to use. The college appointed a Special Projects Manager from the college senior management team to supervise all the dissemination activities.

Approach

The college chose to share most of its good practice through conferences. Whilst the principal delivered some consultancy work, it was felt that this would not be the most appropriate way for the college to share its good practice. There were several reasons which influenced this decision. These were:
● the college felt that management time is valuable and managers have enough to do without the added burden of consultancy work;
● the time available to carry out consultancy work can limit its impact; and
● there are real problems with transferring policy and practice from one college to another. Context, individual ability and experience are just three of many factors that have an influence. Dealing with these factors required more time than the college felt it was able to offer.

A Project Manager was appointed to:
● co-ordinate dissemination activity across the whole college;
● relieve curriculum managers of some of the burdens of organising conferences; and
● make sure that materials, presentations and websites were of a consistently high standard.

All staff agreed that the burden of organising conferences would have been too much if it was left to individuals or curriculum teams, and that the quality of delivery and support would have suffered.

Case study 4

Winstanley College was very clear about the reasons why it wanted to share good practice.
● the process of sharing good practice helps team building within the college and departments;
● the process creates opportunities to share good practice internally;
● it helps individual specialists to make contact with others in the same field. It also helps the college to network with other colleges and agencies; and
● sharing good practice demands self-evaluation and an assessment of what has been done and why.

Sharing good practice brings real benefits to the disseminating college as well as improving the way in which it is viewed by others.

Awareness

The Project Manager co-ordinated publicity for the conferences. Personal letters and a brochure were sent to named heads of department in other colleges.

There was no attempt to vary the approach to colleges based on their inspection grades either in the publicity material or the content of the conference programme (please also see Lancaster and Morecambe College's experience, case study 1).

No requests for help were received over the Internet and only a few came through networking. However, many of the people who came to conferences were already aware of Winstanley College's reputation and their inspection success through publication of their report and through the FEFC's good practice database.

Delivery

A series of one-day conferences was held in English, Geography and History. Another one-day conference was held on the main features of the college's quality systems. The departments involved were responsible for the conference programmes. Eighty-two people went to the curriculum conferences and another twenty-five attended the quality conference. The summer term was felt to be the best time to run the conferences.

None of the staff involved approached the process of sharing good practice as delivering expertise to others. It was viewed more as an open exchange of ideas about what works well and not so well in teaching and learning.

Some teaching staff made all materials, including lesson plans, available to be copied and taken away, while others simply had all documents open to inspection with limitations on what could be copied. All agreed, however, that lesson plans and schemes of work would have limited use in another college – the main point is in approach, not in specific content.

The conferences were well received, which was shown by the evaluation comments and many requests for more conferences.

Impact

The people who were interviewed were all concerned about the problems of transferring good practice between colleges, no matter what methods are used (conference, consultancy or other). Different college structures can be a particular problem. The principal quoted the example of management information systems at Winstanley College, which he felt were of a high quality and were supported by a highly capable technician. However, he was not sure that the system and

the technician would be as effective if they were transferred to another college.

All kinds of factors work against effective transfer, but particularly the context, experience and culture of the receiving college. While it is possible to have a change of attitude, there are many practical considerations to think about before actual practice and performance can be changed.

Some staff at Winstanley College think that it is often formal and documented information that is most likely to be shared. However, informal knowledge and an understanding of college culture are just as important if sharing good practice is to have an effect. Transferring informal knowledge creates a different set of problems to transferring formal knowledge. Interestingly, the English department felt that their conference really came to life when they talked about their values and the spirit within the department (that is, their culture of openness with each other, of sharing and of giving each other support).

Solihull Sixth Form College (Solihull SFC) recognised that the profile of students attending Winstanley College was very different to its own (for example, students' backgrounds, culture, motivations and expectations). Two members of staff from Solihull SFC went to the English conference. They were mainly interested to see how resources were organised, look at facilities and talk to staff from other colleges.

The staff from Solihull SFC returned with packs containing teaching schemes and ideas for coursework. They discussed ideas from the conference at a departmental meeting which led to two members of the English department returning to Winstanley College to consult staff more specifically about the syllabus and coursework materials, and to explore student-centred learning and resources.

