



# Implementing the FE Workforce Strategy

The Agenda for Further Education Colleges  
and Sixth Form Colleges in England

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# 1.0

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# Introduction

Lifelong Learning UK <sup>1</sup> first launched the Workforce Strategy for the Further Education Sector in England in 2007. A 'refreshed' strategy has now been agreed for the current context that the sector faces, with the support of national partners including the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF) and the 157 Group (see box on next page), the latest version being available at [www.aoc.co.uk](http://www.aoc.co.uk), [www.157group.co.uk](http://www.157group.co.uk) and [www.sfcf.org.uk](http://www.sfcf.org.uk)

The national partners – who also include adult learning providers (ACL), work based learning providers (WBL), and specialist colleges (NATSPEC) – have each agreed to produce documents for their own 'community of practice' aimed at setting out concisely the key issues facing the sector and the actions needed to ensure the continued effective implementation of the Workforce Strategy in the months ahead. This publication aims to fulfill this purpose on behalf of further education colleges and sixth form colleges. Its contents are informed by consultations with our members, involving an online questionnaire survey and focus groups. They are set out in the pages that follow under each of the four main priority areas of the Workforce Strategy, preceded by a summary of the overarching issues that face the college sector.

Despite the many challenges in the wake of the severe retrenchment in public funding, the evidence from our members suggests that there is much good practice to build upon, especially with regard to the achievement of greater flexibilities and cost-effectiveness. There is also general agreement that the principles of the Workforce Strategy – as set out in the four main priorities – can now be 'taken as read' as a basic framework for sound practice in workforce management and development. In its present form, therefore, colleges are sceptical about its utility as a tool to guide decision-making related to the workforce. We therefore believe that, if the Workforce Strategy is to be continued, there will be a need for a further review, with a view to making it both more robust, and more specific to the changing context.

<sup>1</sup> Following the announcement on 9th December 2010 that Lifelong Learning UK was not successful in retaining its licence to operate as a Sector Skills Council (SSC), The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) and key government sponsor departments have since agreed a transfer of some Lifelong Learning UK responsibilities to the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) when the SSC ceases to operate from 1st April 2011. Further references to Lifelong Learning UK in this document should be seen in this context.

## College partners

**The Association of Colleges (AoC)** exists to represent and promote the interests of colleges and provide members with professional support services. AoC was established in 1996 by colleges themselves as a voice for further education and higher education delivered in colleges at national and regional level. Our membership includes general and tertiary further education colleges, sixth form colleges and specialist colleges in England and Northern Ireland. We work with and represent colleges in Wales and Scotland through affiliation of AoC and partnership with sister bodies in both countries via the UK Council of Colleges.

**The 157 Group** is a membership organisation that represents 27 large, highly successful and regionally influential further education colleges in England. Providing a national voice on strategy and policy for large, mostly urban colleges in England, the 157 Group aims to promote change for the benefit of its members and the sector as a whole.

**The Sixth Form Colleges' Forum (SFCF)** lobbies on behalf of sixth form college interests, provides services to its members including the conducting of national pay and conditions negotiations and the provision of advice and information.



# Overarching issues

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## Drivers of change

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- Overwhelmingly, the most commonly identified driver of change in the college sector is the reduction in public sector funding, together with the accompanying changes in funding priorities. As a consequence colleges perceive a need to continue to improve the flexibility and versatility of their workforce, potentially involving changes in contracts. The requirement is to 'do more for less', involving significant realignment of services and, in some cases, a smaller and/or restructured workforce.
- Coupled with the reductions in public funding, pressures for greater employer responsiveness have stimulated an anticipated shift towards full-cost delivery, and increased fee contributions from learners and employers, which requires more staff with commercial skills.
- The raising of the participation age to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2014 will have consequences in the form of larger group sizes, and greater demands on staff to cope with potential behavioural problems and pastoral care issues.
- Further curriculum change is anticipated in the wake of the continued reforms to qualifications and the impact of the report of the Wolf Review of Vocational Education, and colleges will need the flexibility to adjust quickly.
- In the current climate, it is regarded as imperative to get value for money from staff development, with further development of flexible forms of continuing professional development (CPD), including self-study facilities available online.

