FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN PRIORITISING AND IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN FURTHER EDUCATION

Project report for FETL

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- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

The Further Education Trust for Leadership is delighted to have supported this important and timely project and we are equally pleased with the result, which represents a much-needed, serious and substantial contribution to our understanding of the complex relationship between leadership, teaching and learning in further education.

Taking as its starting point the experiences of staff at three further education colleges, it recognises both that teachers are the people best placed to understand their professional needs and improve their practice, and the pivotal role leaders play in creating an environment in which such improving practices can be fostered.

It shows how important it is for leaders also to be learners and listeners, and gives some compelling examples of how such leaders practice the leadership of learning and teaching.

The trouble facing leaders, of course, is that they must operate in an environment that is not particularly conducive to the kind of collaborative, trusting and values-based leadership that results in the best teaching and the best outcomes for learners.

As the authors found, the culture of high-stakes inspection that dominates our approach to accountability can have a distorting and disruptive impact on improving teaching and learning, as can instability in policy and funding arrangements. I believe this finding will resonate with the sector.

In too many cases, institutions and their staff are focused on the next inspection rather than the needs of their learners and communities. Colleges can become very good at preparing for and anticipating the demands of inspectors, but it is sometimes at the cost of a genuinely far-sighted approach to improving teaching and learning.

As the report describes, high-stakes accountability can lead to 'institutional paralysis', with leaders preoccupied with second-guessing Ofsted rather than fostering improvement, and passing these concerns onto staff, through their approach to internal assessment and observation, for example. Too often, command and control comes at the expense of thinking and listening.

In such a context, it is important that leaders reassert their values and those of their institutions, and remember their distinctive mission and commitment to public service, which must mean going beyond the preoccupation with inspection and short-term funding arrangements to develop what the authors term a 'long-term narrative' about the work, with teaching and learning at its heart.

What I liked particularly about the report was that it gets that what we in further education lead is learning. I think it is time we reasserted this and made it the unqualified heartbeat of our work. In the context of reduced budgets and high-stakes inspection, this can be a challenge, but when it comes to leading these values-based, ethically oriented institutions, it really is the only game in town. The alternative? Hitting the target and missing the point!

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings and recommendations of an independent research project into *the role of leadership in prioritising and improving the quality of teaching and learning in further education*. The project captures the views and experiences of further education (FE) staff working at all levels, from senior leaders to hourly paid tutors and learning support staff.

The FE sector has endured one of the most challenging and turbulent periods in its history of late. With FE the only part of the education budget to have experienced year-on-year cuts since 2010, the financial position of the sector has worsened considerably in the last decade. Combined with the instability caused by relentless policy reform, a period of unprecedented marketisation and high-stakes inspection and accountability systems, it is perhaps unsurprising that these factors have led to what Keep (2018) describes as the 'perfect storm' for FE, with the future shape and direction of the sector looking uncertain. In light of these adversities, it is all the more remarkable then that FE continues to deliver a high level of quality in teaching and learning in the majority of its providers. However, what is not yet fully understood is what the relationship is between leadership and improving teaching and learning and how leadership makes or fails to make a difference. This research project emerged in response to these questions, to address these gaps in knowledge in the context of the wider FE backdrop.

This project report explores the relationship between leadership and improvements in teaching and learning in FE. It examines the interface between strategic thinking in leadership, its application at an operational level and how this connects to outcomes in

teaching and learning. In doing so, it also investigates how the impact and effectiveness of these activities are monitored and captured.

One of the key findings from the project is that **teaching staff are best placed to improve teaching and learning by identifying and targeting their own professional needs**. Senior leaders and managers have an important role to play in establishing the conditions in which this can take place. **Leadership approaches to improving teaching and learning need to actively involve those that teach**, drawing on their expertise and experience. The improvement of teaching and learning is an activity that has to originate with and be owned by teachers. A key driver of any such improvement is collegial collaboration. The evidence from the case studies in this report reveals that if improvements to teaching and learning are to occur, then the creation of time and space (both physical and mental) is a fundamental factor. Teaching staff need to be released to try out new ideas, skills and interventions and to be able to reflect on and discuss their impact and effectiveness with colleagues. In order to do this, there needs to be a greater balance between centralised systems and policies that control how teaching and learning is monitored and improvement is planned, allowing space and flexibility for teachers to discover things themselves and work collaboratively on targeted improvements.

In the case of 'Hill Top College' (the first case study discussed in this report), the notion of **structured autonomy** was at the heart of its success and the college-wide improvements in teaching and learning. A loosening of top-down control and a devolving of leadership to teachers was realised through the introduction of an initiative known as 'teaching triangles', where staff were **empowered to take ownership** of their professional development. Senior leaders at Hill Top created the necessary conditions to support **structured autonomy,** whereby teachers were able to exercise professional agency.

Another key finding to emerge from the project was that **FE providers need to view and duly construct improvements to teaching and learning as a long-term narrative that unfolds incrementally** and transcends the straitjacket of annualised funding arrangements and the omnipresent spectre of Ofsted inspections. An important ingredient of any organisational strategy is the creation and consolidation of stability as part of this narrative. Admittedly, this is not easy in a climate of continued austerity and a sector fraught with external pressures, competing agendas and relentless policy intervention. As such, it requires strength of conviction and courage on the part of senior leaders to create the necessary conditions in which collegial collaboration can thrive and teaching staff are given the autonomy and space to take ownership of and drive forward their own professional learning. But it can be done. The three case studies presented here all dealt with unstable environments. But only one of these effectively fostered an environment in which teachers themselves were habitually discussing their everyday practice.

In short, **improving teaching and learning is about creating an environment in which collegial interaction can flourish**. It is a process that is locally defined and invariably rooted in subject specific/course contexts. It is socially situated and is shaped by sustained human interactions. To flourish, i**t requires adequate time for teachers to share thoughts and reflection on their practice**, not in single events scattered throughout the year, but in regular, ongoing informal interactions that have allocated time and space. The role that leaders have in creating and protecting this time and space is absolutely fundamental to ensuring meaningful and sustained improvements to teaching and learning in FE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to this research project. Very special thanks are extended to the staff from the three case study institutions who participated in the project. Without the cooperation or generosity of these participants, we would not have been able to gather such a rich collection of data.

We would also like to thank the project steering committee and those who attended the national round table event for their contributions to the project, all of which have proven very valuable and helped to enrich this final project report.

Finally, we would like to thank FETL for funding and supporting this project.

Professor Matt O'Leary

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1. INTRODUCTION

The further education (FE) sector has endured one of the most challenging and turbulent periods in its history of late. A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Belfield, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2018) confirmed that FE has suffered the most of all sectors in government funding cuts to education in the last 25 years. Spending on adult skills 'fell by about 45% in real terms between 2009–10 and 2017–18' (ibid., pp. 46–47), yet FE continues to provide courses for the majority of the country's 16 and 17 year olds (ibid., p. 39). With FE the only part of the education budget to have experienced year-on-year cuts since 2010, the financial position of the sector has worsened considerably in the last decade as a consequence of the government's continuing austerity agenda, resulting in an estimated 23,000 redundancies according to the University and College Union (Jeffreys, 2018) and ever-increasing workloads for those that remain. Combined with the instability caused by relentless policy reform, a period of unprecedented marketisation and high-stakes inspection and accountability systems, it is perhaps unsurprising that these factors have led to what Keep (2018) describes as the 'perfect storm' for FE, with the future shape and direction of the sector looking decidedly uncertain.

In light of these adversities, it would seem all the more remarkable then that FE continues to deliver a high level of quality in teaching and learning in the majority of its providers, as evidenced by recent Ofsted inspection results which reveal that over three-quarters of colleges (79 per cent) were rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' as of October 2018. In addition, with specific relevance to leadership and the focus of this project, a research report published by the London School of Economics' Centre for

Vocational Education Research (CVER, 2017) towards the end of 2017 highlighted the role of leadership in making a difference to student outcomes. What is not yet fully understood is **what** the relationship is between leadership and improving teaching and learning and **how** leadership makes or fails to make a difference. This research project emerged in response to these questions, to address these gaps in knowledge in the context of the wider FE backdrop.

Project overview

The role of leadership in prioritising and improving the quality of teaching and learning in further education is a project that explores the relationship between leadership and improvements in teaching and learning in FE. **It examines the interface between strategic thinking in leadership, its application at an operational level and how this connects to outcomes in teaching and learning**. In doing so, the project also investigates how the impact and effectiveness of these activities is monitored and captured.

Underpinning the project's conceptualisation of **leadership is the notion of leadership as a shared practice and collective responsibility** that manifests itself in differing roles and guises across organisations. At the core of the project's philosophy is the premise that if we are to develop an in-depth and situated understanding of the role leadership plays in creating and sustaining an organisational culture that prioritises the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, then this requires the inclusion of multiple perspectives and not just those of senior leaders. Importantly, such perspectives need to illuminate not only the enablers but also the barriers to the organisational improvement of teaching and learning.

This project comprises a purposive sample of three in-depth case studies of FE colleges/college groups across England. In order to provide a triangulated approach to understanding the research focus, the project adopted a multi-method research design. Data collection consisted of an online survey, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis for each of the three case studies, followed by a national roundtable event with sector leaders. The central research question that the project sought to examine was: 'How do leaders in further education create and sustain an organisational culture that prioritises the continuous improvement of teaching and learning?' Further detail about the research methodology can be found in Section 3 of this report, with the subsequent sections 4–6 providing detailed, self-contained accounts of each of the three case studies. The section that follows (Section 2) provides a review of relevant literature relating to leadership, with a particular focus on what previous studies reveal about leadership in FE. But before moving on to that, it is important to provide a more detailed backdrop to the 'policyscape' of FE in recent years and how that has shaped the current environment and the position it maintains in the English education system.

Contextualising the 'policyscape' of further education

'Further education' is often used as an umbrella term to describe learning that takes place outside school environments. The English FE sector caters for over 3 million students annually. While there is some overlap in the curriculum offered in FE and schools, with both providing education for teenagers, there are equally noticeable differences between the two. For example, apart from providing opportunities for young people to re-take GCSE examinations, FE offers a wide range of vocational subjects, work-based learning and community provision. In contrast to schools, FE also caters for a large population of adult returners to learning, often looking to improve their qualifications and/or gain new skills later in life. The 'diversity' and 'complexity' commonly associated with FE (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013) also extends to the scale of its organisations, with some large colleges catering for over 15,000 full-time and part-time students, compared to small private training providers with fewer than 50 students on the register.

This diversity and complexity also connects to the history of the sector. Many FE providers, in particular colleges, find their historical origins in the industrial and social factors of their regional and municipal contexts. Since incorporation, this historical identity, often closely related to local socio-economic circumstances, has arguably been displaced by a centralised policy agenda that typically positions providers as needing to respond to a national skills agenda. **The churn of FE policy over the last quarter century provides a vital contextual frame for any discussion about improving teaching and learning**. As a point of departure, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) removed colleges from local authority control and introduced a competitive marketisation to this heterogeneous and locally orientated and defined education provision. At the heart of this new kind of marketisation was an approach to funding that, in effect, centralised the curriculum control and allowed for ongoing annual policy and curriculum intervention by successive government departments (Keep, 2006; Lucas and Crowther, 2016). This has led to an increasingly instrumentalist view of FE that is closely linked to the emergence of neoliberal policy with its emphasis on 'skills' rather than broader conceptualisations of education that stress the importance of its social benefits (Duckworth and Smith, 2019). The ideological effect of the Further and Higher Education Act was to enable a discourse that presents the FE sector as a unified, generalised and 'abstract' space (Lefebvre, 1991). This in turn has enabled continual policymaking at a distance and systematically superimposed a centralised drive to address economic and skills concerns over local 'ecologies' of teaching and learning.

The extent to which the FE landscape can be described as a 'market' is a basic assumption of government policy, even though the extent to which this metaphor can be rationally applied is debatable.

The level of government funding and the role of government and public agencies in the way FE is delivered mean that as a whole, FE is not a typical 'market' in which 'consumers' and 'providers' interact with the resulting outcome presumed to be the best outcome for society.
(Snelson and Deyes, 2016, p. 66)

One aspect of the marketisation of FE is the structural imperative that in competitive environments, some players should be 'allowed to fail'. Thus, more than a quarter of 1993's 435 colleges have ceased to exist, with 312 now in operation, according to the most recent count (AoC, 2018). This figure takes into account not only merger, closure and takeover, but also the emergence of so-called college 'groups'. These are college conglomerates in which an umbrella organisation assumes administrative and strategic oversight over a number of formerly independent colleges. While such organisations may originate in the merger of several colleges within a specific geographical location at a particular time, college groups are now a feature not just within specific regions but across different regions. With this in mind, we felt it was important to ensure that our project sample included one of these large college groups.

Leadership in further education

FE leadership is a key focus for educational research because of the model of leadership and governance that has largely dominated the sector since incorporation. We would describe this model of leadership as being characteristic of neoliberal and corporate interpretations of the role. In the early post-incorporation years, the role was positioned and interpreted as leading on the introduction of 'business cultures' into FE. Subsequently, the increasingly important role of high-stakes Ofsted inspections in the marketised terrain and the reliance on favourable performance data for funding gave rise to rigid hierarchies of leadership overseeing tightly coordinated (in 'successful' colleges) management information systems. Changes to the structures of governance, coupled with the data-centrism

of FE and a privileging of entrepreneurial business cultures, is reflected in the recent change of nomenclature, as many principals have now taken on the title of 'chief executive officers' or 'CEOs' (see, for example, Dennis, 2017).

Since incorporation, organisational structures and cultures have also favoured a gradual separation between senior leaders and teaching staff. Today, it is not uncommon to find college CEOs with backgrounds in business and economics rather than education. The extent to which this has brought about improvements to teaching and learning or even had benefits in terms of financial stability is questionable, as others have argued (see, for example, Ryan, 2018).

Arguably, since the financial crisis of 2008–9, there has been a re-orientation of leadership focus in FE. Under austerity, government 'comprehensive spending reviews' sought to reduce expenditure across the public sector and appeared to view FE budgets as low-hanging fruit. Conveniently, FE colleges were positioned by government as sitting outside the 'ring-fencing' that applied to school funding. Contingent on the pattern of cutting FE budgets that has become established since then, it is feasible to read the focus of senior leadership as having shifted from ensuring the institutional efficiency of delivery to the ability to manage the decline brought about by a steady withdrawal of financial resources. Despite the calls for FE principals to spend as much time on student outcomes as they do on budgets (Dame Ruth Silver in the *TES*, Belgutay, 2017), the impact of a prolonged period of austerity has arguably left some with little room for manoeuvre.

This tightening of budgets meant that, by 2015, estimates of the number of colleges in financial deficit ranged from 50 to 110 (Cooney, 2015; Gaunt, 2015; NAO, 2015). This triggered the Area Review programme, the aim of which was to 'move towards fewer, larger, more resilient and efficient providers, and more effective collaboration across institution types' (BIS and DfE, 2016, p. 3). The 'substantial change' called for in the announcement of the Area Review programme was founded on:

> *The work of the FE and Sixth Form College Commissioners [that] has identified there is significant scope for greater efficiency in the sector, in a way that frees up resources to deliver high quality education and training which supports economic growth.* (BIS, 2015, p. 2)

There followed five 'waves' of review in different regions: Birmingham and Solihull; the Marches and Worcestershire; Cumbria; Leicester and Leicestershire; and Essex. The review of Greater London provision was spread across different waves. These reviews ran from September 2015 through to mid-2017, with 37 in total, producing almost 40 reports. That the focus of these reviews was overwhelmingly economic and 'strategic' rather than being focused on improving teaching and learning can be seen in the composition of the steering groups that notably excluded representation from teachers or students. The resulting reports all state:

> *The purpose of area reviews is to put colleges on a stronger financial footing whilst also enabling them to better meet the economic and educational needs of students and employers for the long term.* (DfE, 2017, p. 26)

Significantly, though, the outcome of the reviews in many regions included the merging of colleges subject to a financial notice of concern or a financial notice to improve from the Skills Funding Agency with other colleges in a financially stronger position. While merged colleges were often encouraged to retain 'brand' identities, and while geographical distance clearly played a significant role, these mergers (and merger or the prospect of merger was a factor within the college sample) clearly have implications for management and leadership in relation to improving teaching and learning.

In addition to the ongoing pressures of reduced funding, FE providers have been subject to complex and convoluted regulation and high-stakes inspection and accountability systems over the last two decades (Keep, 2018). As in schools, ratings in Ofsted inspections have come to dominate data and

performance management systems of accountability. Since the early 2000s, Ofsted has cast its 'normalising gaze' (Foucault, 1977, p. 184) over the sector. While performative exercises such as inspections and internal quality audits may occur as discrete 'events', they have become normalised as the key drivers of surveillance, the effects of which are continuous and the process ongoing both before and after these activities occur. As Foucault reminds us, 'surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (p. 201). This was an experience that resonated all too clearly with at least one of the case studies included in the project (see, for example, Section 5). In short, understanding leadership as a situated practice and its role in improving teaching and learning cannot be detached from either the local or national context.

This research report is divided into seven separate sections. Each of the three case studies is presented in its own discrete section (4–6), with Section 7 drawing together some of the overarching themes and issues to emerge from all three case studies.

Section 1 – Introduction
Section 2 – Literature review
Section 3 – Research methodology
Section 4 – Hill Top College case study
Section 5 – Midshire College case study
Section 6 – Meadow College Group case study
Section 7 – Conclusions and recommendations

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reconceptualising leadership, governance and teaching in further education

This section reviews the main findings of a research report on teaching, leadership and governance in further education commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), produced by David Greatbatch and Sue Tate in 2017 and subsequently published in February 2018.

The research is intended to shed light on and offer potential solutions to the present and future challenges faced by leaders and teachers in a sector that is undergoing significant reform (i.e. Apprenticeships 2020; Sainsbury Review; Post-16 Skills Plan), with the aim of restructuring the English FE landscape, improving the quality of its delivery across the board. To this end, Greatbatch and Tate reviewed evidence that covered the whole sector, with a specific focus on FE colleges, which makes the report particularly relevant for this project.

Greatbatch and Tate's comprehensive literature review surveyed a selection of 156 studies published in the 2000s or later that included references to the FE sector, and considered, among other things, teaching, leadership and governance. Overall, the documents comprised peer-reviewed journal articles; research reports; 15 Ofsted inspection reports published in 2016 and 2017; and semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of FE bodies and stakeholders (7) and academics specialised in research on FE (6).

For the purposes of the present research project, the following section will critically examine key contributions to (re-) conceptualising theory and practice of leadership in FE.

Multi-dimensional roles of principals in FE colleges

A qualitative study centred on the principals of six colleges in the south of England (Lambert, 2013) suggests that principals in FE colleges embody a three-dimensional role: **external-public**, **internal-public** and **internal-private**.

Increased sectoral marketisation combined with institutional autonomy gave prominence to the first role, which typically involves principals acting as representatives of the interests of their colleges to businesses within the local community but also regionally and nationally (ibid.). However, a substantive aspect of a principal's role revolves around the display of internal leadership qualities when tackling administrative, academic and business-related issues that tend to be visible to (and involving engagement with) staff and students. Finally, the internal-private role of the principal refers to those internal leadership activities that are only visible to a few staff and governors yet qualify as strategic: e.g. planning, and the development of the vision and mission of the college. Lambert predictably identifies a key challenge for principals in ensuring they maintain a balance between the three dimensions of principalship.

Greatbatch and Tate register clear signs of the changing nature of principals' roles, with emphasis on the development of senior management positions (e.g. to lead on estates and finance). However, more research is needed in order to navigate and conceptualise the complexity of those emerging multi-faceted roles.