No formal agenda was set for this follow-up day which was spent looking at curriculum issues, student focus groups and the organisation of learning resources.

They returned with:
- some teaching tips;
- ideas on self-assessment;
- some strategies for encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning; and
- ideas on how to store lesson plans and materials and make them accessible to students.

For Solihull SFC, sharing good practice was a two-stage process – going to the main conference followed by a one-off visit. The main priorities were finding practical solutions to teaching and learning issues. Those staff who attended the conference found some of the 'cultural' ideas much harder to put into practice, particularly those about student consultation. The people interviewed suggested that this kind of change to student culture takes longer and is more difficult if it is not already the policy and practice of the whole college. They also felt that the level of motivation of students at Solihull SFC was different to that of students at Winstanley College, so it would not be easy to transfer practice. While they would consider attending another conference to hear about current developments, they questioned the benefit to them of further one-to-one visits owing to what they felt was the difficulty of adapting the good practice to their own situation.

A Vice Principal from Stafford College went to the quality conference while she was working as a member of the management team of Tamworth College. Since her appointment at Stafford College she has put into practice ideas that came from her visit to Winstanley College. Her experience shows how dissemination of good practice can still have an effect many months after the event.

Case study 4

Good practice moves with individuals and is more effective when they have the power to follow it through.

She believes that her 'Winstanley experience' has helped her to improve Stafford College's performance at inspection. She was aware of Winstanley College's philosophy before she went to the conference. In her view, Winstanley College was a successful college because:

- it is totally focused on teaching and learning;
- the learner is at the centre of everything it does;
- minimum standards are set for each student;
- student progress is monitored and appropriate action is taken to keep progress on track;
- the drive for all the above comes from the top, with every manager being equally responsible for maintaining minimum standards;
- the management information system tracks the performance of all students and involves all managers from the principal down;
- the whole system supports both students and staff in identifying problems as they happen and then moving quickly to find solutions; and
- leadership is the most important quality in successfully managing a college. It can be transferred across colleges but it follows individuals.

There has also to be a specific level of management support if good practice is to be introduced successfully.

The conference served to confirm what she had already felt to be the right approach. The move from Tamworth to Stafford College gave her the opportunity to put the ideas into practice and the college's recent inspection suggests that there has been some effect.

What did the colleges learn?

- Transferring good practice is likely to be more effective where colleges share similar values and management styles. The same is also true of environment and the characteristics of students attending the college.
- Sharing good practice through conferences works at several different levels. This can range from taking away one good teaching idea to a determination to change the way a whole department or college works. It could also mean realising that what you do already matches the disseminator's good practice. Many would consider time spent confirming this to have been time well spent.
- Allocate enough administrative and management resources to plan and organise conferences, and to make sure there are consistent standards of presentation and delivery. This needs dedicated time and an adequate budget.
- Conferences are best held in the summer term when staff are more likely to attend.
- Be clear about what you are trying to share and reflect this in your pre-conference publicity as well as on the day.
- Preparing for and delivering a conference gives an opportunity to assess your own performance and that of your team or college.
- Avoid giving instructions. 'This works for us' is a helpful starting point but understand that the process of sharing good practice can be complicated. Be open about how the college works as well as about systems and documents.
- Recognise that everyone who comes to the conference, even from less successful colleges, will have something to contribute. Use the conference as an opportunity for colleagues to meet and make other contacts.

- Schemes of work and documents do not transfer to another college or department easily. They will usually need some alteration and sometimes they will be completely unsuitable. Understanding how they need to be adapted is something which is not easily done through a conference.
- Transferring good practice at anything above a purely individual level needs appropriate management and leadership in the partner college. The transfer is most successful if what is being transferred matches the vision of the college and attracts the necessary resources and expertise that are needed to put it into practice.

Case study 5 A regional benchmarking network to support sharing good practice

Cirencester College with Truro College and Cricklade College

Background

Seven colleges are involved in a benchmarking group based in the south and south-west of England – Cirencester, Cricklade, Exeter, Henley, Royal Forest of Dean, Strode and Truro. Although they are different in some respects (for example, Exeter is a lot bigger than the other colleges), the fact that they are all tertiary colleges means that they have enough common interests and experiences to make benchmarking worthwhile.