## Skills shortages and gaps

- Lifelong Learning UK’s Sector Skills Assessment for 2010 shows the following leading shortages, gaps and future skills needs:

Skills shortages		Skills gaps	Future skill needs
1.	Numeracy	E-learning delivery	Employer engagement
2.	Teaching, training & pedagogy	Employer engagement	Marketing the organisation
3.	Supporting diverse learners	Advanced ICT	Fundraising/bid writing
4.	Employer engagement	Performance/staff management	E-learning delivery
5.	Literacy	Managing change	Partnership working

- In our own recent survey, the most common skills gaps identified by member colleges are in:
  - general management and leadership
  - IT proficiency
  - specific subject area skills, including those related to engineering
  - management functional area skills (in, for example, finance, estates and marketing)
  - higher level skills for delivery at Level 3/4 and above.

- Informed by Lifelong Learning UK and our members’ feedback, our analysis of the college sector’s broader priorities for the future includes:
  - management and leadership skills
  - transferable skills and adaptive attitudes
  - skills relating to the effective utilisation of technology in the delivery of learning and in management information system (MIS) applications
  - commercial skills and experience, including those relevant to marketing and employer engagement
  - skills and experience in collaborative and partnership working
  - literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

# Priorities

## Core priority

Ensuring equality and diversity are at the heart of strategy and policy making, planning and training

### Assessment

- The large majority of colleges view themselves as effective in ensuring that equality and diversity is taken full account of in workforce strategy and planning. Examples of related innovative and effective practice are evident with regard to monitoring, recruitment and induction, and CPD.
- Colleges are engaged in the effective benchmarking of progress in furthering equality and diversity, and regard it as important that there is a continued provision of the related data that facilitates this process.
- Perceived problems and barriers in broadening the diversity of the workforce include geographical location in areas with a non-diverse population and limitations on the opportunities to change the workforce profile at a time of low staff turnover. Despite efforts being made, the proportion of black and minority ethnic staff within the workforce is not increasing at a fast enough rate, especially at management level. There are also more general concerns about how to recruit a diverse profile across governing bodies.

- There is widespread recognition of the broad implications of the Equality Act 2010, with the new public sector duties that come into force on 6th April 2011, and a wish for the sharing of information and other support to ensure that every college is fully prepared.

### Actions

- AoC, 157 Group, and SFCF will work with colleges to ensure that continued support is given to prepare members fully to discharge the new public sector duties that will come into force under the Equality Act 2010
- We will liaise with appropriate partners and representative bodies to spread effective practice in relation to all protected characteristics, and to support a continued increase in the diversity of college staff, management teams and governing bodies.
- We will work with our members to strengthen the exchange of effective practice, including in the benchmarking of equality and diversity data, and the successful initiatives taken by colleges in areas with relatively non-diverse populations.

## Priority 1

### Understanding the nature of the workforce

#### Assessment

- Most colleges are satisfied that their systems enable them to obtain data on their own workforce and interpret them satisfactorily to inform workforce planning. There are examples of effective practice, including in related areas of IT applications and procurement.
- However, many identify problems and barriers that they face in obtaining robust workforce data, and almost half in interpreting such data. Others raise issues concerning the time and expense involved in effective data capture and record keeping, and the difficulties of maintaining complete and accurate records. Some colleges experience limitations on their capability to benchmark effectively with others.
- Many concerns have been expressed about the Staff Individualised Record (SIR) in its current form. The associated burden of data collection and entry that falls upon colleges is disproportionate to the uses that are made of the SIR internally. It is evident that it would benefit from a full review to streamline the data collected and thereby hopefully encourage a higher response rate.
- For many colleges, the capacity to undertake benchmarking on a local or regional basis is

regarded as being more helpful than making national comparisons. In the case of teaching qualifications, the pressing need is to check compliance rather than to measure against the national benchmark. Colleges also make use of AoC HR benchmarks, including those related to absence/sickness, and to turnover, and would welcome the facility to extend the range of comparators.

- Certain fields within the SIR are regarded as useful, in particular those that facilitate benchmarking relating to equality and diversity issues. The Online Analytical Processing (OLAP) tool is valued for its facilitation of effective benchmarking and as a means of keeping track of a college's own performance over time.

#### Actions

- AoC, 157 Group, and SFCF commit to working via their respective HR networks to improve the sharing of effective practice in gathering and utilising workforce data. We will also liaise with Lifelong Learning UK/LSIS/IfL to strengthen support on workforce data.
- We will press for a more straightforward and streamlined version of the SIR and will work with relevant sector partners and with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to develop this aim, tailored more directly to colleges' workforce data needs. We also believe that the SIR should be supported by a continuing OLAP facility. Once these ends are achieved, we will support colleges to ensure high levels of compliance in data entry, in order to deliver an overall dataset that is both comprehensive and accurate.