Models of leadership

According to Collinson (2008), traditional renditions of leadership accentuate the charismatic, 'heroic' and tough traits of the individual in charge of a single organisation. Leadership models typically falling within this category include **command-and-control/transactional leadership** and **transformational leadership.**

The former operates through mechanisms of rewards/punishments conditional on achieving (or failing) the targets set for/by the organisation. It is also referred to as 'transactional', as it focuses on the 'exchange of employee skill and effort for tangible and intangible rewards' (Greatbatch and Tate, 2018, p. 52). To the contrary, a transformational model aims to change the values, motives and, ultimately, the goals of staff. While a transactional model appears to be instrumental and predicated on extrinsic motivation, a transformational model relies on the exceptional qualities of a leader who is capable of inspiring their staff by drawing a compelling picture of an organisation's vision, values and future projection.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, there has been a shift towards collaborative models, where both the concept and practice of leadership are redesigned and, significantly, *distributed* within a single organisation or across multiple organisations. Collinson (2008) catalogues this shift as a move towards 'post-heroic' ideas, with fluidity, networks, multi-directional interactions and collaboration superseding old, hierarchical, top-down views of leadership as 'one man shows'. Evans (2008) observes that the idea of a **distributed leadership** emerged and gained traction in the mid-1990s, albeit remaining essentially a contested concept. In this respect, Collinson (2008) rightfully stresses nuanced differences in the concepts of 'shared leadership', 'collective leadership', 'collaborative leadership' and 'co-leadership'. For the purposes of this project, however, it suffices to point the reader to a conceptual and practical opposition between distributed, networked leadership

models and transactional/transformational ones that rest on a traditional view of power and authority within the organisation. Policymakers, academics and practitioners increasingly identify collaborative/shared models as more conducive to quality enhancement, but the picture on the ground appears to be inevitably more complex and variegated. For example, in a study exploring the use and development of transactional, transformational and distributed models of leadership in 10 FE providers,[1] Muijs et al. (2006) revealed that most respondents regarded the transformational approach as the most effective and desirable model. Nevertheless, they concluded that no one leadership style matched the 10 cases neatly and that all of them (pre-selected as successful) were considered effective. Interestingly, tensions emerged between transactional, transformational and distributed leadership across all cases. Distributed leadership, for instance, was associated with a distribution of responsibilities rather than power. It was therefore viewed generally as an instrument to deliver effectively against organisational targets.

The need to deliver organisational outcomes while retaining inclusivity regarding aspects of organisational operations was perceived to be an acute challenge. Along the same lines, Jowitt and Westerman (2007) attempted to capture common factors explaining the leadership approach of seven 'outstanding' FE colleges. They identified several key factors:

1. A clear and simple mission to which all subscribe and relate.

2. A commitment to improving quality by placing the learner at the heart of the process.

3. Having the right people on board.

4. A clear and strong sense of individual and corporate values.

5. A clear understanding of the division of labour between governors, senior managers and middle managers.

6. The crucial importance of data to improve performance.

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1 Purposive sample of 10 providers selected among those exhibiting the highest levels of improvement over the previous three years and with high leadership evaluations in statutory inspections.

However, once again, each college exhibited a unique combination of these factors, particularly in reference to leadership styles. These were identified as:

- College A: Distributed leadership
- College B: Reputational leadership
- College C: Performance leadership
- College D: Transformational leadership
- College E: Centralising leadership
- College F: Singular hands-on leadership
- College G: Situational leadership

The study yielded one strong conclusion: that approaches to and styles of leadership and management were more multi-faceted and internally differentiated in each of the participating institutions. It was a conclusion that appears to be in line with a study conducted by Borrett in 2007, where the researcher investigated how leaders in a large FE provider integrated e-learning during a period of significant internal change. At a pedagogical level, Borrett concluded that the leadership styles that effectively drove change involved a mixture of distributed, facilitative and empowered leadership. At a managerial, executive level, command-and-control approaches proved effective with respect to e-learning infrastructure, resources and policy.

The studies reviewed so far point therefore to the existence of a complex mix of 'blended leadership' styles (Collinson and Collinson, 2009) existing and/or emerging in each institution, usually including managerialist, facilitative, distributed and empowered attributes.

While Vasse (2007) highlights the leaders' dilemma between empowerment and control, explaining the variety of leadership arrangements that we can find in practice, all the studies align in considering **context as fundamental and instrumental** in determining the effectiveness of a particular leadership mix compared to others.

Sensing context and developing leader behaviours

*Clearly, both sensing context and responding to it are vital for organisations in the Education and Skills sector. The organisations themselves and the operating context is complex and changing. Trends in society, pedagogy, technology and the economy, combine with policy and funding, and organisations' competitive position in the Education and Skills landscape to produce **key challenges for leaders in setting the strategic and practical direction for their organisations**. Many organisations in the sector have teams that monitor and respond to key trends that affect their business, and building reliable systems for this can be an important tool in responding to complexity. How then to respond to these changing and challenging contexts is an altogether more difficult and subtle task, and arguably the primary challenge for leaders in the sector.*
(Hughes et al., 2014, p. 29)

Context-sensing skills emerge thus as a key trait of effective principalship in FE, as illustrated by Hannagan's (2006) study of leadership responses to changes in the operating environment of FE colleges. The study found that the ability of chief executives/principals to understand, effectively assess, and strategically react to transformations in the environment in which FE providers operate has a major impact on their overall performance. Hannagan's comprehensive research comprised a national survey of the principals and chief executives of 281 FE colleges in England in 1999; case studies of four FE colleges to determine success factors in greater detail; and a review of the colleges' Ofsted inspection reports (2002–2006). The national survey revealed:

- **Consensus that changes in the external environment represented the most important reason for strategic change**. Changes in the funding regime were identified as more important than the move toward incorporated status.

- Financial pressures ensuing from changes in funding mechanisms were perceived to be the key driver of change in the colleges' organisational structure and featured strongly in decisions regarding the content of strategic change. Crucially, the emphasis on finance increased because colleges felt that it was on such a basis that their success would be measured.

- Enhanced marketisation was the third key variable introduced to explain the relevance of the external context. **Competition** was felt as a significant determinant of strategic change by most colleges. Due to the close link between student enrolment and funding, competitive pressures exerted an influence at the level of content change and process, in so doing raising the strategic importance of marketing and environmental assessment.

Alongside the ability to sense and adapt to rapidly changing environments, FE leaders must acquire or refine a number of skills, according to a 2010 study by the Institute of Employment Studies et al. (2010, pp. 5–6), featuring in Greany et al. (2014, p. 16–17). The research explored and identified key leadership skills deemed necessary for FE leaders, in particular at times of recession:

- **Strategic planning and thinking** – in conjunction with a values-based mindset; willingness to embrace a transformative and distributive leadership model.

- **Work in partnership with other learning providers** – not excluding competitors and, above all, local authorities, with a view to developing negotiation and influencing skills.

- **Change management skills** – to develop project management and staff engagement skills, such as empathy, persuasion and resilience.

- **Performance management** – to develop talent management of individuals/teams and tackle poor performance, relying on motivation and improving communication skills.

- **Commercial awareness and entrepreneurial skills** – to develop the ability to discover opportunities for new provision or innovate existing learning through creativity.

- **Financial management skills** – to develop a creative use of sources of funding to deliver provision adopting forms of co-investment (individual learners and employers) as well as effective management of budgets and resources at every organisational level.

- **Commissioning skills** – to develop/build capacity in negotiation, legal knowledge and strategic use of partnerships for commissioning.

- **Promoting equality and diversity of achievement for learners and staff** – committing to the agenda in spite of possibly contradictory/external pressures.

Building on this study, Greany et al. (2014) refine the set of leadership skills and qualities deemed necessary in more recent times:

*Where there are differences they may be more in the weight of emphasis: for example, the need for partnership working and system leadership to develop innovative, sometimes collective, solutions appears to have grown, while the weight of evidence in terms of why and how leaders should prioritise learning-centred **leadership focussed on recruiting and developing talented staff and a learning culture has also developed*** [emphasis added by authors].
(Greany et al., 2014, p. 10)

It should be noted, however, that an effective leadership system should take into consideration the increasingly relevant, yet fundamentally different role of middle managers/leaders.

Middle leaders

Alongside these developments, Collinson (2007) explains how the role of middle leaders has also grown in importance, especially when it comes to the implementation of internal policies, programmes and daily activities. This role had begun to develop in the mid-2000s as a consequence of the intensification of delegated budgets and management information systems, resulting in more junior staff taking on middle managerial responsibilities.

Research conducted by, among others, Gleeson and Shain (1999) and Leader (2004) has suggested that middle managers/leaders enact two different, at times conflicting, roles, respectively interfacing with senior leaders, on the one hand, and with staff and students, on the other. This 'in-betweenness' may cause them to experience ambiguity and ambivalence, especially when they are actively engaged in organisational change.

Briggs (2005) summarises the middle manager role in FE as one facing multiple demands and pressures arising from above, below and horizontally from other functions/peers/departments. For these reasons, middle managers in FE can be regarded as corporate agents, implementers, staff managers, liaisers or leaders, mirroring the range of functions they can fulfil within the organisation.

To this variegated picture, Leader (2004) adds that middle managers in FE can also be pivotal in crafting the strategy itself. The effectiveness of their role depends on the way they understand, negotiate and enact different roles across a wide spectrum of academic/vocational subjects, specialist services and management functions (Briggs, 2007).

Barker's (2007) study of the perceptions of the role of middle management held by teaching staff and their managers in a large FE college is in line with Leader's and Briggs' conclusions:

> *The culture and values of a construction faculty are determined not just by those of the further education sector, but also by those of the construction sector; and similarly with, for example, hairdressing, catering, or transport. Hence, middle managers may do different tasks and have different styles within a college that reflect their different contexts. And they may all be effective in senior management terms.* (Barker, 2007, p. 97)

Connecting the literature on distributed leadership with the role of middle managers/leaders, Evans' research (2008) found that, while such literature typically assumes that leadership is enacted in the same way (regardless of the level of participant), certain leadership behaviours tend to be more relevant to middle managers than they are to senior leaders or principals.

Tellingly, the middle leaders involved in his study focussed their efforts on day-to-day issues of people management (e.g. trust, sharing information, dealing with poor performance, etc.) with very little mention, if any, of transformational leadership activities traditionally linked with the senior management team, such as being a visionary, legacy building, and so on:

> *There is no time for 'legacy building', for 'planning', for 'making time for people', and for being a 'visionary' when the most important aspects of the job or role are dealing with the day-to-day issues of people care and management. The scores across all four groups indicate that the priority is to ensure that the team is working well, that the focus is on the current project, and that all are able to function effectively. **This all suggests that the priorities of so-called 'leadership' can change significantly according to the level at which it needs to be applied.** The high scores are about integrity, trust, sharing information and*

> *dealing with poor performance – many of which are attributes associated with good management as much as leadership* [emphasis added by authors]. (Evans 2008, p. 23)

The evidence gathered from the literature allows us therefore to start identifying potential implications for the theory and practice of leadership in FE, prompted by the general conclusions drawn by Greany et al. (2014). They observe that, currently, leaders across all sectors face increasingly volatile environments. In light of this, FE leaders in particular will need to develop new abilities and skills, both in relation to partnership working and system leadership, and with respect to the constant need for solid organisational leadership and management. Therefore, FE leaders should be prepared to:

> *… know yourself, your values and what you'd resign for; know your team and the organisational culture; know your business and your distinctive position in a globalised and changing world; engage staff in the change process and invite contrasting perspectives; focus on the core business and embedding change, but remain outward facing and in touch with the needs of your clients; invest time in modelling and creating an inclusive, aspirational learning culture; be bold and rethink how you work when necessary, including by forming new partnerships, recognising that you and others will make mistakes if you are to innovate; distribute and grow leadership at every level, particularly middle leadership.* (Greany et al., 2014, p. 63)

Conceptual and practical implications/challenges

Greatbatch and Tate's comprehensive report reviewed a high number of predominantly qualitative studies that have investigated the relationship between leadership styles and organisational performance (measured against Ofsted inspections/attainment data). There is a clear correlation between high-performing colleges and principals who prove to

be highly skilled in adopting flexible forms of leadership, while sensing and adapting to the complex and rapidly changing contexts in which FE providers exist and operate. There is also evidence that employees in FE colleges prefer approaches that combine traditional leadership elements (top-down) with more distributive/collaborative models (shared power and authority).

The literature has revealed that middle leaders can and do play a significant role in implementing organisational change and daily programmes. It also points to a difference in the concept of effective leadership behaviours for middle leaders vis-à-vis senior leaders. The former are primarily concerned with day-to-day (people) management; the latter with leadership activities traditionally associated with senior leadership teams (SLTs).

Interestingly for the purposes of this project, the research conducted on senior leadership has provided very limited insight into and evidence of the link between traits associated with effective senior leadership and type of institution led. In other words, it is not clear why and to what extent different approaches/styles prove more effective and under which circumstances. In addition, there is a lack of a systematic appraisal of how leadership quality is evaluated and improved in FE.

Furthermore, it should be noted that most of the evidence reviewed is drawn from research that was conducted between 2000 and 2010. More recent evidence appears to be limited and sparse. Hence the need for more research on leadership in FE to refine and improve existing understandings and conceptualisations of the following:

- The changing nature of requirements of effective leadership in response to FE sector transformations and the need for closer collaboration with all stakeholders (policy/practice).

- Different leadership models and how they are being used in the FE sector – which approaches are most effective in which situations? (theory/practice)

- Context-sensing skills and how they can be further developed (practice/vision).

- Versatile and context-specific role of middle managers/leaders (practice/theory).

- Teaching and learning as a central pillar in the reconceptualization of FE leadership.

In order to address these limitations, we suggest a three-pronged FE leadership model, comprising SLTs (ethics of care, vision, legacy building, finance, managing external/institutional pressure), middle management (ethics of care, executive, day-to-day, internal pressure points, point of grace) and staff (ethics of care, teaching and learning/creativity/innovation), seamlessly operating as a 'holy trinity'. Sectoral/structural limitations and context specific/institutional pressure points should ideally be filtered through and managed by an effective leadership system (senior management and middle management), allowing staff to focus on and re-energize teaching and learning as the central pillar around which the concept and practice of leadership in FE should (re)-align.

The three case studies that follow will be assessed against the findings of the literature review and the proposed reconceptualised model of leadership in FE.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Between February 2018 and January 2019, a team of academic researchers at Birmingham City University conducted an independent research study, commissioned by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL), into the role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in FE. The study aimed to fill the gap in knowledge and research relating to the interface between leaders' strategic thinking, its application at an operational level and how leadership understandings and practices connect to successful outcomes in FE teaching and learning. The study was specifically aimed at investigating situated understandings and practices of leadership in improving and prioritising teaching and learning at an organisational level. The research question for this study was thus:

> *What do leaders in further education do to create and sustain an organisational culture that prioritises the continuous improvement of teaching and learning?*

As discussed in the literature review, leadership understandings and practices in FE are highly versatile and variegated, with colleges' local contexts and individual circumstances impacting significantly on how leadership is understood and performed. With this in mind, this study focused on the situated leadership experiences and practices of FE practitioners, middle managers and senior leaders in their local contexts, with prioritising and improving teaching and learning at its core. An additional line of inquiry that the study sought to explore was the kinds of leadership visions and practices that nurture or inhibit the authentic improvement of teaching and learning in FE providers.

The aims of this study were thus:

1. To explore the relationship between leadership and the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in FE.

2. To explore the understandings of leadership as a concept across college structures.

3. To explore the understandings of leadership as concept within the FE sector.

4. To examine what FE leaderships do to create and sustain organisational cultures that prioritise teaching and learning and its continuous improvement in the face of ongoing adversities.

Image 3.1 illustrates the conceptual underpinning of this research study, which emerged from our review of current literature and knowledge of FE leadership, highlighted in the previous sections of this report. This provided the basis for this study's research design and data analysis.

Research methodology and methods

The research design adopted a mixed-methods case study approach, involving three FE providers across England, followed by a national roundtable discussion with FE leaders and managers. As discussed in the literature review, we recognised the importance of involving FE practitioners as well as leaders and managers to research with them leadership understandings and practices. Given the nature and focus of the project's research question and aims, it was decided that the use of case study methodology would provide the most effective means of capturing situated understandings and practices of leadership in FE. The national roundtable discussion helped to strengthen the findings, conclusions and recommendations arising from the case studies, as well as supplementing them. Together, they not only enabled the project team to harness the complementary strengths of these different methods but also to explore the research topic in sufficient breadth and depth.

Different leadership models and how they are practised in FE colleges (theory/practice)

Teaching and learning as a central pillar in FE leadership

Versatile and context-specific role of practitioners/middle managers/leaders (practice/theory)

Context-sensing skills and how they can be further developed (practice/vision)
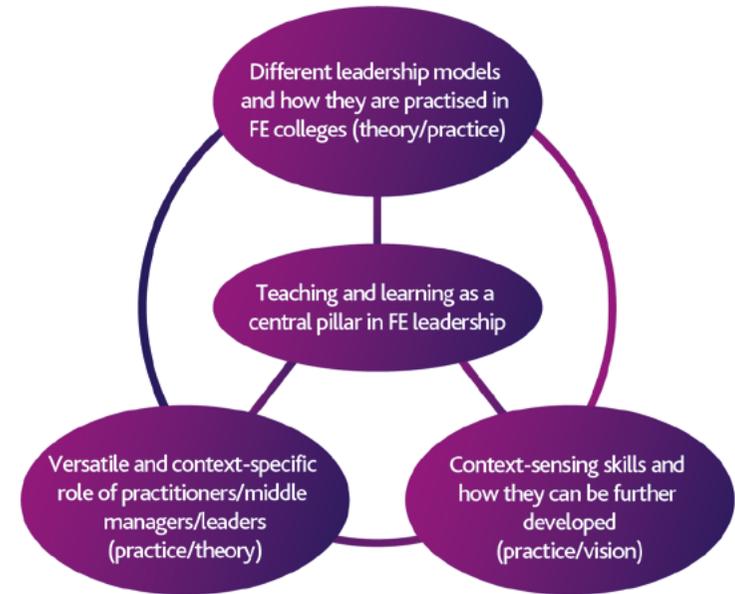
Strategies for strengthening validity at different stages of the research process were used to avoid the selective and unrepresentative use of data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 198–99). Triangulation was embedded into each of the data collection phases, analysis and re-porting. This included the use of multiple researchers in the project team and their multiple perspectives during the course of the research-design, data-collection, data-analysis and writing-up stages of the study, as well as the inclusion and triangulation of multiple sources of data. For example, a different pair of researchers was allocated to each case study, with each pair responsible for carrying out the data collection and data analysis. The first draft of each case study's data analysis and commentary was subsequently shared and discussed with the rest of the team in a project meeting. Following comments and questions from other members of the project team, each case study team produced a second version of its data analysis and commentary, which was subjected to a further review in the final stage of writing up the project report.

Case studies

The main data collection phase for the three case studies took place from April 2018 to July 2018. The three participating colleges were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. The purposive selection process consisted of the following criteria:

- Differing 'quality' in teaching and learning based on Ofsted inspection ratings between 2008 and 2018.

- Different geographical locations across England.

- Different institution sizes.

- Availability and willingness of institutions to participate in the study between April and July 2018 (main data collection phase).

Due to the narrow timeframe of the project, the researchers drew on some of their contacts and networks across the sector at the recruitment stage. The three case study institutions[2] were: Hill Top College, Meadow College Group and Midshire College. We acknowledge that it is not possible to include case studies that capture the breadth and diversity of FE colleges as a whole. However, the research team was keen to ensure that they included case studies that readers could relate to for 'naturalistic generalisation' (Stake, 1995), as they could recognise aspects of their own practices and experiences in the cases and intuitively generalise from them.

The methods for data collection included an online survey to all staff involved in teaching and learning at their college, interviews with college management/leadership teams (e.g. CEOs, principals, teaching and learning managers), focus groups with teaching and learning staff and a review of relevant documents (e.g. teaching and learning strategy/policy/plan) provided by the case study colleges. In this study, we viewed **leadership as a process** or **set of practices** rather than a role or a position within the

college. The use of case studies thus sought to 'engage with and report the complexity of social activity in order to represent the meanings that individual social actors bring to those settings and manufacture in them' (Stark and Torrance, 2005, p. 33). This was why we designed the case study to include multiple sources of data, in particular the voice of staff with responsibility for teaching and learning through the online survey and the focus groups. With the aims, research question and the underpinning conceptual framework in mind, we used multiple methods and data sources to explore and interrogate contextualised leadership understandings and practices from different perspectives (FE practitioners, middle managers and senior leaders):

- Quantitative methods were used to capture a cross-sectional representation of participants' understandings and practices of leadership in teaching and learning, which allowed us to develop an initial insight into the leadership practices at each case study institution, as well as to identify key areas/aspects to focus on during our sub-sequent visits.