The colleges are far enough away from each other to make sure that competition is not an issue (but close enough to be in contact). This allows for an honest exchange of views to take place.

With an occasional change in membership over the years (the group has grown from five to seven), the group has been running since 1995. It is entirely voluntary – the general view among its members is that one of the reasons for its continued success is that its members are there because they want to be (rather than because they have to be).

Before the Standards Fund was introduced, benchmarking activity tended to be limited to college principals, deputy principals and others 'by invitation'. A curriculum or cross-curriculum area would be invited to each deputy principals' meeting.

The Standards Fund has allowed the benefits of sharing good practice to be extended across the colleges far more than was previously possible. In particular, it has kick-started the contact process, allowing members of staff at all levels in the colleges to contact each other informally and meet regularly.

Approximately 50% of funding has been used in this way to support increased benchmarking activities between the member colleges.

Members of the group also spent time spreading the message about benchmarking to other interested colleges. This involved visits to other colleges to discuss the principles and practice of benchmarking.

Approach

At the heart of the benchmarking group is a desire to:
- raise standards in teaching and learning, and levels of enrolment, retention and achievement; and
- allow professional exchange between staff at all levels and across all aspects of the member colleges' work.

In this context, benchmarking is not just about comparing data. While statistical analysis provides useful comparisons in the performance of similar colleges, it does not reveal much about how and why colleges are operating at their current level. A benchmarking group will look at the processes and practices associated with an activity to identify and reproduce what works best to improve performance.

The group achieves this by:
- collecting, analysing and exchanging comparative data and other information – members of the group need to have a reasonably common approach to documents and information so that comparisons are valid;
- using data as a way to identify good practice; and
- sharing ideas, experiences and good practice that will benefit all members.

Historically, member colleges have taken it in turns to host principal and deputy principal benchmarking meetings – these continue to be used to bring colleges together. Meetings between member colleges at curriculum and cross-curriculum level also take place outside this formal meeting structure.

Formal notes are not usually taken at meetings so that discussion can be more open.

In between meetings, colleges keep in contact by email, phone, visits to benchmark colleges and a programme of lesson observations.

With regard to the 'spreading the benchmarking message' element of the project, the group produced an A4 information sheet called Benchmarking Families – Collaborating to Raise Standards. This was circulated to all colleges in the sector.

Colleges were offered a half-day workshop plus supporting materials and follow-up consultancy to learn from the benchmarking group's experience. As a result, visits have been made to four colleges that are interested in setting up benchmarking groups.

Awareness

Awareness of the benchmarking group among staff at member colleges does not appear to be an issue – most staff are either aware of it through direct involvement, or will have it brought to their attention when they need to deal with certain issues.

At Cirencester College, staff are asked about their involvement in benchmarking work as part of the staff review process. Comparisons with the benchmarking group are expected as part of the course review. By doing this, the college hopes that benchmarking will become part of the culture of quality improvement.

Delivery

Colleges within the group consider that between six and nine colleges is the ideal number for a benchmarking group of this type – any more and the balance between distance and competition between members might be compromised; any less and the range of experiences being shared might not be enough to make the experience worthwhile. Not all members can go to all benchmarking meetings – having at least six members at each meeting makes them worthwhile.

The group works because its members share similar characteristics. For example, they are all tertiary colleges in similar locations (market towns in mainly rural areas) and client groups (young people aged between 16 and 19 plus a strong focus on involving the community). This means that all the members of the group face the same issues from similar points of view and are more likely to find solutions within the group that apply to them. The group has survived staff changes so far. This shows how valuable members think benchmarking is. The group has benefited from the continued commitment of sympathetic senior managers.

In some areas of activity, there tends to be a cycle of peaks and troughs as periods of action are followed by periods where there is no need for benchmarking activity to take place. Other areas have longer periods of action (for example, Key Skills) or are the subject of a planned programme of activity (for example, lesson observations).

The following issues have been covered in recent meetings:

Case study 5

- cross-college issues: Basic Skills, Key Skills, progression from AS to A2, staff development, questionnaires and student feedback, inspection and self-assessment reports, equal opportunities, organisational structures and other staffing issues, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model, Curriculum 2000, programme hours and the structure of the college year, a co-ordinated approach to use of value added information, using data on achievement and staffing issues; and
- curriculum areas: Humanities, Science, English, Creative Arts, Maths, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and Languages.