## Priority 2

### Attracting and recruiting the best people

#### Assessment

- Most colleges regard it as highly important both to raise the profile of FE and to improve its public image in order to attract and recruit the staff they need. Compared with schools and universities, the range and type of career opportunities that FE can offer are not as widely known. It has long been felt within the sector that the media pays insufficient attention to FE. This adds to the challenge of addressing the sector's specific skills shortages.
- The most common recruitment problems and barriers currently experienced are the funding constraints that lead to difficulties in offering sufficiently attractive salaries, and skills shortages in specific vocational subject areas. For some colleges their geographical location creates additional barriers related to cost of living or remoteness.
- There are concerns that reforms being considered or planned by Government – including those to pensions and to initial teacher training (ITT) requirements – will further erode some of the overall remuneration package benefits currently enjoyed by FE compared with alternative career options available to potential job applicants.

- The most common way of recruiting the best people is via the development of existing staff. There is also evidence of more detailed and realistic job previews and overviews for applicants, and a development of formal strategies for succession planning.
- Innovative and effective recruitment practice exists in a number of colleges in the development of existing staff and/or former students, and also in the employment of robust assessment and testing procedures for job applicants.
- Steps taken or planned by colleges to promote a more positive image of a career in FE include improvements in recruitment advertising and PR – including online approaches – and the development of positive staff case studies.

#### Actions

- AoC, 157 Group, and SFCF will work to promote positive perceptions of employment in the college sector, in conjunction with their respective networks. Individually, colleges are urged to redouble their efforts to advocate their own workforce, and the benefits of joining it, at a local level.
- We commit to continue with our respective national lobbying roles, both with Government and with stakeholders more generally, to help ensure that FE receives more prominent and fairer attention.
- We will also support an improved sharing of effective practice across the sector, particularly that related to recruitment to hard-to-fill vacancies.
- We would welcome research on employee perceptions and motivations for working in colleges.

## Priority 3

### Retaining and developing the modern professionalised workforce

#### Assessment

- In the current climate of financial stringency, CPD is viewed by colleges as far and away the most cost-effective method of workforce improvement. Here, in-house and online approaches are in use across the vast majority of colleges. Developments are also occurring in classroom observation and feedback; staff appraisal; use of student feedback; mentoring; and coaching; with related examples of innovative and effective practice.
- Steps taken to develop leadership and management capacity in the workforce include training and development programmes, usually tailored to specific needs, and increasingly delivered in-house. Coaching and mentoring schemes are also commonly in use. Innovative and effective practice is evident in both these areas – and also in systems of competence assessment for new managers.

- Perceived problems and barriers in retaining and developing a modern professionalised workforce involve the impact of impending funding cuts on staff morale and retention, and on opportunities for CPD. Responses to these challenges include more robust mentoring programmes and investigation of online approaches to CPD.
- Specific priorities for future CPD include management and leadership; employer responsiveness; IT; and 14-19 education; as well as that concentrated on specific subject skills gaps. Continued research on the workforce skill shortages, gaps and priorities for the sector is viewed as desirable in order to inform workforce planning in anticipation of future skills requirements.
- Increased opportunities to share effective practice on CPD practices, achieving greater flexibility and adaptability in the workforce would be welcomed, including via online exchanges as well as networks.
- Evaluation of CPD cost-effectiveness is regarded as ever more important. The development and maintenance of the evidence base in this area is therefore an area of concern.

## Actions

- AoC, 157 Group, and SFCF will request UKCES and Lifelong Learning UK/LSIS to take appropriate steps to ensure continued research on future skills needs in the sector.
- We will consider if there are ways in which we can work with our members to facilitate the development of collective procurement schemes for CPD, in order to enhance value for money.
- We will also take steps to improve the sharing of effective practice, both via our own networks and in conjunction with national partners, including on:
  - skills priority areas as identified by our members
  - innovative and successful approaches to CPD
  - external sources of good quality CPD
  - impact assessment
  - workforce flexibility.

In doing so, we will seek to extend the availability of online exchanges, as well as via HR and staff development networks, and improving links to relevant national projects.

- We will continue to support our members on developing leadership and management skills in the workforce.

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# Notes

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## More information

> For more information about this document please visit:

[www.aoc.co.uk](http://www.aoc.co.uk)

[www.157group.co.uk](http://www.157group.co.uk)

[www.sfcf.org.uk](http://www.sfcf.org.uk)

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