- Qualitative methods were used to explore the situated perceptions and experiences of senior management and teaching staff at each case study institution in the form of a narrative to seek an in-depth understanding of the key components of effective leadership and its application in practice.

As commented above, the data collection and analysis for each case study were carried out by a pair of researchers from the project team. **Image 3.2** illustrates the case study process.

An important characteristic of this study was the involvement of the case study institutions as active research participants. This was embedded into all stages of the case study data collection process, where we worked with them to contextualise the research focus and ensure that the case study specific questions asked during the data collection were relevant and meaningful to them. Once we had completed the case study analysis, we visited

2 Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the anonymity of the colleges.

the case study sites to share the findings and outputs produced by the project and discuss the implications with leaders for policy and practice. As this study set out to investigate situated understandings and practices of leadership in improving and prioritising teaching and learning at an organisational level, the inclusion of multiple participants strengthened its validity. To ensure its rigour, the design and analysis of this study was based on a conceptual underpinning (**Image 3.2**) that arose out of our review of the latest research and policy literature on FE leadership.

Image 3.2: Case study process
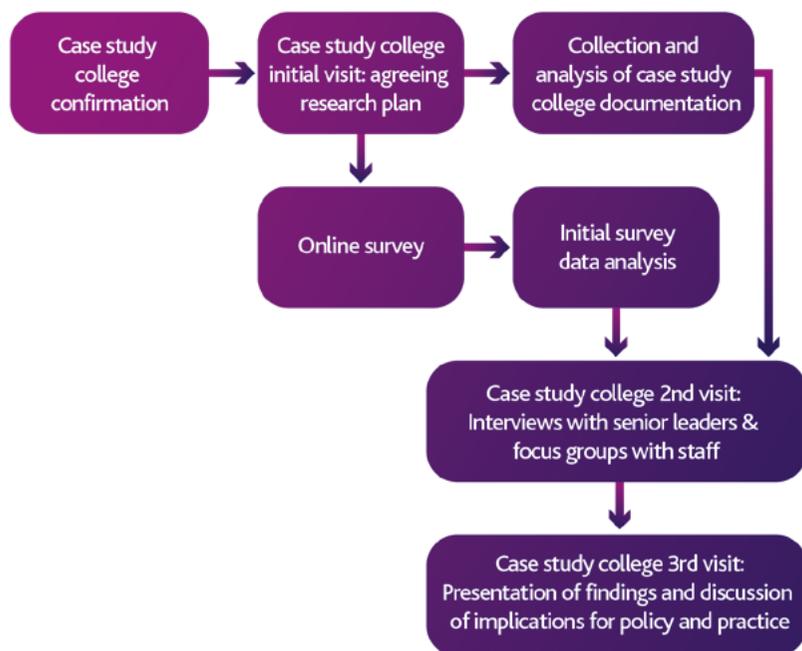
Case study college teaching and learning documentation

At the first case study college visit, the project team requested relevant teaching and learning policy documents. These included colleges' strategic plans, teaching and learning development plans and/or policies/strategies. In addition to this documentation, the project team also visited Ofsted's website and downloaded inspection data from between 2008 and 2018 for each case study.

This documentation provided important contextual information for the project team to develop an initial understanding of each case study's strategic visions and practices. They also formed the bases for the design of the online survey, interviews with the college management and focus groups with teaching staff.

Online survey

Between May and June 2018, the online survey was made available to staff members from the three case study institutions via the Online Surveys platform (formerly BOS). A hyperlink to the survey was circulated via internal email across each case study on behalf of the project team. After the initial email was sent out, two reminder emails were subsequently sent to encourage staff participation.

The survey was informed by the literature review findings on FE leadership understanding and practices. It was trialled with a pilot group of respondents comprising of FE practitioners and managers and was reviewed by the project steering group. We also shared the draft survey with the SLTs in each case study and the project steering group. Based on suggestions made by these three groups, revisions were made before the final version of the survey was produced (see Appendix 1).

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3 The online survey was originally planned for release in April 2018. This was delayed until early May as a result of it coinciding with the circulation of a sector-wide online survey from the Department for Education that all colleges were encouraged to complete. A senior leader from one of the case study colleges contacted the project lead to recommend that we should delay the release of our survey by two weeks so as to avoid any confusion between the two surveys and any adverse impact on response rates.

The online survey was designed to explore participants' perceptions, attitudes and feelings towards the roles and practices of leadership in the context of their respective workplaces; the culture of leadership, their own personal experiences of leading; connections between the strategic and operational elements of leadership. It incorporated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative responses, which were divided into four sections:

- Section 1 – participant profile
- Section 2 – sources of evidence influencing improvements in teaching and learning
- Section 3 – activities associated with improvements in teaching and learning
- Section 4 – understanding of leadership in teaching and learning

Section 1 collected information about respondents in two areas: personal and employment/work-related demographics. The data gathered in this part of the survey served three purposes:

1. To ensure all demographic groups across the three case studies had the opportunity to be represented.

2. To determine whether the respondents were a representative sample of the case study college staff population for generalisation purposes.

3. To use the demographic groupings as variables to carry out statistical analyses to address the research aims and question.

The questions in Section 2 of the survey were designed to collect information on the sources of evidence that staff felt were important to improve their teaching-and-learning thinking and practice. This was largely aimed at providing a snapshot of the case study college staff's perceptions of the impact different sources of evidence had on their teaching and learning practices. We were also interested in whether participants considered particular sources of evidence as essential for effective teaching

and learning. Findings from this section were then triangulated with other data to evaluate how these sources of evidences were considered in strategic thinking and used in practice in each case study college.

Section 3 included questions on activities associated with improving teaching and learning at participants' workplaces. We drew examples from the case studies' teaching and learning documentation, as well as common practices identified across FE to form the list of activities. Data gathered in this section provided an overview of the case study college staff's perceptions of the value of different activities for improving teaching and learning. We also examined the congruence and incongruence between what they considered the priorities for improving teaching and learning in their workplace. Findings from this section were triangulated with other data to explore effective improvements in teaching and learning and the leadership thinking and practices associated with them.

The final section of the survey focused on leadership and teaching and learning directly. As this project adopted a case study approach, the majority of the questions looked at strategic thinking and leadership practices in relation to teaching and learning at an institutional level.

An initial analysis of the survey data was carried out once the survey closed in June to produce a range of themes and lines of inquiry, which informed the focus and questions for the subsequent interviews with senior leaders and focus groups with staff. For the scope of this report, descriptive statistical analysis was carried out on each case study college's quantitative survey data to canvass a snapshot of participants' views and understandings of leadership and their practices for prioritising the improvement of teaching and learning. As we did not intend to produce generalisable quantitative findings to apply across FE in this report, nor did we intend to suggest any kinds of predictions on leadership understandings and/or practices by staff members from particular demographic groups, inferential

statistics were not considered necessary for the purpose of the case study methodology we employed. Qualitative data generated in the survey were analysed thematically to aid the quantitative analysis findings on each case study's teaching and learning policies and practices.

Interviews with senior leaders

Senior leaders (e.g. CEOs, principals, directors of quality) were interviewed in each case study. These semi-structured interviews explored these senior leaders' understandings and practices of leadership through examining their strategic visions, policies, and teaching and learning activities. While the survey data provided an overview of certain aspects from the perspectives of teaching staff, the interviews placed emphasis on the history and development of each case study. Thus, the teaching and learning cultures, policies and practices, localised contexts and the impact of Ofsted inspections and national policies on strategic decision-making all influenced the focus of the questions. The interview questions were underpinned by the project's conceptual framework **(Image 3.1)** but for each interview, the questions were contextualised with information from the case study college's teaching and learning documents and findings from their online survey, in order to ensure that the questions were tailored to each case study's specific situation. An example of interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed. For each case study, the interview data was analysed thematically using the project's underpinning conceptual framework.

Focus groups with case study teaching and learning staff

There were two focus groups with teaching staff in each of the case studies, which took place during the second site visit. Between six and eight staff members took part in each focus group, which lasted approximately one hour. Participants of

the focus groups were volunteers from a stratified sample of subject areas, with different teaching and learning roles and responsibilities. An email request was sent to all teaching staff in each case study on behalf of the research project team.

During each focus group, we explored the following areas with participants:

- Strategic teaching and learning policies, roles and activities.
- Staff ownership and the scope to lead teaching and learning initiatives.
- Formal vs. informal teaching and learning activities.
- Understandings and practices of leadership in teaching and learning.

In a similar vein to the interviews with senior leaders, the focus groups included a range of semi-structured and tailored questions for each case study college. The focus groups were recorded with a digital voice recorder and subsequently transcribed. Data was analysed following a similar approach to the interview data analysis for each case study.

Once the individual case study analysis had been completed, the project team carried out a triangulation of findings from common themes across the case studies as well as incorporated findings from our literature review. This was to examine and explore the central research question: 'How do leaders in further education create and sustain an organisational culture that prioritises the continuous improvement of teaching and learning?' This is where the research team moved beyond the 'anecdotalism' (Silverman, 2005) of the participants' responses, to critically interrogate their contributions and to look for patterns across institutions and the sector as a whole.

National roundtable event

A national roundtable event was held in December 2018 involving a group of principals and college teaching and learning managers from across England. The event provided an open forum to discuss the research topic as well as responding to the project's preliminary analysis of the three case studies and associated outputs. It was an important means of validation of the research project's emergent findings, outputs, conclusions and recommendations. Furthermore, it also stimulated additional data and analysis on the research topic. During the event, we explored participants' understanding of FE leadership in the context of teaching and learning and practices at their respective institutions. We also discussed emergent findings from each of the three case studies, with a focus on the aspects they recognised from their own experience, as well as sharing with them the 'two cycles of improving teaching and learning' (See Appendix 3). Data gathered from this event included handwritten notes produced by participants, along with summary discussion notes recorded by the research team. These data were analysed, cross-referenced against the common themes from each of the case studies and subsequently incorporated into our discussion of the overarching findings to address the project's central research question and aims.

Ethical considerations

All participating institutions and individuals were briefed on the aims, focus and anticipated outcomes of the project during the recruitment stage of the project. They were informed that they had the choice to remain anonymous for the duration of the project or to have their identities disclosed. To respect one of the case study college's decision to remain anonymous for this project, the decision was taken to anonymise all three case studies and thus they were all given pseudonyms.

Participation was voluntary. Case study institutions and participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw the research data they provided at any stage of

the project before publication. Before each research activity, participants were given an information leaflet and a consent form, providing them with an overview of the project and the ethical considerations for the research activity in which they were about to take part. To participate in the online survey, participants were asked to provide their consent electronically. Interview and focus group participants were asked to give their written consent.

All participants were provided with confidential opportunities to discuss sensitive issues outside the open forum of the interviews/focus groups/roundtable event (e.g. through direct face-to-face or email exchanges with the research team).

Given the levels of detailed demographic information collected through the survey, the research team was mindful of protecting participants' anonymity. Data analysis of the survey data therefore only focused on broad categories and avoided focusing on specific individuals or risking individuals' identities being compromised.

Participants at each focus group and at the national roundtable event were aware of one another's identities. However, to create a safe space for participants to openly share their experiences and views and to protect their anonymity from outside the focus group, the project team requested that participants respect the privacy and anonymity rights of other participants by treating the discussions at the focus group as confidential.

Any data from the survey, interviews, focus groups and the roundtable event containing references to participating institutions and/or participants was anonymised/given a pseudonym to ensure data could not be traced to specific institutions or individuals.

The data were stored securely by the research team on the university's password-protected server. Backup data were stored by the project lead in a password-protected folder on a work PC. The physical copies of signed consent forms and written notes were stored securely a dedicated facility provided by Birmingham City University (BCU) following the university's guidelines.

The research adhered to BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2018) and was approval by BCU's Health, Education and Life Sciences (HELS) Faculty Academic Ethics Committee, which is responsible for assessing and approving research and business project proposals in terms of insurance risks related to reputational damage, legal and financial liability and institutional costs related to disciplinary action or investigations of misconduct.

A project steering group was set up at the beginning of the project. The steering group included members of the project team, FETL's operations manager, a FETL trustee and two senior leaders from different FE providers. The steering group made an important contribution to ensuring that the project team fulfilled its ethics and quality-assurance functions, along with helping to monitor key project milestones and outputs, discuss progress updates and emergent findings. The steering group met twice during the lifetime of the project but maintained regular email contact throughout.

4. HILL TOP COLLEGE

A case study portrait

Hill Top College has a longstanding educational heritage in its local area that dates back over 150 years. Throughout its history, the college has played a vital role in providing technical and vocational education for its local community and the wider region. Hill Top has expanded its estate significantly in recent years, along with its portfolio of courses, with particular growth in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and apprenticeships. This growth has witnessed the development of a brand new learning quarter, which includes a new sixth form centre for A-level provision and a state-of-the-art manufacturing and engineering centre for apprenticeships. The college also has a well-established partnership with local enterprises and employers, which has contributed to its recent expansion and investment in ongoing developments.

As well as having experienced significant physical transformation to its estate in recent years, Hill Top College has also undergone a journey of cultural change as an organisation in terms of teaching and learning and its strategic approach to improving the quality of teaching and learning. Over a 10-year period, Hill Top College rose from the lowest (Grade 4) to the highest (Grade 1) Ofsted inspection rating. Though, interestingly, the view of Hill Top's standards and performance manager, Grant, who has worked at the college before and throughout this period, was that **this improvement in its Ofsted ranking was despite rather than because of the influence of Ofsted,** as he explains in the following comment from an initial site interview:

We did our own thing to get to where we are now, regardless of Ofsted. We recognised that in the past we were too Ofsted focused so from 2014 onwards we took all references to Ofsted out of our teaching and learning plan. We said to ourselves, 'Let's just be the best we can be for Hill Top!'

While Hill Top continued to perform well in external inspections, its CEO saw its quality assurance systems as 'too restrictive'. Grant remembers a meeting between him and the CEO as a significant turning point in the college's approach to improving teaching and learning, with the latter acknowledging an imbalance between quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) activities:

He was totally upfront with me and said, 'Why are you spending all your time writing these quality reports? Who are they for exactly? All you keep doing is weighing the pig instead of fattening it! We need to do things differently.'

This meeting signalled a defining moment in Hill Top's change in direction to move beyond conventional approaches to QA measurement in FE, notably graded lesson observations, and, in the words of its CEO, take the opportunity 'to do things differently'. Grant explained that although they were both in agreement as to the need to get rid of graded observations, they were unsure what to replace them with and how best to manage this transition. As discussed in the analysis of the project data below, this provided the backdrop to the SLT's decision to introduce the college-wide initiative of 'teaching triangles'.

One of the features of Hill Top College's SLT that stood out from the initial meetings right through to the dissemination of the project findings was their **vision and commitment to devolving the ownership of improving teaching and learning to staff.** In an end-of-project meeting, the principal of the college was very explicit about this when he stated that 'you can't improve things in education from a top-down perspective'. As a team, Hill Top's SLT had a clear conceptualisation of the improvement of

teaching and learning across the organisation as a developmental, collaborative process. This was reflected in the project data and triangulated across data sets, as discussed in the presentation and commentary of the case study data below. In addition, it is a philosophy that was explicitly articulated in the college's current Learning and Teaching Development Strategy:

As one of its key strategic drivers, the college aims to consistently deliver outstanding teaching and learning across all curriculum areas. The teaching and learning strategy outlines the college's ethos behind its strategy for developing teaching and learning excellence, its professional standards and how staff are developed and observed. The college follows a teaching triangle model that is a developmental and collaborative process which allows staff to plan, deliver/observe and evaluate within a proactive environment which promotes collaborative communities of practice.

The college's commitment to developing 'collaborative communities of practice' among its staff was encapsulated largely in its introduction of the teaching triangles, which was one of two main activities identified by staff as a priority at Hill Top for improving teaching and learning. This is discussed in further detail below.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the study's key findings, drawing on research data taken from the online survey, semi-structured interviews with the SLT, focus groups with staff and Hill Top's Learning and Teaching Development Strategy. Where possible, the presentation of different data sets is integrated i.e. where thematic links occur naturally. There were chunks of quantitative data that did not lend themselves to being thematically linked with some of the qualitative data but were, nevertheless, important in their own right to report, e.g. demographic data from the sample. So as not to exclude these data and to contextualise the sample, some of these data are presented at the beginning of this section.

The quantitative data presented in **Figures 4.1–4.5** below thus help to provide a descriptive overview of the demographic profile of the sample, covering areas such as gender, age, mode of employment, length of service at Hill Top and their current role at the college.

Demographics of the Hill Top College sample

Of the 90 respondents who completed the survey, the gender profile closely reflected that of the staff population at Hill Top, i.e. female = 55 per cent; male = 45 per cent, as outlined in **Figure 4.1,** and was not dissimilar to the wider gender profile of the FE workforce (ETF, 2017).

Figure 4.1 – Hill Top College participants by gender

2. What's your gender?

Gender	Count
Female	47
Male	39
Prefer not to say	4
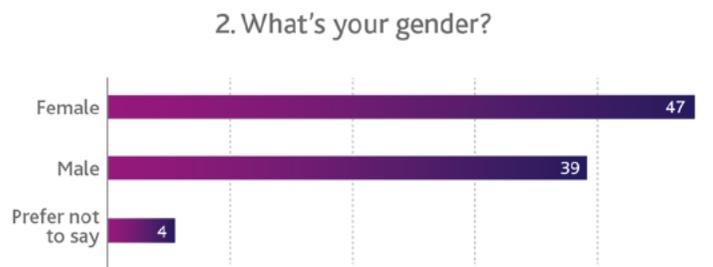
As **Figure 4.2** reveals, just under three-quarters of survey respondents were aged over 40. Over half had been employed at the college for up to seven years at the time of the survey, with over a fifth of respondents having been there for under two years, suggesting a significant intake of new staff in recent years (**Figure 4.3**). The SLT confirmed in an end-of-project dissemination meeting that there had been a recent increase in staff recruitment following the opening of the college's new buildings and the expansion of curriculum provision into new subject areas.

Figure 4.2 – Hill Top College participants by age group

4. Which age group do you belong to?

Age group	Count
Prefer not to say	3
Over 55	21
51–55	14
41–50	27
31–50	16
25–30	8
Under 25	1
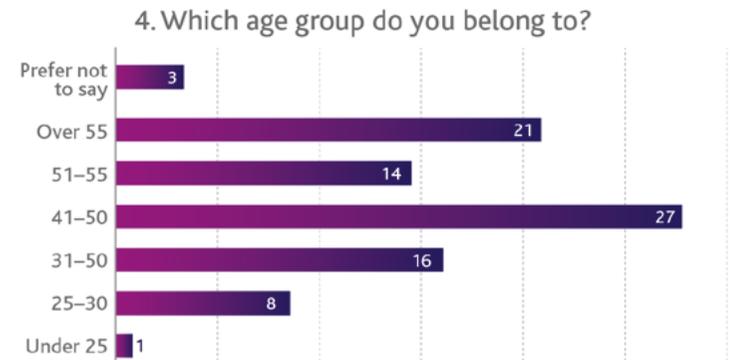
Figure 4.3 – Hill Top College participants by length of service

11. How long have you worked at the college where you are currently employed?

Length of service	Count
20 years or more	10
14–19 years	18
8–13 years	12
2–7 years	30
Under 2 years	20
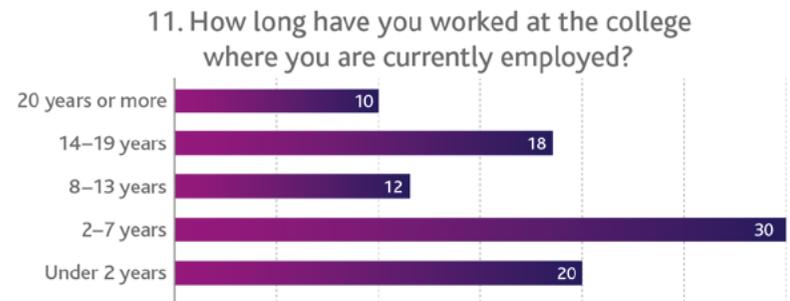
Over 70 per cent of respondents were employed on a full-time basis (**Figure 4.4**) and these were spread across a broad range of subject areas/departments in the college, with the biggest group (20%) working in A-level provision.