The group are also observing lessons in each others colleges and looking at developing other activities including a mentoring scheme for senior staff.

Impact

The members of staff interviewed at all three colleges thought that networking in the benchmarking group was far more productive than the other (generally local) networks to which they belonged. This is particularly the case for teaching staff. For other staff (in particular, those involved in cross-curriculum areas – for example, Key Skills), the benchmarking group was part of a more general support network to which they had access.

All staff interviewed referred to the contact that they had with members of the benchmarking group as being of a significantly higher quality than the contact that they had with the more local networks to which they belonged. There were two aspects to this:
- the nature of discussions – local competition restricts the information that can be shared in local networks; and
- the subject of discussions – benchmarking

discussions cover both strategic and operational issues. Discussions in local networks tend to focus on operational issues only, and to be more negative and less creative than interactions in the benchmarking group.

While benchmarking is strongly supported by those involved, it is difficult to identify the effect that the project has had on improvements in retention or achievement, or both. However, the project has had an effect on:
- the curriculum;
- staff; and
- the colleges as a group.

On the curriculum

The impact on the curriculum has been seen through a number of small, but measurable, incremental changes. For example:
- several colleges introduced the European Computer Driving Licence as a result of the earlier experience of another group member;
- one member college was concerned about deadlines for handing in coursework in a particular subject area (Art) – group members were asked what the practice was in their colleges. Subsequently changes to coursework deadlines and procedures were made as a result of the good practice identified;
- the group provides a ready-made forum for exchanging ideas on particular areas of difficulty. For example, some colleges in the group have changed their approach to Key Skills Information Technology as a result of learning from the practice of others;
- one college changed its approach to eligibility for GCSE Maths retakes to deal with poor pass rates. Alternatives were offered to students who did not achieve a grade E at the first attempt;
- the group can draw on other teachers' experiences of developing new schemes of work for Curriculum 2000;
- group members have access to the wide

range of experience which other members can offer (for example, as exam board moderators or external verifiers); and

- resources are freely exchanged between practitioners.

On staff

Several people who were interviewed referred to the difficulty of getting out of their own college to see how others work. This is a particular problem for staff who have only worked in one college or are new to working in further education.

The benchmarking group offers a ready-made network for staff to see how others do things. Staff will then either think about their current practice or have the value of the approach they are currently using reinforced.

Having access to colleges in the group:
- helps staff appreciate that they are not the only ones experiencing problems or difficulties with new initiatives;
- removes the sense of isolation that staff can sometimes feel;
- allows staff to share experiences outside their own college openly and equally – this offers a safe and supportive environment in which, for example, you can admit the limits of your knowledge and receive real help;
- allows staff to see how things happen in other colleges – this may just reinforce the fact that 'things are not that different', which in itself can be valuable, or it may highlight areas where the college can improve or is already more advanced; and
- provides a sense of reassurance about a particular approach.

One of the colleges in the group was in recovery at the time of our visit. College staff emphasised how they had benefited from being part of the group by:
- providing staff who are new to the college

or teaching in post-16 education with invaluable information and support, especially on the 'big picture' (rather than getting bogged down in the day-to-day detail of work);
- offering advice on particular areas where the college has lost expertise due to staff leaving;
- observing lessons and preparing for re-inspection, with support from those who had been through the process before; and
- preventing staff and the college from becoming too self-critical (a particular difficulty for those in recovery) – the fact that others are interested has helped staff regain confidence in the value of what they are doing.

On the college

Finally, benchmarking has helped the member colleges to:
- share the burden on a range of issues that all colleges face (for example, the introduction of Curriculum 2000);
- add to the pool of knowledge that colleges can use;
- improve the quality of processes and documentation through sharing;
- make resources go further – group members have relatively small budgets because they are smaller colleges so being in the group helps them make what they have go further; and
- move quickly along the learning curve through sharing the experience and knowledge in the group.