Figure 4.4 – Hill Top College participants by mode of employment

6. What is the mode of your employment at your College?

Mode of employment	Count
Full-time	64
Part-time	25
Hourly-paid	1
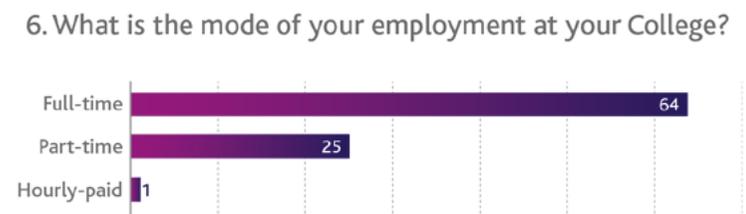
Figure 4.5 – Hill Top College participants by current role

12. What is/are your current role/roles at your college? (Tick all that apply)

Teaching (e.g. lecturer, instructor, assessor, demonstrator) — 76
Teaching (e.g. lecturer, instructor, assessor, demonstrator) and Management — 7
Learning/Teaching support — 4
Teaching (e.g. lecturer, instructor, assessor, demonstrator) and Learning/Teaching support — 2
Management — 1
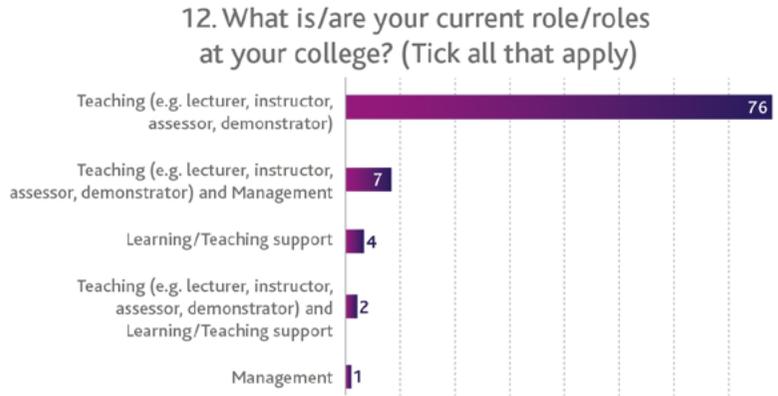
Sources of evidence and their impact on thinking and practice

While all 10 of the 'sources of evidence' listed in Q.13 of the survey (illustrated in **Figure 4.6**) generated consistently high levels of agreement among respondents, those that yielded the highest level of '(strongly) agree' responses overall involved students in some capacity, i.e. student feedback, student participation and, especially, student performance. The only source of evidence that surpassed these was 'personal reflection', with all respondents (strongly) agreeing.

Teaching triangles, continuing professional development (CPD), peer observation and informal conversations were among the most commonly cited other examples of evidence that had an impact on their thinking and practice in participants' qualitative responses to Q.14 of the survey.

13. The sources of evidence listed below have an important impact on my thinking and practice:

13.10. Reflecting with others
13.9. Personal reflection
13.8. Awarding bodies' comments
13.7. External employers' comments
13.6. External examiners' comments
13.5. Senior managers/leaders' comments
13.4. Peers' comments
13.3. Student performance
13.2. Student participation
13.1. Student feedback

Legend: Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Not applicable | Not assigned

Activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace that you are aware of

Activity	Value
Teaching triangles/squares	88
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues	83
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers	77
Informal conversations with colleagues	76
Unassessed peer observations	68
Teachmeets	64
Formal programmes of study/qualifcations	64
Mentoring	63
Subject/programme review with colleagues	60
'Personal' research on teaching and learning	52
Assessed performance management observations	50
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter	46
Partnership work with other organisations	38
External conferences	33
Academic research on teaching and learning	32
Professional Learning Communities	28
Other	2

Improving teaching and learning at Hill Top College

The professional learning, training and development of staff was clearly valued at Hill Top, with multiple participants making unprompted references to this in focus groups, interviews and the online survey. This was explicitly emphasised in the college's Learning and Teaching Development Strategy and reinforced by the SLT when interviewed, along with the financial support provided for staff to pursue further qualifications and training/ development opportunities.

Questions 15–19 of the online survey generated the majority of the data relating to activities associated with teaching and learning, as well as how the college and its staff prioritised these different activities and their role in improving the quality of teaching and learning.

What was clear from responses to Q.15 (illustrated in **Figure 4.7**) was that staff at Hill Top were clearly involved in a wide range of activities associated with improving teaching and learning, as indeed were participants across all three case studies. While some of these activities played a more central role than others, as discussed in more detail below, levels of participation were generally quite high across survey respondents, suggesting an established culture of organisational involvement in practice sharing, and the updating and improvement of professional knowledge and skills.

Figure 4.8 – Three most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning by staff/the college (Hill Top)

The most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning
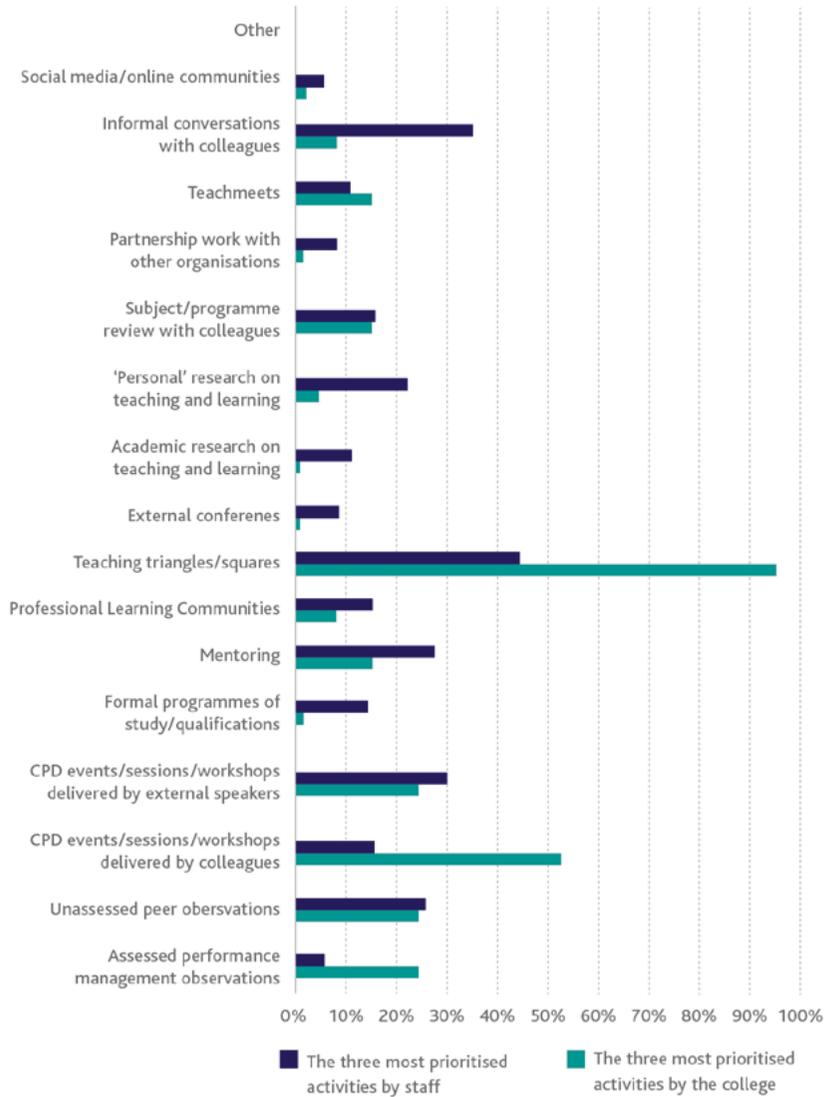
- The three most prioritised activities by staff
- The three most prioritised activities by the college

What staff considered the three most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning and their perceptions of the college's priorities revealed both similarities and differences.

A comparison of the responses in **Figure 4.8** shows that teaching triangles were identified as the most prioritised activity in both cases. Overall, staff responses revealed a wider portfolio of activities compared to what they considered were the college's priorities. Almost all of the activities mentioned by staff involved some type of peer collaboration, with 'informal conversations with colleagues' yielding the second highest number of responses after teaching triangles. As the comments below illustrate, a collective and collaborative ethos underpinned the college's approach to improving teaching and learning:

> *Meeting with colleagues is key to thinking and practice improvement, i.e. gathering teaching/learning ideas, solutions to problems in the classroom.* (Respondent 51)

> *The completion of teaching triangles and informal conversations, especially about one's chosen subject, offer the best form of immediate feedback and help in improving one's practice.* (Respondent 60)

> *The focus at Hill Top is all about working collaboratively to improve T&L. It is a great model which allows professional autonomy and allows for creativity and professional dialogue. Long may it continue!* (Respondent 40)

> *Watching each other teach and then talking about classroom practice has been a breath of fresh air. I hated being observed and graded. Did nothing for my teaching.* (Respondent 67)

In contrast, staff identified the three least important activities associated with teaching and learning as: 1. Engagement with social media/online communities, e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter; 2. Assessed performance management observations; and 3. External conferences. Elaborating on their choices in their qualitative comments, some respondents expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of engagement with social media and the use of external speakers on the basis that they 'are external to the college and so cannot differentiate between different colleges

to provide a bespoke service'. Criticisms of assessed/graded performance-management observations pointed to some of the shortcomings and counterproductive consequences associated with this practice revealed in other research studies (e.g. O'Leary & Brooks, 2014; UCU, 2013) and discussed in detail in the other two case studies in this report. Interestingly, the **constraints of performative, assessment-based models of observation were also acknowledged by the SLT as a major barrier to making substantive and sustainable improvements to the quality of teaching.** The following section elaborates on this further by providing an important backdrop to Hill Top's decision to move away from performance-management models of observation and to pursue alternative approaches to such normalised practice in the form of teaching triangles, discussed in detail below.

Background and rationale for moving away from performance-management models of graded observation at Hill Top College

As discussed at the beginning of this case study, the decision to introduce teaching triangles at Hill Top College was the culmination of a long journey during which its SLT had come to realise the limitations of relying on an accountability-led approach driven by measuring staff performance and the need to move beyond such reductive measurement:

> ... when we first were changing, we had a lot of forums when we went to non-graded observations, when we were uncertain about what we wanted to do. We met with a lot of staff and I visited a lot of other colleges and read a lot of articles and decided what to do. Once we got into that change and once we started to head in that direction, the next change we made was when we went to triangles last year. We didn't consult staff about that, we just knew that that was where we wanted to go and I did talk to people, for instance, our team, they call it OPs, the 'outstanding practitioners'. We had quite a big consultancy period and we thrashed out the ideas and that's when we decided on the triangles, but in that phase of it, we didn't involve any other staff because we knew that's where we wanted to head.

Hill Top's SLT knew it wanted to change but was initially unsure as to which direction to go in, though as Grant, the standards and performance manager, commented, 'the overriding thing we knew was that the grades had to go'. The college had reached a point of stagnation with its performance-management models of observation; improvements in teaching and learning had stalled and, in some cases, staff were deliberately 'performing' in such a way in their annual assessed observations that they could avoid being given a Grade 1. This was largely because of the additional workload that was triggered by being awarded a Grade 1, i.e. mentoring others and/or opening up their classrooms to repeated peer observations for 'their peers to observe best practice'. In one case, a lecturer was the subject of 25 peer observations in a single academic year. Grant also recounted an observation that he had carried out in construction where the lecturer had delivered an 'excellent lesson... one of the best I've ever seen', but had consciously avoided getting a Grade 1 by asking the students to leave early. When Grant questioned him as to why he had done this, as it was the only thing preventing him being given a Grade 1, he replied that he had done it deliberately because he did not 'want the extra hassle and pressure that goes with getting a Grade 1'.

The transition from graded observations at Hill Top went through various stages, which helped to lay the foundations for the present practice of 'teaching triangles' (discussed below). For a period of two years following graded observations, the college moved to a developmental, mentoring/coaching model of observation. According to Grant, this approach was embraced by the vast majority (90%) of staff. At the heart of this model was a reconceptualisation of the role of the mentor from 'repair technician' (O'Leary, 2014a) under the previous graded observation scheme to one of collegial support, which led to a change in staff attitudes to observation and subsequently a wider cultural change across the college, with staff becoming more

'open' and 'receptive' to inviting colleagues into their classrooms. This developmental model replaced the previous four-point grading scheme with a broader 'standards met/partially met/ not met' system. Thus, there was still a ranking of performance of sorts, despite the removal of the Ofsted grades. After a two-year cycle, the SLT noticed a 'dramatic improvement' in the overall quality of teaching, which they attributed to the shift in focus from a performance-management driven agenda to a developmental emphasis. But they were not content with this progress and wanted to push for further change.

In September 2016, in a whole college briefing to staff, Grant outlined what work had taken place to date to improve the quality of teaching and learning. He was forthright in declaring that there was no longer anything the SLT could do to improve teaching standards further and that staff needed to take responsibility for this themselves, with the support of the SLT:

> It's now over to you. We're going to do everything we can to help and support you but **if your teaching is going to improve further then you need to take ownership of it yourself.**

This call to arms thus formally launched the introduction of teaching triangles at Hill Top.

Teaching triangles

The teaching triangles originally emerged from a 'change project' that Grant had been working on as part of a leadership and management course. Following the presentation of his project to Hill Top's CEO, the decision was taken to roll out the triangles across the college in 2016/17, with the knowledge that Hill Top was due to be inspected by Ofsted that year. It was a decision that had the full backing of governors. Given that the SLT knew that the introduction of the triangles would coincide with an Ofsted inspection, it might arguably have been easier for them to take a more cautious approach and not change the status quo until after the inspection. However, it was clear that Hill

Top's strategic vision for improving the quality of teaching and learning was something that its SLT strongly believed in and was committed to pursuing regardless of whether or not the college was due for inspection. According to Grant, the teaching staff were more guarded than the SLT about the move to teaching triangles in an Ofsted year. Yet the conviction of the SLT and its drive to persuade staff to embrace the move was crucial in encouraging them to take this 'leap of faith' and to get them to think differently about their teaching and how to improve it by using triangles as a catalyst to do so, as discussed below.

Before beginning to explore the experiences and views of Hill Top's staff of the teaching triangles, it is worth getting an insight into what they are and how they work. **Table 4.1** is an abridged extract from Hill Top's Learning and Teaching Development Strategy that provides a brief background to, and overview of, the procedural aspects of teaching triangles.

Table 4.1 – An overview of teaching triangles at Hill Top College

The background

Teaching triangles work on the theory that positive teaching skills are transferable and that staff learn not from being observed, but from observing their peers. It takes peer observations a step further (as they involve three people) and are a powerful tool, as they generate greater discussion and assist in developing collaborative communities of practice. Teaching practice develops through the willingness to experiment and receive non-judgemental feedback and support from colleagues. In short, they get teachers talking about teaching and reflecting on their own practice. This entire process is heavily supported by a member of the outstanding practitioner (OP) team.

A teaching triangle activity consists of:

- Three members of staff forming a 'triangle'.
- Within one academic year each of the three members delivers a lesson on a set theme (i.e questioning) and the other two staff observe for a minimum of 30 minutes.
- Before each lesson a planning session is held. This will be coordinated by an OP.
- After each session, a brief reflection will be recorded. This will be coordinated by an OP.

The first steps

All staff in scope will join two peers to form a triangle. This group will establish a theme to develop over the academic year (e.g. differentiation, stretch and challenge). Triangles are generally subject-specific, however, there are examples of cross-college staff working together to satisfy their own professional development (higher skills, adult ,etc).

The planning stage

Each stage of the triangle process will be coordinated by the OP in each curriculum area. During the planning stage, each triangle will research their triangle theme and then plan a lesson/strategies to use within the classroom. A date for the triangle lessons will be set.

The delivery

The first member of the triangle delivers a lesson which incorporates the theme. The other two members of the group observe the lesson and make notes on areas of strength and how the theme could be further developed. OPs will attend these lessons to assist in the supportive reflection of the session. If they cannot attend then some lessons may be videoed to allow for future collaborative analysis. The triangle lesson must last for a minimum of 30 minutes.

The evaluation

The evaluation of the themed lesson should take place within 48 hours and should involve all members of the triangle. OPs will assist with this process by providing the reflective 'lens', which will drive discussion and professional development. The triangle process is repeated until all members have planned, delivered and evaluated a lesson.

Action planning

All those in scope will have an action plan to focus and develop their teaching and learning. These action plans will be produced, monitored and evaluated by their OPs. The action plan will focus on the sharing of good practice and individualised areas of development. The closing down of developmental action plans is the responsibility of teaching staff/OPs and is likely to include working collaboratively with team members, peer observation or further professional training.

Grant, the OPs and members of both focus groups talked about how a common pattern to emerge in the triangles was that the 'stronger teachers' would often volunteer to teach the first lesson, thus 'setting the standard'. By the time it came to the 'weaker' of the three, in Grant's words, 'they felt like they really had to up their game', which seemed to lead to a peer-driven desire to want to produce as high quality a lesson as possible, in turn triggering a rise in quality across the college as a whole. Grant went on to talk about how some staff had asked to do their taught lessons again in their triangles, as they felt that they had not shown their best to their colleagues: 'I've got my two colleagues at the back of the room and I want them to think I'm better than that'.

When compared to previous assessed performance-management models of observation, the introduction of teaching triangles was seen as 'a breath of fresh air' by teaching staff at Hill Top. The contrast between the two regimes and the impact on staff perceptions and their experiences was significant. The following account, from a head of department who had left the college to work elsewhere but then returned after a period of nine years, captures well the contrast between a performative approach to observation and one that is based on an ethos of collegial support:

> *I worked here years ago and then left for about nine years and worked for two colleges where it was always graded and it was a one to one, and I was an observer and you could see the tutors, the stress levels rise as you went in the class. They were given timetables, it could be any lesson within a week, so the pressure it then used to put on the staff that they've got to... yes, you've got to prepare for every lesson but there was that added pressure that somebody would appear in your classroom at a particular time and you didn't know which one it was, and I always saw, it was an Ofsted tick-box exercise where it was all about the grade. Coming back here now, there is a completely different approach to teaching and learning as to what there was nine years ago when I was here. It*

is more relaxed, it is about the supportive rather than kicking somebody down when they've done a bad job in a classroom, because you know what, we can't perform 100 per cent all the time, and some people do go to pieces when they're being observed, and that one particular occasion doesn't mean they're a bad teacher just because the lesson observation didn't go very well. So there's a lot more to it now with these teaching triangles, and the use of peer support, it is a lot better. Hats off to Hill Top for it, to be fair. I think that is a good positive.

Qualitative data from the survey and staff focus groups revealed a consensus as to how the teaching triangles had been embraced enthusiastically by the overwhelming majority and were perceived to be a success, which reflected the results of a college-wide evaluation carried out at the end of the first year in 2017. This narrative was repeatedly reinforced with staff at all levels and across different curriculum areas. In one of the focus groups, one of the project team researchers asked staff about the rationale for the introduction of the triangles and the claim by the SLT that they encouraged staff to take greater ownership of their teaching and greater freedom to work collaboratively with their peers. The following extract provides an insight into staff perceptions and their experiences to date:

> *R1 – So according to the college SLT, part of the rationale for introducing teaching triangles was to give more ownership to staff to allow you the freedom to work collaboratively, to decide collectively on what the focus of your observations would be. Is that consistent with your experiences?*

> *P3 – It is definitely better than the old system. With the old system, you were stressed. You don't seem stressed at all with this system. It's more **informal, relaxed.***

---

4 R = Researcher

5 P = Participant

*P4 – Timing as well, **you choose** when it is… so **I like that freedom of it**.*

*P3 – Well, you're not scared that if you make a complete fool of yourself and mess it up completely that you're suddenly going to go to a Grade 3 because you've previously been good or outstanding or whatever, and then actually I want to try something, and also if **you have collaboratively decided on doing that**, it might have been tried by someone else in your triangle beforehand and they go, no, you should try this, you really should, and you might be a little bit more reserved, previously, **but you think, all right then, with your support I'll do that and that's the key word all the way through**.*

*P5 – I've been at the college for eight years now and **with this model it's the only time we've actually talked about teaching and learning**.*

*P2 –… **we're encouraging each other to be more experimental, take risks** and go, 'you know, I've never actually tried to use the whiteboard with 10 students on it at once, why not?' And if it crashes, you go, 'did it crash as badly as I thought or did you actually see something else happen which worked?' We then progress from that.*

The words/phrases highlighted in the transcript extract above are indicative of comments from participants across the focus groups and survey responses. **The overriding narrative to emerge was one that accentuated the collaborative, supportive and developmental focus of the teaching triangles,** with staff no longer afraid to 'take risks' but positively encouraged to do so, as the focus had shifted from a judgement of performance to collegial support. This was echoed in Hill Top's most recent inspection report, which stated that:

Leaders and managers have successfully created a culture which encourages teachers to be professionally reflective, confident, enthusiastic and willing to take risks to bring out the best in learners.

The OPs were central to the success of the triangles; they acted as the glue that bonded the various elements together, as Hill Top's standards and performance manager describes:

… the crucial thing that drives all this is that OP, because without them this system falls… So that OP is crucial because they do two things, one they make it happen, they arrange it, it's all done electronically, you know, make sure that people are there, so they do it that way. And the other one is that they help with the feedback, so sometimes if it's a difficult relationship or there are some things that a lot of people don't want to say, they will…

The OPs are effectively middle managers, acting as mediators between the SLT and teaching staff. There are six OPs in total, each assigned to different curriculum areas, with whom they work on an ongoing, long-term basis. While they all continue to teach in their respective subject areas, their OP role takes up two-thirds of their contracted time. They manage the work of their triangles closely, attending departmental/team meetings, becoming part of the triangles themselves, identifying key themes/areas of practice on which to focus, observing teaching, offering ongoing advice and support, facilitating the professional dialogue, etc. When asked to describe their role, the two OPs interviewed for the project used terms such as 'to support staff collaboration' and 'to facilitate staff in the planning, reflection and discussion of their practice'. It was clear from their interviews and, indeed, the other project data that the role of the OP in the context of the teaching triangles was complex and multi-faceted. It involved elements of coaching, mentoring, project management, monitoring standards and mediating policy and practice, along with acting as a conduit between the SLT and practitioners. In the following interview extract, Grant recounts

a conversation with an Ofsted inspector during the college's inspection about the role of the OP:

> *... it's funny, because when Ofsted were here, they went to a triangle feedback and the guy said to me they didn't say much, the OP, and I said, okay, what did they say? He said he'd occasionally lean forward and say what about the embedding of English and maths, and then sit back again. I said, well, that's what they're supposed to do. They're supposed to stir the pot, they're not supposed to be in charge of it. The lesson that he'd seen had been an incredibly strong lesson with three really quite strong members of staff.*

The conceptualisation of the OP's role as being there to 'stir the pot' is reminiscent of the way in which Whitmore (2002, p. 42) describes the role of a coach as a 'detached awareness raiser' rather than a provider of solutions. They are there to provoke and develop dialogic interaction between colleagues. Thus, the primary verbal interaction of the OPs should be interrogative in the form of posing questions rather than making declarative statements. The use of questions encourages deeper reflection and problem-solving abilities, promoting self-reflection to explore one's thinking, beliefs and assumptions (Costa and Garmston, 2016; Parsloe and Leedham, 2009). As Charteris and Smardon (2014, p. 16) argue, 'Questions can enable teachers to cast a new lens over their landscape, to make the familiar strange'.

This conceptualisation of the OP was also consistent with how they themselves perceived it, as the following comment from one of the OPs highlights:

> *We're not there to dictate how and what they do but to support the collaboration between them and their development, both individually and collectively... we might ask them some difficult or challenging questions at times but it's all aimed at getting them to think about improving their teaching and their students' learning.*

When quizzed about why they thought the teaching triangles had been so successful and well received by staff to date, both OPs agreed that this was largely because of the underpinning ethos. They emphasised the importance of the 'developmental', 'supportive', 'non-threatening' and 'informal' nature of the triangles. As facilitators of this collaboration between staff, what the OPs witnessed was the development of closer professional relationships over the course of time, which in turn led to increased levels of trust, openness, willingness to experiment/take risks in teaching, collegial support and reciprocal motivation to want to learn and develop their practice. The multi-dimensional aspects of teaching triangles clearly emerged as a great strength, as not only did colleagues learn from each other (including the OPs) but working closely alongside peers meant they developed a professional investment in their peers' as well as their own practice, thus creating a climate of collective responsibility.

The continued success and sustainability of initiatives such as teaching triangles also seemed to be linked to other factors that were subject to the flux of policy reform in the sector, as well as the logistical challenges involved in arranging for several members of staff to find time when they were all available to complete their triangles. Some focus-group participants, for example, talked about how the recent increase in recruitment of part-time staff, combined with staff leaving for a variety of reasons and timetabling difficulties had disrupted working relationships in some of the triangles. It took time to develop collegial collaboration and relationships of trust among colleagues, and there was a perception that the conditions for forging such relationships were hindered sometimes if there was a high turnover of staff or an imbalance between part-time and full-time staff.

Hill Top's senior manager responsible for overseeing the management of the teaching triangles was mindful of some of the challenges involved in their operationalisation, which he described when recounting their launch in an interview:

Well, in the first year, we actually allocated people to triangles because there was a new system and it was a really onerous job. We all had to sit down with every timetable of every person because it's a tricky thing to do because you've got to have, obviously, one person teaching when two are free but that's got to work times three. And we said at the beginning of the year, it's also going to be tricky because people are going to leave, they're going to go off on maternity leave, they're going to be long-term sick, so the triangles constantly fall down and they've got to pick them up and say, right, they've got two here and I've got one over there and I'm going to make that another triangle… So in the first year we did that because it was a new system, and we also wanted to make sure that we had them right, so we did a lot of that… In the second year, we just went into team meetings and said, right, triangles are going to start soon, here's all your timetables, get yourselves into threes.

Not only were teaching staff being given the autonomy to decide which aspects of teaching and learning they wanted to focus on in their triangles, but they were also required to take responsibility for the logistics of the process, in collaboration with the OPs.

The importance of CPD, practice sharing and informal dialogue with colleagues

Both survey responses and focus-group comments emphasised the importance of collaboration, comparing and sharing practice, and ongoing informal conversations with their peers as the cornerstone of improving teaching and learning. The following two extracts from the focus groups with staff illustrate some of the specific activities that provide discursive forums in which teaching staff come together to discuss teaching and learning with peers at Hill Top:

In terms of learning fairs, essentially it's open to all colleagues within a particular department or area and it's an opportunity for everyone to bring like an item or some material or some resources that they can share just on a bigger scale away from teaching triangles and then obviously some members of staff will kind of take some ideas or kind of reflect and say I can implement that next time and so forth. So that's learning fairs and that normally takes like an hour or so. In terms of teachmeets, it's been in operation for the past two academic years and it's an opportunity to not only share practice internally, obviously you get external speakers and external members of staff coming in to share practice and it's just a great opportunity to not only build your confidence but look at kind of things that are implemented away from the college and the practices and so forth. (P3 – Focus Group 2)

I think there is a sense in which whether it grows from teaching triangles, teachmeets or college conference days, there is a sense in which there is very often, certainly in our kind of department, almost a kind of an informal discussion going most of, you know I've tried this and that's worked and people go away think about it, consolidate it and think I'll try and adapt that to my area of work and people do try. (P4 – Focus Group 1)

Teaching triangles, teachmeets and learning fairs are examples of some of the core activities that played an important part in helping to prioritise and improve the quality of teaching at Hill Top. Based on staff comments in the focus groups and online survey, it was clear that not only were these activities considered valuable in their own right, but they also acted as important catalysts for helping to establish an institutional culture in which **informal conversations about practice were valued and had become the norm** among staff outside of these activities. The interest, enthusiasm and passion of teaching staff to want to talk about their practice with others and to have the opportunity to do so shone through brightly across Hill Top's project data. In contrast to the reluctance and indifference often reported as being expressed by FE staff to college-wide CPD or what some

have pejoratively referred to as the 'sheep dip approach to CPD' (Scales et al, 2011), teaching staff at Hill Top clearly valued the time that they were afforded to engage in CPD activities. Besides, when asked what more they would like to see in place to improve teaching and learning, they demanded more opportunities for practice sharing. Such positive attitudes and experiences were not coincidental but the result of a planned strategy by Hill Top's SLT to transform CPD and to empower staff to become the protagonists in shaping its focus and direction.

Tracing back the origins of his thinking around CPD to a discussion that occurred as part of a master's he had undertaken previously, Grant elaborated on how the conceptualisation of CPD had shifted at Hill Top. As part of the ongoing Hill Top 'journey', CPD had gone through a process of transformation from a top-down model to one that was 'more organic', with staff having taken greater ownership of it and having become the driving force:

> *... the mass CPD session, you know, Wednesday afternoon, I remember when I went to your master's module and we discussed... there were two things and I'll never forget it, they said there are two things that don't work, one is graded observations and the other one is mass CPD, and I'm thinking, great, they're the two things I'm responsible for! But it's right, and we used to do them on a Wednesday afternoon and you'd have 20 or 30 people turn up but they were generally the same 20 or 30 people who came the week before or some staff were told they had to be there and would sit at the back... So it didn't really help, so we don't do that anymore. We have two college conferences a year but all of our CPD is delivered more organically, so we do it that way but also we have learning fairs... they do it more like a market stall where people move around and they all take resources, so it's just sharing and it's just CPD, but it's more organic because staff are driving their own CPD as opposed to you saying, right, on Wednesday afternoon at three o'clock you've got to come and do a lesson on differentiation. They all talk about how they do it,*

> *and it's more about their own learners and when they talk about behaviour management with a group, they actually know because they're out there doing it.*

At the core of the SLT strategic vision for improving the quality of teaching and learning was the way in which staff were actively encouraged to take responsibility for their own development. As one lecturer commented in the online survey:

> *Tom (CEO) and Grant clearly told all staff what was happening and that it was now over to us to drive our standards and the college's higher. Giving us all the structured autonomy to develop has been truly liberating. A master stroke! Management are always accessible to discuss teaching and learning.*

The notion of **'structured autonomy' was a distinctive characteristic and indeed strength of the role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning at Hill Top.** In many ways, it exemplified the SLT's conceptualisation of 'distributed' and/or 'affiliative' leadership, discussed further below. It was a notion that seemed to strike a balance between the interlinked, yet equally distinct, notions of **accountability** and **responsibility,** with the emphasis on the latter, as others have argued for in relation to pedagogic development:

> **By positioning responsibility as the basis for pedagogic development, academics become answerable to others through continued dialogue and partnership**. *This makes responsibility a contextualised process more than it is one based on generic metrics... Here,* **everyone is responsible for bringing about sustainable change that leads to better practice for the organisation from below, rather than relying on targets and accountability from above** [emphasis added by authors]. (O'Leary and Wood, 2019, pp. 131–133)

The importance of high standards and continuous improvement

Data from across the Hill Top case study as a whole revealed a clear awareness of the standards expected for teaching staff and what constitutes 'good' or 'effective' teaching.

Figure 4.9 – College sets standards in teaching, learning and assessment (Hill Top)

27. My college sets standards in teaching, learning and assessment

Yes	84
No	2
I am not sure	4
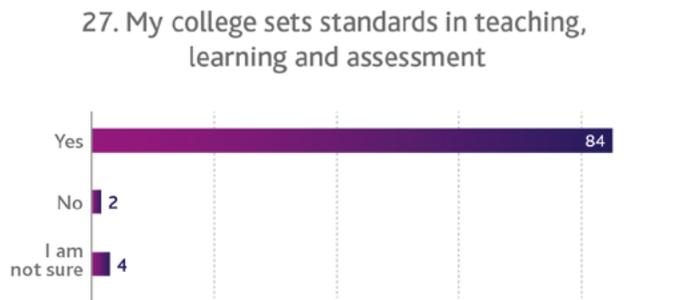
Figure 4.10 – College makes clear its standards for teaching, learning and assessment (Hill Top)

27.a. The College makes me aware of what it considers 'good' or 'effective' teaching, learning and assessment

Yes	85
No	1
I am not sure	4
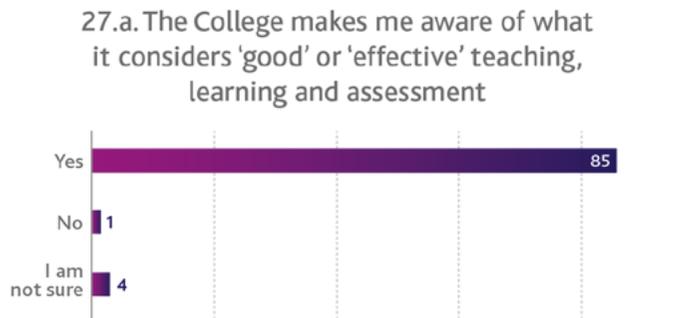
A term used frequently by the SLT, OPs and lecturers was 'the Hill Top way'. When teaching staff were asked about what this term actually meant, a participant from the second focus group explained:

*For me it's the 4As. I've only been here a year and when I do teaching and learning I use those 4As every lesson. Because I think it works. Those 4As are fantastic. **Aspiration,***

achievement, attendance and attitude. If they're all in the right place and in the right order, okay and you remind the students, then brilliant, and it's a tool I use all the time. So for teaching and learning, whoever comes up with that as a thing, I think it was a great thing. And that's all round the college that is. (P2 – Focus Group 2)

Drawing on sources such as the ETF's professional standards for the sector, Hill Top had devised its own teaching standards, which were articulated in college documentation and included as a reference point for staff in the booklets used for the teaching triangles. The OPs also used them to reinforce the key elements of 'effective lessons' at the start of each triangle. It was a message reiterated by the college's SLT too in its commitment to the notion of continuous improvement and pushing students and staff to achieve their maximum potential. Thus, the setting of high standards was a golden thread that ran through policies and practices relating to the improvement of teaching and learning:

The beginning of the year the principal in his speech was talking about we've had some success, we're grade 1 and everything's worked really well but what I want now instead of getting the student passes is to get them a credit. You know what I mean and we often debate that in our classrooms and we've got staff that are engaged I think and will push students and say, 'Look, you can easy get a distinction, I think your minimum is a credit'. (P6 – Focus Group 2).

Data from the focus groups and online survey painted an overwhelmingly positive picture of staff experiences. While the SLT was pleased with this positive feedback, it was also eager to emphasise that it would not remain complacent. Instead, they were more concerned with responding to the few comments that mentioned issues of communication, as the following extract from their standards and performance manager highlights:

I think the large majority of the responses were positive, which is good, but, obviously, you know, we've always got an eye on what we could do better, so there are a few

comments in there about communication and a lack of communication from management to staff so I suppose that's something… and it's funny that what I said in those emails to the principal and to our CEO, that's the thing they both came back with as well, you know, it's good but keep an eye on the things that you need to… you know, there's no need for complacency.

There was evidence of the teaching triangles leading to a change in the way in which staff conceptualised improving teaching and learning as an ongoing process, which differed to previous performance management driven models of observation:

I think the older format, you had one observation, like you said it would be that week, and then that number and that feedback defined you for the whole year… And you only really thought about improving your teaching and learning preparing for that one lesson. Whereas, because the triangles you have the initial thought then teacher one, teacher two, teacher three, as it goes on, or five, you're constantly helping with planning, you're constantly observing one another and you're thinking about it the whole year. And even if I was teacher one, what I've seen from teacher three at the end of the year, that's still improving my teaching at the end of the year then thinking forward to the next one, that's what I like about it.
(P3 – Focus Group 1)

Conceptualising improvement as an ongoing process that requires drive and a commitment to continuously wanting to do better was a philosophy that permeated Hill Top, from the SLT to many of its staff, whose work was informed by a distinctive orientation towards the future – a future perceived to be fast approaching. Hence, the necessity to avoid standing still at all costs, as this would remind the SLT of the damning 'good' results achieved in the 2013 Ofsted inspection:

We had been bashing our head against a brick wall, and that Ofsted report that we had in 2013, which is a frustrating

*thing to read, I mean, **everything's good, just everything's good, nothing's great, and nothing's poor, everything is good**, and we've driven that, really, not oppressively but it had been a little bit top-down from 2008 to 2013, and what that had done is it had tidied up teaching but it clearly wasn't going to deliver the college we wanted for the future…*

This accelerated, growth mindset also applied to methods and operational strategies that had proven successful, notwithstanding the recent implementation. When reflecting on the effectiveness of the teaching triangles, for example, the SLT was mindful of anticipating and envisioning possible evolutions, such as 'meta-triangles', designed to entrust more leadership to certain teachers who would lead more visibly on the development of the teaching themes. This particular approach to continuous improvement, backed by the belief that even a valid and well-rehearsed method 'is not the answer', sets the tone and the pace of work at Hill Top, where the 'what's next' motto drives both the action and imagination of senior leaders and staff, as illustrated in the passage below, where the SLT asked the researchers to probe the staff on their vision for the college:

*Where next is an interesting one because I don't think we've had that conversation, have we, really? [...] So not what worked and what didn't work, that's too clunky, you know? Maybe if you took some of the things which are evidentially working or the good stuff of it, and ask the question how do we grow in that, **how do we amplify that, and how do we align it to the wider societal challenges,** which is getting a bit clever but, you know what I mean?*

Models of leadership at Hill Top

In line with Lambert's study (2013), which highlighted the increasingly multi-faceted aspects of leadership in FE, the interviews conducted with Hill Top's SLT confirmed the saliency of three roles:

- **External-public** – CEOs/principals acting as representatives of the interests of their colleges to businesses within the local community but also regionally and nationally.
- **Internal-public** – internal leadership qualities: tackling administrative, academic and business-related issues that tend to be visible to (and involving engagement with) staff and students.
- **Internal-private** – internal leadership activities that are only visible to a few staff and governors yet qualify as strategic: e.g. planning and the development of the vision and mission of the college.

As far as the first role is concerned (i.e. external-public), the interview with Hill Top's SLT revealed a strong awareness of and strategic thinking in relation to the connections that need to be forged and maintained with business and the local community. The CEO's vision for Hill Top went beyond the financial gains associated with these partnerships, to suggest a more organic and ethical understanding of what these partnerships entail. As the following interview extracts illustrate, Hill Top's vision is dominated by a desire to **improve the quality of future employees and, through them, to bring about a change in the way businesses operate in the region,** thus effecting a long-lasting change of culture:

> *… Our business model is about providing products and services which are compelling and people want to buy, i.e. young people want to come here, adults want to come, employers want to come here, and that will lead to growth and the growth is funding it… Really simply put, the big challenge here is we need to create better jobs, so we need industry to be more effective, because there just aren't enough good jobs here. I mean, there are good jobs but there are not enough of them.*

The internal-public and internal-private functions of leadership, as per Lambert's classification, appeared to be combined in Hill Top's SLT. An effective division of labour seemed to be in place, with the standards and performance manager taking responsibility for administering policy and engaging substantively with staff at an operational level. For example, he was responsible for getting the teaching triangles off the ground and overseeing the work of the OPs, whilst the CEO and the principal provided and enacted the vision for the college. **Culture, aspiration, growth mindset, effective college governance** all featured strongly in the SLT agenda, as articulated by the CEO:

> *We're big on mission, big on vision, I think communication is massively important, setting expectations and keeping to them, consistency in a way people talk and behave to each other, being innovative as far as we can and showing innovation in terms of the curriculum and the building and design, teaching triangles, **highly visible leadership and management,** with an emphasis on leadership, the idea that people don't have to follow, leaders require followers, that doesn't mean you've got them… The more profound question is why are colleges not able to develop effective governance? There's a lot of ineffective governance, and I guess simply put, the quality of people in the governing body, you know, their intellectual capacity to… this doesn't mean they need MBAs and doctorates but their **ability to see things holistically.***

The holistic, highly visible leadership envisioned by Hill Top's CEO was consistent with the **transformational model** illustrated in the literature; one that aims to transform the values and, ultimately, goals of staff by acting on their motivations. It is a model that relies on the exceptional qualities of inspirational leaders who distinguish themselves by drawing a compelling picture of the organisation's vision and future projection. In the case of Hill Top, the golden threads that ran through this vision, its articulation and implementation, were consistency and transparency in the college's mission and the expectations of all staff in helping to achieve this. Thus, there was a golden thread of common understanding as to what the strategic priorities were in

relation to teaching and learning at a departmental/programme level and institutionally, as the responses to these two statements in the online survey illustrate in **Figure 4.11** and **Figure 4.12.**

Figure 4.11 – Understanding of strategic priorities of the college in relation to teaching and learning (Hill Top)

20. I understand what the strategic priorities of my college are in relation to teaching and learning

| Response	Count
Yes, but only a little	24
Yes	61
No	5
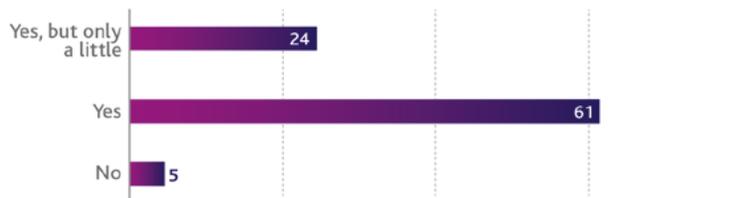
Figure 4.12 – Understanding of strategic priorities of my department/programme area in relation to teaching and learning (Hill Top)

21. I understand what the strategic priorities of my department/programme area are in relation to teaching and learning

Response	Count
Yes, but only a little	18
Yes	66
No	6

This common understanding was echoed in the qualitative data from the survey, interviews and focus groups, as these two excerpts illustrate:

You couldn't have a more transparent system than triangles. Staff have been consulted (forums, etc) every step along the way as T&L has evolved. (Respondent 51)

The management care about teaching and learning and what's best for teachers. A very clear and transparent model (triangles) allows me to develop without the huge pressure

of other big brother methods (graded/judgement). We are an outstanding college because we have an outstanding approach to developing our teaching staff. Long may it continue! (Respondent 74)

When confronted with the shift towards more collaborative, networked leadership styles, whereby leadership gets distributed within a single organisation or across multiple organisations, Hill Top confirmed that it, too, moved away from traditional, 'heroic' forms of 'command-and-control', to privilege a blended leadership. In other words, they retain a mix of hierarchical elements, while explicitly embracing 'diffused leadership'. The latter re-defines the concept by centring it on teaching and learning. The extensive use of teaching triangles is here depicted and justified as an effective method to improve teaching quality and give aspects of ownership and control back to staff.