Again, while all colleges benefited, the college in recovery was particularly helped. This college felt that teaming up with other colleges in the group had had a huge effect by:
- providing access to good practice;
- offering the opportunity to benchmark (for example, observing lessons); and
- improving staff confidence.

Case study 5

What did the colleges learn?

- Colleges need to have a common interest and be far enough away from each other. There can be a potential conflict where benchmarking groups include providers from the same local area. Whilst local networking may be desirable, benchmarking relies on a more open exchange which is best achieved where the providers are not competing for the same learners.
- Some initial face-to-face contact is important but once connections are made, a lot can be done over the phone or by email.
- There need to be some colleges with externally recognised good practice in the group for maximum effect.
- While benchmarking encourages colleges to learn from each other, care must be taken to use other ideas from further afield.
- Members have to get on as a group. The south-west group seems to have survived changes of personnel and expansion beyond the original principals' group fairly easily.
- Involvement in benchmarking is better started early in the academic year rather than later.
- It is important for staff to be comfortable with what they can tell other colleges in a non-competitive situation, so the early involvement and commitment of the principal and senior management team is important.
- Benchmarking takes time and effort by those involved if it is to work well – you only get something out of it if you put a reasonable amount of time and effort in.
- Group members tend to prioritise calls from benchmark colleges. They are also prepared to do work for benchmark members that they would not do for others, and to do it sooner rather than later.
- There is a danger that benchmarking relies too much on the commitment of key personnel – it may collapse if some people in certain colleges move on.

- Members of the group believed that benchmarking represented good value as a means of sharing good practice. In particular, the agenda is set by the member colleges as a group rather than by an individual partner. This means that colleges can cover what they want to cover in dissemination activities – and not what someone else has decided will be covered.
- On the basis of this group's experience, some assistance and support from an external organisation may well be necessary to help benchmarking groups start up elsewhere.
- This might include some or all of the following actions:
  – reducing the number of local partnerships that colleges join;
  – publicising more widely the benefits of benchmarking;
  – identifying a number of groups of colleges who could work together in a benchmarking group – this would remove a possible blockage at the start of the process (that is, identifying colleges who could form a group); and
  – providing support to set up benchmarking meetings, helping colleges to collect data to support benchmarking and identify those activities which could be improved.

Fieldwork and interview checklist

Fieldwork

Fieldwork was carried out using a mix of individual interviews and small focus groups. The key questions and interview prompts are set out here.

Main research question

What are the most effective strategies for sharing good practice between colleges?

Research method

Using dissemination activities carried out by colleges that used Further Education Standards Fund (category 5) funding as the source, ACL was asked by the LSC to research the most effective strategies for sharing good practice.

The research looks at the experiences of five disseminator and 10 partner colleges through a series of semi-structured interviews with those involved in dissemination activities.

Outputs

The interviews provide the source material for a report on effective approaches to sharing good practice, and the case studies, or aspects of them, are included as part of the report.

The people contributing have been given an opportunity to comment on references to their college in the report before its wider circulation.

Check list

Questions asked at interviews are outlined on the next page. Those that are specific to either disseminator or partner colleges only are noted as such.

The check list does not cover everything which was discussed during the interviews. The people interviewed were free to add comments on any other topics which they felt were relevant.

Fieldwork and interview checklist

Background

1 What area or areas of sharing good practice does this interview cover (see FEFC Circular 00/15)?

2 If the college could have become involved in dissemination activity across more of its activities but decided not to, why were all the possible areas not covered and how was the decision made on which should be included?

3 (Disseminators only) How much funding was received to support the dissemination activity or activities? Did this cover the cost of dissemination activity? To what extent have you had (or chosen) to support dissemination work with funds from elsewhere (an analysis of spending would be useful if it is available)?

4 When did good practice dissemination activity start? How long has it run for? Is it still running?

5 Had you or the college had any experience of this type of work before the college became involved in activities that were supported by the Standards Fund? If so, what was it and how does it compare to dissemination activity supported by the Standards Fund? What is the effect of the funding?

Approach

6 (Disseminators only) How did you decide on your approach to sharing your good practice? What factors influenced this?

7 (Disseminators only) What alternatives, if any, were considered? Why were they disregarded?

8 What was your approach to sharing good practice (we need a detailed description of the process from the disseminator college and the partner college's points of view)? (Disseminators only) If a variety of methods were used or available, which has been the most in demand and most successful?