I love the word 'diffused'. I don't like the word 'democratic', interestingly, because democracy suggests the will of the people, and actually this isn't quite the will of the people, but this is the… it's not antidemocratic but it's not pure democracy because it's about people taking their role in leading the delivery of the vision which is to give young people jobs, prosperity, better behaviour, societal issues, that sort of stuff. They don't really have a choice about the way they do that, it's how we best consensually do that, so I think democracy is a bit too strong, but it is affiliative, it is inclusive, and it's diffused leadership. (Hill Top CEO)

Middle management and teaching triangles

In line with a significant gap identified in the literature relating to the role of middle leaders as implementers of leadership, one key purpose of this study was to shed light on the versatile and context-specific role of middle managers in FE. For these reasons, the two focus groups held at Hill Top were explicitly designed to explore the extent to which the teaching triangles, run under the guidance of the OPs (middle leaders), proved effective. Both groups agreed that the teaching triangles had enhanced

the quality of teaching and learning in the college, marking a veritable cultural change that had beneficial effects for teachers and learners. The extracts below encapsulate the core idea that teaching and learning ought to be central to the strategy and practice of leadership. At Hill Top, this is achieved by placing emphasis on aspiration, motivation, engagement and, above all, a clear expectation of high quality and standards. Teaching triangles had proven effective in creating a virtuous cycle of trust among colleagues/peers, who felt supported and encouraged to experiment with and diversify their teaching.

> *I think the **one thing that struck me about the teaching triangles is kind of a supportive developmental atmosphere in the sense that because teaching triangles are more of a discussion amongst peers, there's more encouragement to try or develop new innovations, new techniques,** whereas perhaps under a, dare I say, more formal system of observation where one is graded that that tends to encourage conservatism. Whereas under the teaching triangle situation you're actually, I felt and in my triangle there was a real sense in which you could actually go and try things without fear of that it would actually backfire… So **I feel it's actually encouraging the development or the diversification of teaching techniques rather than making it more convergent and more limited because, in other words, I suppose in a nutshell, people aren't frightened to try new things.**
> (P5 – Focus Group 1)

> *I don't know if it's shared but part of the college mission is to really raise people's aspirations of what they feel they're capable of achieving… Can I say it is part of the mission statement but I think it's about raising this, almost raising people's expectations about themselves, I think, and allowing them to come to believe that they can do it and their lives can often be changed as a result of that, if that makes sense, you know, and I think there is a sense in which **whether it grows from teaching triangles, teachmeets or**

> ***college conference days, there is a sense in which there is very often certainly in our department, almost a kind of an informal discussion going most of the time… you know, I've tried this and that's worked and people go away, think about it, consolidate it and think I'll try and adapt that to my area of work, and people do try.*** (P1 – Focus Group 2)

When asked about the role of the OPs in the planning and delivery of the teaching triangles, the two groups recounted largely positive experiences, though there were admittedly some challenges involved in responding to the differing needs and expectations of staff across a broad range of subject areas. Teaching staff in one group referred to the OPs as:

> *… facilitators… there to set up the first meeting, to explain the triangle that you're in, have subsequent meetings after that hopefully with the other two members of staff, which is normally not the case, and then they will observe and give feedback to each one of the members.*

The OPs were seen as effectively leading the teaching triangles in both groups. However, there were some tensions relating to the OPs' areas of subject specialism and the extent to which these correlated with the teaching triangles to which they were assigned. By virtue of this, as emerged in the first focus group, OPs could recommend a shift in focus of the observations away from disciplinary specialisms to generic aspects of pedagogy, with emphasis on the practice and style of teaching. This led to mixed reactions among some participants, with some lamenting that the OPs lack of expertise in the areas they are assigned to could be counter-productive:

> *… the OPs don't always fully understand the area that they're observing. I found it quite frustrating at one triangle observation, I'm a GCSE English lecturer, so obviously [my] subject specialism is English and literacy, and on numerous occasions the OP told me to take my English hat off in the lesson and when we were having a discussion about*

differentiation the OP didn't understand, for example, that analysing structure is more difficult than analysing language and I got different groups working on different areas and the OP didn't understand that because they weren't an English specialist. So, I think it's important that actually the OP is a specialist for the area that they're observing. (P2 – Focus Group 2)

The OPs were themselves aware of some of the challenges involved in working across broad curriculum areas, particularly subject areas that were very different to their own. That said, they were able to offset some of these challenges by taking advantage of their own rich and diverse experience as OPs and consulting each other in regular team meetings. This was made easier by the fact that they all shared the same office, which helped to support communication and collaboration between them as a group.

As previously mentioned, at the time the interviews took place, the teaching triangles at Hill Top had entered their second year. The collective reflection of staff articulated in the two focus groups signalled differences in their implementation from year 1 to year 2. For example, it was noted that the collaborative lesson planning that occurred in the first year allowed for more experimentation and less stress for staff, with most of them declaring their preference for this mode of implementation. The second year saw a shift towards more individualised planning and preparation, which was perceived by some members of staff as contradicting the ethos of the teaching triangles, especially in light of logistical issues arising around timetabling, which further eroded collective preparation time. A lively debate ensued regarding ways of improving the structure and implementation of the teaching triangles at Hill Top, informed by ideas and questions about what constitutes going 'above and beyond' in one's teaching practice and what characterises 'good standards'. An unchallenged consensus emerged about the so-called 'Hill Top way', which speaks of a culture that fosters and cultivates expectations among staff and students, informed by a willingness to experiment and take risks, to innovate and appropriate teaching and learning.

When assessed against the **three-pronged model of leadership** introduced at the end of the literature review, Hill Top emerged as a paragon of virtue in every domain. The research data revealed **a transformational/distributed leadership at the SLT level operating in tandem with hands-on middle management to guarantee standards of practice and continuous innovation in teaching.** The reconceptualisation of leadership around teaching and learning is further evidenced and evinced by the collective input of teachers, who were not short of suggestions when quizzed about margins for improvement at Hill Top. CPD, adequate timetabling and remission time, logistical and technical support such as additional learning support and IT, were all examples of such suggestions. The three pillars of leadership – senior and middle management, and teaching staff – were shown to be operating in accord, resulting in a re-centring of leadership on teaching and learning.

Summary

The ethos of the teaching triangles links well to the three aspects of leadership referred to in **Figure 3.1** and is illuminative in what it reveals about the way in which leadership is conceptualised and enacted in Hill Top's teaching and learning strategy. There is a **strong sense of the collective, with staff working collaboratively in teams to improve teaching and learning,** principally through their involvement in the triangles but also through other college-wide activities such as learning fairs and teachmeets. What all these activities have in common is that they place practitioners at the forefront, investing in their professional autonomy to act as key drivers for change and improvement in teaching and learning. At the heart of the conceptualisation of improvement articulated by Hill Top's senior leaders is the belief that teaching staff are best placed to improve their practice and collaboration with colleagues is essential to driving meaningful and sustainable changes and improvements to their practice. The reciprocal learning that can occur when colleagues collaborate can have a powerful impact on practitioners' thinking and practice.

Table 4.2 – Key lessons from Hill Top College for improving teaching and learning

- Importance of creating the right culture and environment for professional learning to occur.

- Importance of creating an environment where staff take ownership of their own development.

- Need to trust teaching staff to take ownership and responsibility for improving their practice.

- Placing staff at the heart of teaching and learning improvements.

- Allowing staff the freedom to take risks and to try things out in the classroom.

- Prioritising professional responsibility over neoliberal accountability.

- Collaboration as a catalyst for improvement – discussing and reflecting on practice with colleagues is central to sustainable improvement.

- Collaborative learning with and from peers is more powerful than top-down, performance-management driven approaches.

- Importance of scheduling dedicated time for staff to discuss practice.

- Allow for localised flexibility but organisational consistency.

- Highly visible leadership with an emphasis on leadership rather than management.

- Teaching triangles promote longer-term thinking about practice.

- Consistency in policy and practice is crucial to get everyone 'on board' with the organisation's vision and plan.

- Transparency in articulation and implementation of policy.

5. MIDSHIRE COLLEGE

A case study portrait

Midshire College was established in the 1960s. Over the last 50 years, it has grown into a significant FE provider in its local community, serving the wider region. In particular, the college has a very strong enterprise and employability focus to its learning and partnerships with local businesses and universities. The college offers a wide range of courses from Level 1 to higher education (HE) in over 30 subject areas. Like many FE providers, it has strong access provision and provision for students with learning difficulties, which reflects a dedication to inclusive education. It was noted by Ofsted that the college recruits most of its learners from the most deprived areas of its local community.

Over the last two decades, Midshire College has grown into a multiple-site FE provider with two main campuses and five satellite campuses across the local region. This growth reflects how the college views its role in the local community as the main provider of FE to business and young people's needs. During the course of this research, an opportunity for further growth through merger with another local FE provider emerged. This opportunity did not come to fruition but signals the ongoing instability of FE in the region, mainly due to the reduction of funding under the current government. The Area Review process signalled a possible merger with a neighbouring competitor college, but initial discussions and a scoping exercise did not result in a merger.

When the research team first visited the college, the senior leadership team (SLT) shared a pragmatic view and approach to prioritising and improving teaching and learning in the college.

This was connected to the position of the college in the local market as senior leaders were conscious of the need to maintain a focus on high-quality teaching and learning in a highly competitive local market.

This pragmatic philosophy was also reflected in the college's approach to teaching and learning improvement and enhancement. The SLT acknowledged the value and importance of the Ofsted inspection framework and had based the college's teaching and learning (T & L) policy largely on the Common Inspection Framework (CIF), in order to 'ensure standards'. However, the SLT did not consider the CIF as sitting at the core of the college's T & L strategy, rather, it provided a mechanism to ensure the college remained 'Ofsted ready'. This last point is crucial in understanding the narrative that underpins the college's current position regarding the prioritisation and improvement of teaching and learning. **Between 2008 and 2018, the college had five full inspections and four monitoring visits from Ofsted. The historical impact of this pattern of inspections is significant.** While between 2013 and 2016, the college's Ofsted inspection outcomes rose from 'Satisfactory' to 'Good', a judgement that was maintained in the most recent inspection, in 2018, the college had another 'surprise' full inspection. This took place while our project was underway. As a result, there was an inevitable concentration of effort in relation to this inspection when we visited the college.

Central to the college's teaching and learning policy is a series of observation schemes, including graded observations, learning walks, peer observations, supported observations and non-graded observations. Graded observation is the most commonly used mechanism across the college. Although teaching performance is graded, the SLT intended it to be a formative assessment and feedback process, focusing on teachers' development. This is clearly stated in the teaching and learning policy document:

An observation procedure based solely on the outcomes of graded lesson observations will no longer generate

sufficient evidence to align judgements on teaching, learning and assessment and students' progress to the criteria and standards of the new CIF. Feedback would be insufficient to provide teachers with the information they need to align their work to the revised criteria and standards. The policy therefore details a revised procedure for carrying out graded observations, and the developmental work expected of academic staff in light of the grade awarded for their observation against the criteria and standards of the new CIF.

Observers are made up of a team of senior/middle managers. This is underpinned by the idea of bringing different communities together to provide organisational culture across the different departments and sites. Organisational culture is identified by senior managers as one of the most important areas but also one of the most challenging issues at the college.

As well as focusing on satisfying Ofsted inspection requirements, the college has also endeavoured to develop its own teaching and learning initiatives. In particular, the college has increased its resources for staff development and CPD over the last few years and encouraged staff to take development opportunities. According to the SLT, staff development focuses on issues in the sector/industry that staff need to know about; CPD is about professional development for their career. There has been a series of internal staff development workshops and activities led by staff members who received outstanding grades in their teaching observations.

Over the last few years, the senior teaching and learning managers have started developing a distinctive whole-college pedagogical approach that encourages students to be active and critical questioners. The approach focuses on students' being and becoming through using questioning in teaching and learning. This was intended to be a key part of the college's developmental teaching and learning strategy, as one of the managers put it:

... because we wanted to encourage our students to be able to think and whilst dealing with all the sort of pressures of funding and all of this regulation, what we've tried to do is encourage our teachers to think.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the study's key findings, drawing on research data taken from the online survey, the semi-structured interviews with Midshire College SLT, the focus groups with staff and from Midshire College's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy. The key themes emerging from the data are specific to this case study as each college is situated in its own particular context. However, where relevant, we develop threads that connect with the other two case studies.

Demographics of the Midshire College sample

126 staff members from Midshire College responded to the online survey. This was 43 per cent of the total number of staff who were in teaching and learning roles (293) at Midshire at the time of the research. The gender profile of the respondents closely reflected that of the staff population at Midshire, i.e. female = 68.60 per cent; male = 31.40 per cent. Compared to the wider gender profile of the FE workforce, the Midshire College population of female staff is considerably larger.

Figure 5.1 Midshire College participants by gender

2. What's your gender?
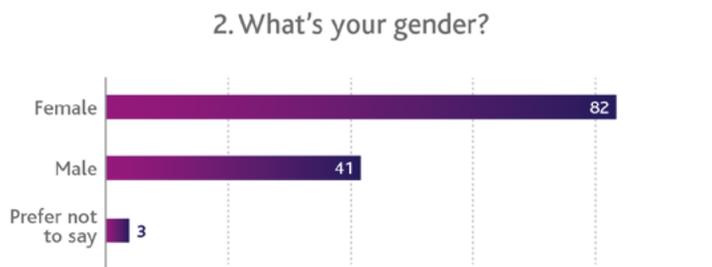
There was a fairly even spread of the age groups respondents belonged to, with 21 respondents reported under 30, 26 between 31 and 40, 32 between 41 and 50, 18 between 51 and 55, and 27 over 55. As **Figure 5.2** and **Figure 5.3** reveal, the majority of Midshire respondents were rather new to the college and to working in FE in general. Perhaps this reflects the recent expansions undertaken by the college.

Figure 5.2 – Midshire College participants by length of service in FE

10. How long have you worked in further education?

Figure 5.3 – Midshire College participants by length of service at the college

11. How long have you worked at the college where you are currently employed?
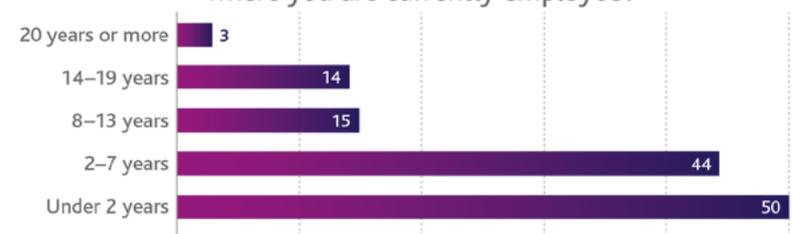
72 respondents out of 126 were employed on a full-time basis (57.14%) which was a larger proportion compared to the total number of full-time teaching staff in Midshire's staff population (87 out of 293 at the time of the research). Almost two-thirds (59.52%) of respondents were on an open-ended/permanent contract.

The respondents came from over 20 different subject areas/departments across the college, with engineering, foundation learning, GCSE, early years and ALS having the largest groups of respondents. While the majority of them were in a teaching role, there were 25 respondents in a learning/teaching support role and four in management. Some of the respondents also had multiple roles at Midshire.

Figure 5.4 – Midshire College participants by current role(s)

12. What is/are your current role/roles at your college?
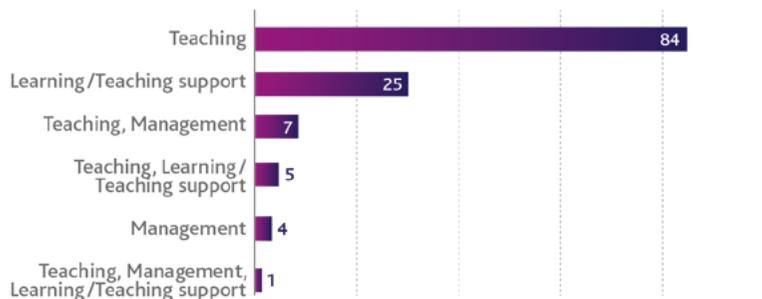
Sources of evidence and their impact on thinking and practice

As with the other two case studies, all 10 'sources of evidence' listed in Q.13 generated fairly consistent levels of (strong) agreement among respondents (**Figure 5.5**). Nevertheless, it was clear that respondents from Midshire College valued student feedback, student participation, student performance and their own personal reflection more highly than the other sources of evidence. On the other hand, external examiners' comments,

external employers' comments and senior managers'/leaders' comments had the most disagree/strongly disagree responses. This coheres with qualitative data from the focus groups, which we explore in more detail below.

Figure 5.5 – Sources of evidence that impact on thinking and practice (Midshire)

13. The sources of evidence listed below have an important impact on my thinking and practice:
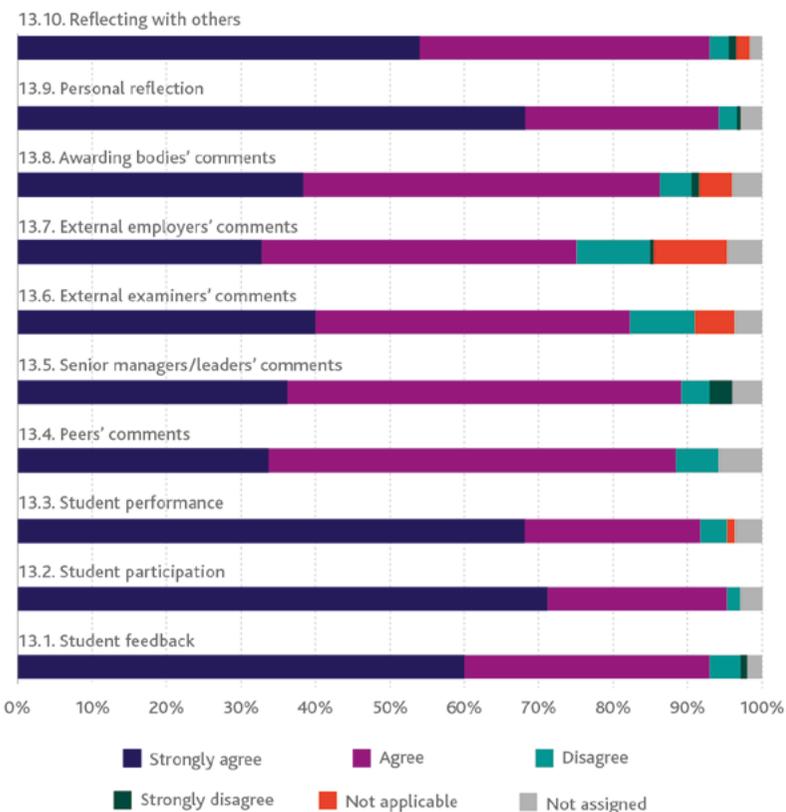
Improving teaching and learning at Midshire College

As in the other two case studies, staff at Midshire College reported a wide range of activities associated with improving teaching and learning (**Figure 5.6**).

Activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace that you are aware of

Activity	Value
Assessed performance management observations	103
Informal conversations with colleagues	99
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues	98
Formal programmes of study/qualifications	79
Subject/programme review with colleagues	73
Mentoring	69
'Personal' research on teaching and learning	66
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers	64
Unassessed peer observations	56
Partnership work with other organisations	50
External conferences	46
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter	33
Academic research on teaching and learning	29
Professional Learning Communities	22
Teaching triangles/squares	12
Teachmeets	9
Other	2

Clearly the college's formal teaching and learning policy (e.g. graded observations) and development initiatives (e.g. staff development activities and CPD events) were recognised by the majority of respondents. At the same time, they also acknowledged the informal and formal activities (e.g. informal conversations with colleagues, mentoring and unassessed peer observations) they do with their colleagues/peers. The high rating given to these activities is significant and we will explore this significance below.

Comparing what staff considered as the top three priorities for improving teaching and learning and what they believed were the college's top three priorities, it is clear **there is a dissonance between what staff themselves value and what they feel the college (management) values.**

Figure 5.7 – Most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning by staff/the college (Midshire)

The most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning
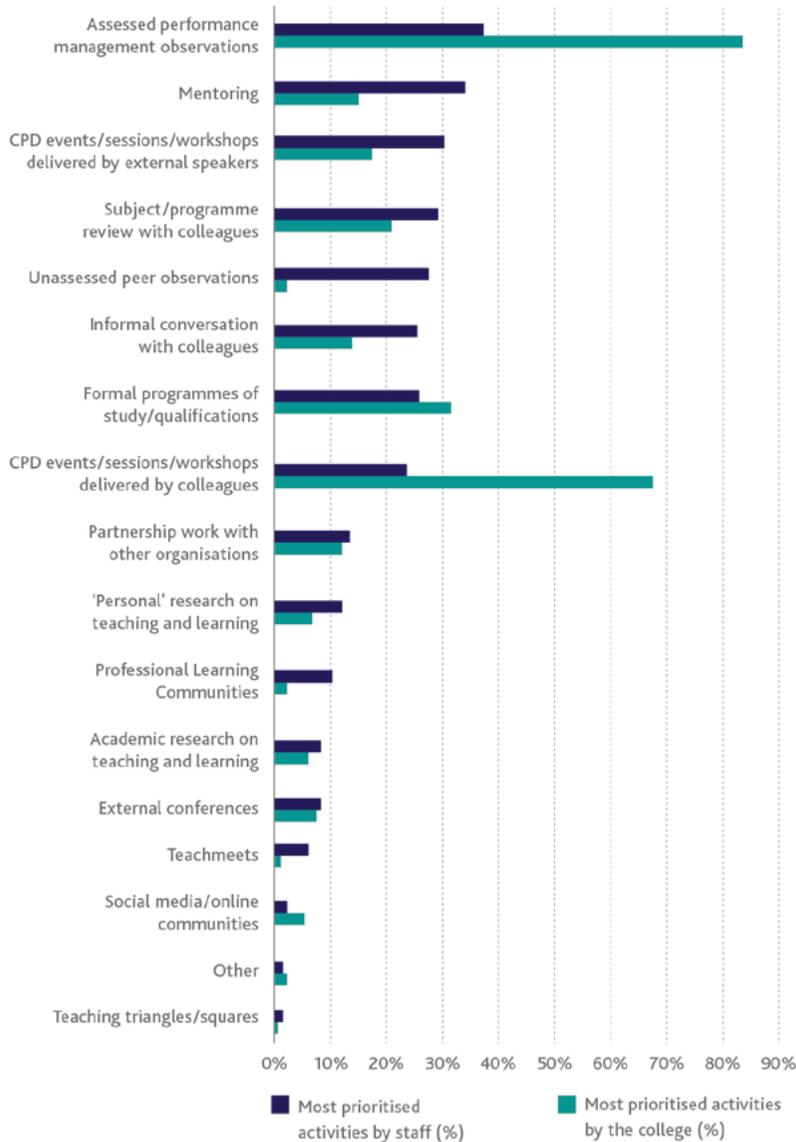
Clearly, respondents recognised the college has its flagship initiatives and approaches (i.e. graded observations and CPD activities delivered by internal staff); but there was a much more diverse range of activities that staff considered to be valuable. This difference in perception is most striking in three cases: 1) unassessed peer observations; 2) mentoring; and 3) informal conversations with colleagues. The key common feature of these three activities is the level of (in)formality of these interactions and an inferred collegial power dynamic. Also notable is that they sit outside the (potentially) high-stakes mechanisms that are regarded as the key improvement tools by the SLT. Our interest in versions of leadership that are non-hierarchical and that catalyse agency at different levels in the organisation, specifically in relation to teachers' self-directed improvement of teaching and learning, is key here.

Figure 5.8 – Least prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning by the college (Midshire)

Q17. What does the college identify as the three least prioritised activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace

Activity	Value
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter	40
External conferences	34
Unassessed peer observations	33
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers	31
Mentoring	29
Teaching triangles/squares	28
Informal conversations with colleagues	26
'Personal' research on teaching and learning	24
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Teachmeets	21
Partnership work with other organisations	18
Subject/programme review with colleagues	11
Formal programmes of study/qualifications	10
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues	7
Assessed performance management observations	6
Other	5

Key themes

In this next section we will draw on data from the interviews with SLT and the focus groups with staff to: i) explore the contextual pressures faced by Midshire College in its drive to improve teaching and learning; ii) illuminate the impact of current strategies that are being used to enhance teaching and learning; and iii) tentatively propose ways forward.

The contextual frame: The impact of Ofsted inspections

In the case of Midshire College, **the interview and focus group data need to be framed by the understanding that data were gathered immediately after an Ofsted inspection** that rated the college as 'Requires Improvement'. There were strong opinions about the fairness (or otherwise) of the judgement on the part of all staff. The inspection that took place during the research process provided the researchers with a unique perspective on the latest episode in a decade-long series of interactions between the college and Ofsted.

As with the Hill Top case study, the interviews with the SLT at Midshire suggested an ongoing commitment to improving teaching and learning that generated a narrative spanning more than a decade. According to the teaching and learning manager: '(T)he things we're doing this year are a function of the things we've done in those]six] years before.' This sense of striving to achieve continuity, with a potential for gradual improvement, is a key insight. A starting point in this area was identified as the need to embed a common understanding of what constituted 'good' under the CIF:

> *[Staff] really need to know what the expectations are and what the criteria is and standards, so we used it as an opportunity to better understand together the Common Inspection Framework grading and criteria.*

This suggests an SLT prioritisation of establishing consistency and coherence across the college's multiple sites. Unsurprisingly, **institutional interactions with and responses to Ofsted were a key feature of this narrative.** Not only did the college experience a difficult inspection during the course of the research, but it had been inspected five times in the last 10 years. **One important finding of the study relates to the impact of these frequent inspections.** One way the data can be interpreted is that the SLT's main focus in this period was on responding to a broad agenda set out by Ofsted as well as to discrete points emanating from inspection reports. This illustrates the significance of Ofsted's influence in contributing to or inhibiting the improvement of teaching and learning in the college.

While five inspections in 10 years may seem excessive, this pattern of visits is not especially unusual as inspections typically occur over a three-year cycle. At the beginning of this period, Midshire moved from a 'Satisfactory' grading to 'Good'. The inspection that took place during the course of the research (and immediately prior to the main interviews and focus groups) is more interesting. Coming only two years after the previous Good judgement, senior leaders believed it may have been triggered by the prospect of a merger with another local (competitor) college.

The institutional impact of this succession of inspections, however, was not one of incremental improvement. During this period, **Ofsted's role can be seen as emphasising the production of snapshot assessments to provide market data, rather than, for example, engaging in a developmental and ongoing dialogue with colleges to assist them in bringing about change to improve teaching and learning.** The significance and power of these judgements cannot be underestimated in terms of the affective impact on colleges' staff but also on their influence on institutions' cultural approaches to observation and the improvement of teaching and learning in which 'authoritative judgement' is positioned centrally (see Gallagher and Smith, 2018). Midshire College leaders' comments on these inspections also provided evidence that they found

them constraining in the sense that they had the impact of prescribing some potential actions (those favoured by the inspectorate) while circumscribing others (those generated by college staff in response to contextual considerations), as articulated by its head of teaching and learning:

> *Because we've been inspected every two years, our thinking about teaching, learning and assessment have been very geared towards these pending Ofsted inspections.*

Midshire's experience in its most recent inspections illustrates how Ofsted's involvement can potentially disrupt improvement. The 2016 inspection was interpreted by the SLT as endorsing a home-grown initiative that sought to promote a questioning mindset in students across the college and to embed this into the college curriculum. For that reason, the post-inspection plan sought to build on the initiative and embed it further. However, when the snap inspection was announced in 2018, with, as is usual, a different inspection team, this initiative was deemed to have had no impact and its significance was dismissed.

Ofsted's perceived lack of consistency here can be seen to limit the college's ability to break new ground in improving teaching and learning on its own terms. As the Hill Top case study has illustrated, **moving beyond parameters set by Ofsted to embark on a locally determined and contextually nuanced strategy can be a critical step.** Instead, in Midshire's case, the inspection cycle arguably locked the college into a specific set of actions based on a plan founded on the areas of improvement identified by inspectors. This was made more difficult when college staff disagreed with the development points identified by inspectors:

> *[W]e have the dilemma that we'll be re-inspected on the report that we have. So, if we don't acknowledge the report then we'll just have the same outcome in the reinspection. So we have to acknowledge it.* (Member of SLT)

In contrast to Hill Top, rather than fixing on a values-based strategy and implementing this while consciously putting to one

side any perceived 'agenda' on the part of Ofsted, Midshire, partly due to being subjected to a succession of inspections, felt unable to fall back on authentic, home-grown initiatives. This resulted in a type of institutional paralysis that involves second-guessing the inspectorate and centring the improvement narrative on existing 'market intelligence' about their latest emphasis. The interviews provide data that support such a reading:

> *In each inspection there's going to be something a bit different, this time it was note-taking ... and what they liked was when students sat down and as soon as they sat down they could take a notebook out and put it on the table and then have a pen at the ready because it meant they had notes, but they didn't like it if it was a single sheet of paper or they didn't like students doing notes together and taking photos and thinks like this, so there's always going to be something, isn't there, and it's oh – got an issue with note-taking.* (Head of teaching and learning)

The long-term impact of this cycle is that it incentivises an orientation towards getting a favourable response from Ofsted, rather than the development of a context-sensitive, institutionally grounded *sui generis* approach, which, by the nature of its production, is owned by staff. In Midshire's case, the frequency of inspections appears to have effectively prescribed strategy and circumscribed agency at all levels around the improvement of teaching and learning. While Ofsted claims to be a 'force for improvement through intelligent, responsible and focused inspection and regulation' (Ofsted, 2017), this case study suggests intelligence that is limited by a lack of sensitivity to context and a standardised focus arising from the inspectorate's over-reliance on snapshot judgements. A key drawback of this approach is that it can undermine the development of a longitudinal perspective and understanding.

Emerging from the inspection experience, staff's perception that the college's attempt to create its own narrative of improvement had foundered was potentially hugely destructive. This was

exacerbated by staff's views that inspectors' judgements were not justified. The SLT recounted a number of examples in which inspectors relied on unsubstantiated judgements while rejecting additional evidence provided by the college:

> *So I said, 'Well, give me examples of the lessons you've seen where the teaching's not good.' 'We don't give examples…. the outcomes have declined over a period of time'. So my point was: 'Well you were here two years ago and you said outcomes were good, so that can't be right… you're only talking about one year's data… We've got four courses where the outcomes were less than the previous year in our self-assessment report. So, except for those four courses out of 145, what actually are you talking about?' And they just said, 'No it's declined over a period of time'. So I said, 'That's just not correct, you know.' But they write it anyway.*

This crisis of legitimation (Habermas, 1976) is institutionally momentous as it puts the SLT in the impossible position of having to promote the implementation of steps for improvement that they do not believe in. There is evidence that a crisis in confidence in Ofsted is sector-wide in FE and beyond (Perryman, 2009; Smith and O'Leary, 2015). The blurring of the roles of market regulator and agency for improvement is the issue here. In order to be a 'force for improvement', Ofsted inspectors have to earn and enjoy the trust and respect of colleges so that their judgements are taken seriously and acted on. Unfortunately, in this case, the evidence suggests a failure in this regard. This is encapsulated in the view of one participant:

> *Ofsted have gone on a path that is not benefitting the sector and is also not in the public interest.*

Key improvement tools

From the qualitative and quantitative data gathered as part of the study, there are two main kinds of teaching and learning improvement activities taking place in Midshire College. The first is a group of management-organised, formal initiatives and

activities, i.e. CPD events and the graded observation scheme. The second, though highly valued by staff, is organisationally less formal and its value seems to be less recognised by management. This kind of activity includes unassessed peer observations, mentoring and informal conversations with colleagues.

Whole-college activities: CPD

While initiatives to bring about the improvement in teaching and learning at Midshire had been heavily (and negatively) influenced by its experience of inspection, internal structures and approaches also impacted. The survey data provided evidence that staff had experienced a variety of CPD and activities aimed at improving teaching and learning (**Figure 5.6**). However, there were indications that the impact of these activities was not great.

> *There's then normally a big sort of mind map style activity with six or seven people around the table about what can be done to improve the college and then we break up into workshops either with staff sharing best practice or trying to get all the staff to conform to the same way, but all of the sessions are run by staff within the college.*

> *It's not structured and I think as well sometimes you've got to look at different angles so, again, I think we look at our teaching in practice but if you look at a model like Brookfield or lenses, for example, or something like that. I don't think we actually take into consideration the students or your colleagues, and your colleagues' view. What they do might impact on your practice.*

> *[A]ctually I don't know if they're that productive, they take up the whole day and we don't really go away with much from it.*

The success of CPD events that introduce new ideas and approaches hinges on contextual considerations after the event. If the aim of CPD activities is to change and improve teachers' practice then the success of such 'event-led' approaches to

CPD depends on the leadership devolved to teachers at the implementation stage. Event-led CPD is no replacement for culturally embedded practice. This finding is evidenced by data from the staff focus groups:

> *We went to a networking group which we thought was very valuable…. We did, it was with other [subject] teachers, I can't remember the company that held it now, and it was external. It was just a day where we would talk about things and we were networking and did little projects. We came back with some quite interesting information and ideas and then they asked if you wanted to go again but we could never go because of the timetable so this networking group has continued without us. So we started on the first one and then we never got to go back to anymore because of our timetables.*

> *[T]he time's never given to continue which was a shame really.*

> *There's no follow on. There's no sort of like the roll out with the work thing.*

> *The work we do there is never followed up.*

There is evidence here that the college strategy of facilitating staff engagement with CPD activities has had a positive impact (**Figure 5.7**). Staff value ideas from external speakers and this is also evidenced in the survey data. However, with both these and the whole-college CPD events there is a concern that **there is a need for time/space in teachers' busy working schedules for a follow-up implementation stage.**

The notion of structured autonomy is again useful here. Following exposure to new ideas teachers have to enjoy: i) the space and time to reflect on how they can best adapt and apply the ideas; ii) the support and/or licence to experiment with implementation; and iii) more space and time to reflect on implementation and refine if necessary. What might structured autonomy look

like in this context? We would argue that it would mean at the very least **a supportive environment that encourages individuals to be response-able in developing a sense of their effectiveness as practitioners through ongoing informal dialogue** and connecting this to more formal structures.

Whole-college activities: Graded observations

The main tool for addressing the improvement of teaching and learning was a scheme of graded observations conducted by a team of senior staff. The success of such schemes inevitably hinges on staff's view of the legitimacy of the observers' judgements and insight, as other studies have highlighted (e.g. UCU, 2013). Midshire's focus group data was gathered immediately following a disappointing inspection result, which might have influenced the views of staff in this regard. Even so, the perspective they offered in relation to the central tool for improvement of teaching and learning in the college was overwhelmingly negative. The central failing with the approach centred on how the outcome of the observation feeds back into the shared cultured of teaching and learning. For those staff who achieve a high grade, the focus groups' perceptions were that benefits were very limited:

> *I don't really see much point in the graded observations. I think the member is either egotistical or staff get too worked up about it so if they do get graded a 3 already, say for example they get observed in October then for the whole of the rest of the academic year they're demotivated, they've given up.*

> *[I]t means nothing. You walk away with a grade and it's a good grade, it means nothing to you, you go, well, I can relax now, I can take a chilled out approach for the rest of the year.*

According to the evidence, **the graded observations act as a system of classification for staff,** once again reinforcing

previous research findings (e.g. O'Leary, 2013). They do not form the basis for cultural exchange about pedagogy. Rather, they serve to rank staff and lock them into an assessed stasis until it is time to be observed the following year:

> *I think a lot of people, again, with the number they associate whether you're good or bad rather than the developmental points that you could improve by doing this, and that's it, we'll see you next year.*

For those who come away with areas to work on as the pedagogical dimension, the learning and teaching opportunity that observations could be, does not materialise. The absence of properly organised reflective scaffolding on the other side of the assessment undermines possible benefits.

> *Participant 1: It's not productive as an observation.*

> *Participant 2: Not a good process whatsoever.*

> *Participant 1: It should be supportive.*

> *Participant 3: It should be developmental. What have you done well, these are the next three things that you should work on over the next three or four months to help aid your teaching and manner in classrooms.*

That graded observations are not discussed at departmental level but, rather, are viewed by staff as standalone 'trials' to be endured by individuals, further disables these observations.

> *Participant 1: We don't discuss it in departments… because of that grading. Because of that grading…*

> *Participant 2: Some people get embarrassed.*

There was some evidence that there was also an issue with the legitimacy of the judgements of the observation team. This is typified by the comment of one focus group participant:

I think one of the biggest problems is that the managers at the top are too disconnected from the classroom.

There were some barriers associated with the judgements of the observation team being taken on board by teachers in order to bring about improvements in teaching and learning. One of these was that they were seen as not being sufficiently engaged as teachers in their own right, hence being perceived as 'out of touch' with the 'real' demands of being a teacher. But, also, there was criticism from staff who saw their input as too generalised, too based on a superficial judgement. This criticism also mapped across to a perception that the observations were generic and did not take sufficient account of subject specialist aspects of the teaching and learning being observed.

I think as well, going back to the observations too, it's hard for an observer to come in to a department where they don't know much about it as well. So, if I was to go and observe someone in construction, I wouldn't know if that was a good lesson or not, or if the knowledge was there for the teacher to pass on to the students or not. So for me I think it's quite tricky, not just us to show our knowledge that we know to pass on to the students but for the observer to understand then where we're coming from and how much we know as well.

So, for example, observers' comments might be based on a 15-minute observation that does not go beyond a surface judgement of what has been seen in the classroom. An example would be a member of staff complaining about the observer saying the students weren't being stretched, when, from the perspective of the teacher and the students' starting points, what happened in the classroom showed progress and development.

Crucially, the graded observation scheme lacked ownership on the part of staff:

Why do we need a grade because it's not about us, it's about the students *and if we're giving them the right*

experiences and sort of the right framework, so why do we need that grade added to our name as a teacher? I think I don't do this job for me I do it for the students and I don't need to have a Grade 1 or a Grade 2 to tell me that I'm doing my job right.

If you get to the end of the year and only 50 per cent of your students have passed and they've only ever got low grades that's where you've got to then reflect and think, hang on there's something not right here. It's irrelevant whether you've got a 3 or 2 or 1 or whatever.