9 Does the approach or approaches used focus on promoting awareness (distributing materials, publicity, publications, conferences, websites) or developing understanding (consultancy, workshops, secondments) or a combination of the two?

10 Did the approach you used change over time? If so, why and how?

Awareness

11 How were potential partner colleges made aware of what the disseminator was offering?

12 (Disseminators only) What was the level of interest – both initial expressions of interest and the number of people who took part – from partner colleges?

13 (Partner colleges only) How did partner colleges choose between the various options? What factors influenced the final choice of college to work with?

Delivery

14 (Disseminators only) Were the partner colleges 'chosen'? If so, how? How many partner colleges are there? Where are they (that is, local to the disseminator or further away)? What consideration was given to commercial and competitive factors?

15 (Disseminators only) How many partners can you work with at any one time? How many requests for help did you have to turn down?

16 What strategies or internal arrangements has the college put in place so it can share good practice?

17 How was dissemination activity managed? What issues arose and how were they handled?

18 How many staff were involved in the dissemination activities that are being discussed in this interview? An indication of grades or levels and whether it was

full-time or part-time involvement could be helpful?

19 (Disseminators only) How do the demands of being good at sharing your knowledge of an activity differ from the demands of being good at the activity itself?

20 (Disseminators only) How do you manage the expectations of partner colleges?

21 What happens next? Will the college generate any income from its dissemination activity?

Impact

22 How has the effect of the dissemination activity been measured? How will the value of being involved be shown? If an effect has been identified, what (or how much) is due to the activity being shared and what (or how much) is due to other factors?

23 (Disseminators only) Have you assessed the effect of sharing good practice or have you received any views from users? If so, what did they say?

24 Given the effect – both observed so far and expected in the future – does the approach to dissemination represent value for money?

25 Can the approach be used on a wider basis? If so, what resources would this need?

26 What obstacles did you face when you tried to share your good practice? How did you try to overcome them? Were you successful?

27 Did any unexpected benefits arise from being involved in the dissemination activities? If so, what were they?

28 Are there any conditions or preparatory steps that need to be in place if dissemination activity is to be effective?

Overall assessment

29 What has worked well? How have you made the most of these aspects?

30 What has worked less well? How have you tried to overcome any difficulties?

31 Looking back, would other approaches to sharing good practice achieve better value for money or would you do the same thing again?

Glossary

Some terms used in this publication have specific meanings. These are given below.

Accredited colleges
Colleges granted accredited status by the former Further Education Funding Council from September 1997 to March 2001. Accreditation was achieved through an application process and assessment against five criteria.

Average Level of Funding (ALF)
The average amount which a college received for each funding unit it delivered.

Beacon colleges
Colleges granted beacon status by ministers at the former Department for Education and Employment.

Benchmarking
A quality improvement process which compares one college's activities and processes with those of another.

Brokerage
A process by which colleges looking for help can be partnered with colleges offering support. A brokerage service may be offered by an independent organisation such as the Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Cross-college functions and areas
Services and activities which are not specific to particular teaching or curriculum areas but service them all. Student support, advice and guidance and finance are examples.

Cross-curriculum area
See also cross-college functions. Usually limited to activities directly relating to students, for example, learner support, key skills and tutorial provision.

Diagnostic testing
Assessment carried out at the start of a student's course or programme to work out any additional support needs the student may have.

Dissemination activities
Activities through which good practice is shared.

Disseminator
A college sharing its good practice.

Mentoring
An arrangement where an individual is able to receive support and guidance from a more experienced member of staff.

Outreach
Learning activities which are provided away from the main college site, often in community centres, schools and places of worship.

Standards Fund
The Further Education Standards Fund was introduced in 1999/2000 and allowed the Further Education Funding Council to support colleges to improve quality and share good practice. Category 5a was the part of the standards fund which allowed colleges to share good practice.

Work shadowing
An arrangement in which a member of staff from one institution or department works with or 'shadows' an experienced member of staff in another institution or department for an agreed period of time.

Acknowledgments

Other Publications

Other publications in the Good Practice series

Targets: getting smarter	January 2002
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Notes

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