Attendance, punctuality, I think, speaks a lot more than being graded a 1 or 2 or a 3 or 4 in your lesson observations, because if you're attendance is low obviously, as a teacher, you've got to do something about that, if you don't act on it then that tells you a lot more, personally I think.

Teachers' reluctance to engage fully with graded observations is a product of this lack of ownership. This lack of ownership effectively disables, or at least undermines, the scheme as a tool for improving teaching and learning. The data here suggest that however good the developmental tool may be, unless there is a climate and culture in which teachers can discuss its benefits and or apply the learning points, then the gains will be severely limited. In that situation, the scheme instead begins to reflect cultural compliance with the performative snapshot ritual of Ofsted inspections.

Outlier activities influencing teaching and learning

Staff in the focus groups expressed that at the core of leadership in teaching and learning was a sense of 'accountability as a teacher'. What they meant was not the externally imposed and/ or top-down notion of a regime of accountability, rather they were referring to the responsibilities teachers across the college share in improving teaching and learning for their students and themselves. This involves them understanding and responding

to everyday challenges and students' expectations while maintaining a practical emphasis on student learning experiences and outcomes. This is also reflected in survey data where most of the respondents recognise students' feedback, participation and performance as key sources of evidence that impact on their teaching and learning (**Figure 5.7**).

With this in mind, the activities that focus on improving classroom practices were clearly valued by staff, as shown in our survey and focus group data. In contrast to whole-college activities, many of these activities appear to be more peer-based, staff-led and informally organised.

Peer observations

Unassessed peer observations are viewed by staff as a valuable experience for improving their teaching. As revealed by online survey data, 35 respondents considered it as one of the top priorities for their improving teaching and learning. Unassessed peer observations are part of the college's teaching, learning and assessment policy, but are only carried out as an intervention activity for new staff or staff who receive poor outcomes in graded observations. A third (33) of respondents felt that unassessed peer observations were one of the three least-prioritised activities by the college for improving teaching and learning (**Figure 5.8**). The purpose of peer observations, according to the college's teaching, learning and assessment policy, is to:

- facilitate the sharing of best practice;
- encourage innovation;
- support reflective practice.

Certainly, focus group members who experienced peer observations when they first came to the college felt they provided a supportive environment for some meaningful development experiences:

I've got a slightly different experience [comparing to graded observations] because it's the first year I've taught properly, so I didn't actually have an observation until the end of this year but during the year they gave me what they call staff development observation, so it wasn't graded and they just came in and they say what I did and sort of explained the process but then gave me action points and arranged for me to go and see again X but I had a choice of tutors that I could go and peer-observe and just see how they did different things so I found that quite supportive but that was under this sort of separate staff development, because it was my first year.

What staff appear to value the most is the conversations taking place as part of the peer observations. Staff feel that the contextualised, timely and genuine comments and feedback from another colleague are highly relevant and constructive to their learning and development:

Regular peer observations support both teachers' practice as we trust each other's professional opinion, we are in the same work setting with similar requirements.

When [a colleague] did observe the feedback was that… and you can see where you can improve so there's an action, there's a language used and there's that personal, yeah, he's a teacher, he knows what I'm going through. Not when someone just walks in, doesn't know what teaching is, never been in the class and then tells you, oh, you can't do that, sorry. I'm in this class, I've been here for like 30 weeks, you're telling me now in week 31 that I can't do this. No, that's wrong.

This contextualised understanding of practice is about an understanding and appreciation of teachers' and students' experiences:

It's because they teach as well so they understand, so they wouldn't pick up on something, a nitty-gritty sort of thing

whereas I think someone from a different department that don't actually teach have no idea how difficult it…for me [a colleague] might come and observe me and I've got a particularly difficult learner that likes to use quite colourful language most of the time but for me it's great if she actually sits in and she participates but for someone else, oh, she's not got her pen on the table, or something like that, I think that's where I'd be more sort of concerned of the grades that we're given from quality I'd see sort of what grade it is whereas with both of them I'm actually listening to the actual feedback itself.

When [a colleague] came to observe me it was the sort of personal stuff as well so he could see if I was stressed to say I'd be mindful of this because it's my wellbeing as a teacher as well as the teaching part as well.

The attitude towards peer observation is built on trust, which means the discussions often are honest and open:

__Unassessed peer observations are constructive and help to improve standards across the board.__ Because they are informal, there is not loads of paperwork to put in place. These are more frequent with no pressure and are performed by people who understand the difficulties around the sector.

I believe that more frequent informal observations would be beneficial to gain a broader picture of tutors. __Informal and structured conversations with peers is extremely important for reflection and improvements.__

When you do peer observation you're with your colleagues, you're on a one-to-one level, you can talk, you can openly discuss which you can't with the LIMs [learning improvement managers], for example.

Crucially, peer observations' characteristic informality, the non-hierarchical relations between observer and observed contrast sharply with perceptions of management-led graded observations. For staff, **the fundamental purpose of peer observations is 'to help improving teaching and learning rather than collecting data' on teachers' performance.** These perceptions once more feed into a critical perspective around the need for greater investment in discursive interactions that take place in an atmosphere of informality in spaces that may fall outside of 'managed' time or that may feature but be undervalued within existing departmental habitus. The intensification of teachers' work (both teaching and administrative) is a well-known feature of further education settings (e.g. Smith and O'Leary, 2015), so it is unsurprising that staff expressed frustration in relation to time constraints and heavy workloads. Nonetheless, the data suggest that an increased recognition of the importance of these less formally recognised social interactions orientated to improving teaching and learning could pay dividends:

I've observed one of my colleagues this year but only because he was doing his PGCE through the college. I've been his mentor and so as part of that I've got to observe him twice. But I don't have the time in my week to be able to go and observe colleagues.

From the focus group discussions, clearly staff felt that peer observations were a catalyst for reflective practice. However, at the time of the project, staff recognised that this form of observation is not considered as part of the core teaching and learning improvement activities. One of the focus group participants, who was an experienced member of staff, commented:

Normally you do peer observations when you get quite a low grade in your observation, you make sure you peer up, but I think as good practice, we could, I've seen it being done in other colleges where I've worked where you do, do peer observations it's part of a scheme they do for their teachers in general and you do it for like — you know you make the arrangement with your colleague or whoever it is you want to do it and you do like a short write up, a reflective insight but there isn't enough of that, to be fair.

Mentoring

The evidence from the survey relating to teachers' views on 'mentors' was illuminating as it indicated an almost complete disconnect between the views of teaching and learning managers and the perceptions of staff (**Figure 5.7** and **Figure 5.8**). In important ways this disconnect is a product of the 'management' of teaching and learning improvement rather than its 'ownership' by practitioners. **The improvement of teaching and learning is fundamentally not a task for or of management, it is an activity that has to originate in and be owned and developed by teachers themselves.**

The focus group data provide important insights into the importance of locally experienced need and response:

> *[I]t's some of those areas where [teachers] haven't got that support that I think as a college we need to find a way. Because if you're in a team that's close and you've got other people who actually can see they need support and offer that they're the ones that are going to survive.*

The nature of the need is that its experience is episodic and contingent. Teachers' critical incidents occur unpredictably and, for learning to happen in response to them, appropriate conditions need to be in place. The role of a (localised) mentor was perceived by staff as an appropriate way of facilitating this. The mentoring role was associated in staff's mind with the in-house teacher education team.

> *When I first started [teaching] my mentor met with me once a week, took me off the premises so that we could talk freely and frankly at a time when we were both free, and … I found that more supportive.*

The perceptions of mentoring are striking because they contrast sharply with the absence of gains from formal mechanisms, including the impact of Ofsted:

> *But I think if you took [Ofsted] out of the equation and you just looked at us as teachers doing a better job within the classrooms so that there's better learning taking place I think you've got to look at the teacher education because, when I've mentored people, often the feedback from one year to the next is the content. They don't feel [the experience of inspection] prepares them for being in a classroom and coping in a classroom to the effect that you can then develop as a teacher.*

One factor feeding into the perceived benefits of the mentoring role is its situatedness in informal relations and its dependence on a relationship of trust. **Trust becomes important in high-stakes environments if teachers are going to be able to work outside familiar territory and experiment with new approaches.** This is encapsulated in one participant's comment that to improve as a teacher '… you also need to make mistakes, don't you?'

While not acknowledged by the teaching and learning improvement team, **mentoring here is viewed as providing a discursive space for talking about teaching and learning as individuals.** The relationship between mentor and mentee has the qualities of a relationship between peers in which experiences can be freely and frankly shared. This contrasts with teachers' perceptions of a low-trust, fear-filled working environment where people feel unable to speak freely.

The personal relationships of trust that characterise a shared and collective approach to improving teaching and learning are exemplified in what the focus groups referred to as mentoring. This is a feature that comes out of the college's initial teacher education (ITE) provision and is also experienced by some staff as part of the induction process. In Midshire, this was foregrounded by the fact that there is a high number of staff who have been at the college for between two and seven years, i.e. they are relatively new to the college.

What was particularly interesting in this was that the SLT was not sure what survey respondents meant when they referred

to mentoring. What this suggests is that there is an existing infrastructure that sits outside the 'official'/institutional architecture that is supposed to be the main vehicle for improving teaching and learning. Importantly, it was also suggested by staff that a reduction in ITE staffing over time meant that the mode of mentoring experienced in this way had gradually been reducing in significance.

The importance of informal discursive pedagogical spaces

A key aspect of the survey data is the insight it provides into how **highly teachers value informal conversation with colleagues.** This finding was supported by comments in the focus groups:

> I think we all know, if you sat down with a colleague in the staff room and we've had a chat about something, actually that could be the most valuable experience you have this term or this year even rather than staff conference or any other kind of training. Actually, just that chat in the staff room where something's been highlighted and you thought, actually I don't do that or I could do that or I'm going to implement that in my classes next week and if it works, why didn't I think of it sooner? Those little tiny things that sometimes are more valuable than anything else... and I think sharing practice should just be top of the list.

The informality of the sharing and the discussion, the fact that it occurs outside timetabled (and therefore institutionally/management determined) space/time, is an integral aspect of this kind of collegial activity. One senses it is valued because it is space in which experiences that address individual concerns can be voiced, thinking verbalised and possible solutions sought from peers 'in the moment'. In other words, this type of departmental exchange, far from being merely phatic, is viewed as making a genuine contribution to improving teachers' practice. For teacher educators such fora are recognisable from the reflective practice that sits at the heart of most ITE programmes. Reflective practice

in the field of teacher education is conceived of as 'irreducibly social' (Brookfield, 1995).

> Quite often in our staff room, somebody will turn around and say, 'Oh I've got to teach this particular subject, I've got no idea how to teach it,' and then we'll all the four of us we'll work together on how to do that lesson and what best to put into that lesson. And it might be something that we've done in our own lesson that worked really well or it could be something that we've seen on TV and we thought have you considered this YouTube video whatever? But the four of us will then collaborate on a lesson and make it work and quite often they're the best lessons I do in the year when the four of us have worked on it together and put something together.

> I think teachers rely on teachers to sort of keep up to date and keep fresh ideas, I don't think it's led by management.

There are two interconnected elements at work here. The first, as we already touched on, is the environment and the extent to which it facilitates teachers' involvement in improvement activities that require several phases to effect change. The second, which may connect to Dweck's (2017) notion of 'growth mindset', relates to the disposition of teachers when engaged with the range of teaching and learning events offered and supported by the college. There are links with effective pedagogy here as well. Effective classroom learning is associated with a number of key features that include dialogical exchanges between teachers and students but also (group) talk in which students are supported to articulate new ideas in their own terms and relate these items to their existing knowledge base (see, for example, Ginnis, 2002). In formal settings (e.g. graded observations) or in events with a more formal tone (e.g. whole-college CPD events), staff may not be in what we might term a 'learning mode'; they might be cautious and defensive (as in an assessment situation) or otherwise passive (as in 'lecture' situation). The implication here then is **there needs to be an**

emphasis on encouraging and using and nurturing spaces for local and informal discussion possibly and most obviously at departmental level.

Models of leadership

In Midshire's case, middle managers as a function of improving teaching and learning did not really feature. This was due to the main observation scheme being conducted by a discrete observer team. One interpretation of this structural feature is that it had the effect of opening up and reinforcing a discursive rift between top-down prescriptions of how to improve teaching and learning and practitioners' informal and reflective dialogues around their practice. In the view of staff, the connections between improvements in teaching and learning and the institutional structures that aimed to support it are tenuous. In Midshire, the overwhelming evidence was that leadership in improving teaching and learning was primarily a function of management. Some focus group participants described graded observations as being like 'a game'. The personal relationships of trust that characterise a shared and collective approach to improving teaching and learning are exemplified in what the focus groups referred to as mentoring. This is a feature that comes out of the ITE provision and is also experienced by some staff as part of the induction process.

That the members of SLT who were interviewed did not seem sure what survey respondents were referring to when they mentioned mentoring further suggests that there is an existing (and possibly under-utilised) infrastructure that sits outside the 'official'/institutional architecture that is supposed to be the main vehicle for improving teaching and learning.

Conclusion: Sensing the context

In concluding this commentary section on leadership in improving teaching and learning in Midshire College, we want to return to the impact of Ofsted once again. The result of the latest inspection strongly framed the data gathered from participants, particularly in the interviews and focus groups. It is a regrettable impact of the high-stakes nature of the current inspection regime and the notion of externalised 'accountability' that it feeds into a process that often leaves staff feeling disillusioned and powerless. This, in turn, can lead to feelings of recrimination and blame as teachers feel that they are not able to respond. Where there are issues of 'ownership' of cultural practices associated with improving teaching and learning, such feelings may be aggravated. We would suggest that these phenomena are, to a large extent, a product of the market environment and we have outlined the negative consequences of an inspection process that appears to be unsympathetic to and therefore undermines the construction of a longitudinal institutional narrative around teaching and learning improvement.

An understandable response to a critical inspection report might be to tighten managerialist structures and targets and to seek a stronger level of compliance from staff in engaging with these. In other words, in terms of leadership, a typical response to the circumstances faced by Midshire College might be to refocus and concentrate leadership as a function of the college's SLT. However, the project data as a whole communicates a number of key messages that are contrary to such a response.

Crucially, the SLT interviews acknowledge that, following the Ofsted inspection, there is a need for staff to own development. Indeed, ownership, which we interpret as a quality of teachers' leadership in bringing about improvement in their own practice, is identified as being the difference between achieving a judgement of formulaic 'Good' as against a judgement of 'Outstanding':

> *… if we want the college to be graded one we're not going to be, we can't do it with this level of control, it is a thing where the teachers individually and as a community have to decide by themselves that this is the thing that they think they should do and that they want to…. [T]hat is the difference between being good and being*

outstanding, that you can control a college to being good but you can't control it to being outstanding. (Head of teaching and learning)

There is recognition in this passage that the adoption of approaches that start with and then nurture teachers' own sense of what constitutes good teaching and learning is a necessary first step in improvement and the achievement of 'Outstanding' practice. Our data suggest that centralised command and control is likely to choke out the ownership that underpins this. Instead, a potent and more radical strategy would involve handing over responsibility for improvement to practitioners, prioritising existing informal discursive pedagogical spaces and adding to these wherever possible – at subject and departmental level but also by paying close attention to physical space and available time for the growth of socially embedded reflective practice. A resuscitation and renewal and, if necessary, reconceptualisation of the mentorship role might make an important additional structural contribution. These strategies may be regarded as high risk. They are long-term strategies that fly in the face of a quick-fix approach grounded in technical rationality. However, they might form the basis for establishing the foundations of an institutional narrative that is outside the cycle of Ofsted inspections and that, over a longer period, builds a rhythm of improvement that is particular to Midshire College and that expresses the experience of leadership at all levels within the college.

Summary

In the context of a recent unexpected Ofsted inspection and an outcome of 'Requires Improvement', the external force of Ofsted has played a vital role in shaping the college's teaching and learning improvement plans. This has led to an inhibition on the college's part from taking ownership of its teaching and learning practices.

While considerable resources were invested in staff development across the college, the lack of opportunities, space and time for

consolidation and evaluation meant many teaching staff saw little value of the events they attended in their everyday practice. In contrast, **staff valued activities and schemes that allowed them to engage with meaningful peer conversations and personal reflection.** Peer observations of teaching, mentoring and informal staff dialogue were key sources of teaching and learning improvement for staff.

What the Midshire case study has revealed is the importance of the internal leadership, in particular the middle management role, in working with staff members to recognise their needs and develop strategies/activities that are meaningful in their context. While the impact of external forces (e.g. Ofsted) needs to be carefully considered, it cannot be allowed to become a driving force that restrains the college's own vision, values and practices.

Table 5.1 – Key lessons from Midshire College for improving teaching and learning

- Leadership around improving teaching and learning at all levels largely (and detrimentally) shaped by agenda arising from Ofsted inspections.
- Instability created by repeated inspections disabled SLT attempts to build a long-term college narrative about improvement .
- The same instability constrains the establishment of the college's own vision, values and practices.
- Top-down observation scheme staffed by managers with absence of full developmental phase perceived to be ineffective by teaching staff.
- Teachers' ownership of improvement in teaching and learning inhibited by perceived disconnect between SLT and teachers' experience in classrooms.

- Emergence of a culture of gaming and distrust between teaching staff and managers.

- Lack of opportunities, space and time for consolidation and evaluation of new ideas encountered in (often well-resourced) CPD opportunities.

- Peer observations and mentoring, though valued by teaching staff, remained 'under the radar' of SLT as important tools for improvement.

- Spaces and times for spontaneous as-and-when discussions around teaching experiences were key resources of teaching and learning improvement for staff but not valued by managers.

- The gap between SLT and teaching and staff emphasised the bridging role of middle managers in helping teachers to identify needs and develop appropriate teaching strategies.

- Erosion of the (formerly strong) role of ITE in the college removed a key existing resource that was valued by teachers and provided a potential forum for a college-wide discussion of pedagogy.

6. MEADOW COLLEGE GROUP

A case study portrait

The Meadow College Group (MCG) comprises a very large consortium of diverse education and training providers situated across eight different campuses in urban and rural locations of England, covering a wide geographical area. Although it proved difficult to pinpoint the exact numbers, it was estimated that MCG caters for over 20,000 students each year and employs approximately 1,300 academic staff across all of its sites.

At the time of the project, MCG had undergone recent organisational change following a period of significant financial difficulty and instability during which the CEO worked closely with the FE Commissioner. This resulted in a major restructure and many new appointments to its senior leadership team (SLT) across the group. This was particularly the case for the SLT responsible for overseeing the management of teaching and learning, quality and curriculum, of which there were three core members, all of whom were involved in the project from the outset.

MCG's SLT was keen to stress from the first project meeting that 'robust monitoring and quality improvement of learning and teaching is a key strategic aim of the group year on year'. MCG's organisational strategy and operational plan for the quality assurance (QA) and quality improvement (QI) of teaching and learning was largely captured in a document known as the Learning and Teaching Plan. The plan for 2017/18 is a detailed and aspirational document. In its introduction, it states that the group:

... is committed to developing and investing in learning and teaching... supports and promotes individual learner progress and achievement through brilliant learning and the development of brilliant teaching that stretches and challenges all learners.

The plan was aligned with various organisational systems and activities across the group, including performance management, professional development, self-assessment, quality improvement planning and impact reviews. In turn, the teaching and learning priorities articulated in the plan were identified through a range of ongoing internal reviews across curriculum clusters, along with external sources such as the group's last Ofsted inspection report. Its stated aims for 2017/18 were as follows:

1. Increase ownership by individuals, teams and clusters of brilliant learning through coaching, mentoring and effectively targeted support.

2. Continue to develop and support brilliant teaching that stretches and challenges all learners, enabling them to make demonstrable progress.

3. Facilitate the development of learning and teaching through professional development lesson observations, carefully formulated developmental support plans, regular learning walk activity and planned, clearly communicated CPD training, designed to meet the needs of individual teachers, teams, clusters and the group.

4. Deliver a programme of pedagogic development sessions based on the above priorities that share good practice and demonstrate a variety of successful teaching and learning strategies.

These aims were closely followed by a detailed list of teaching and learning priorities for the year, ranging from specific priorities such as improving target setting with learners for their individual learning plans (ILPs) to the more generic upskilling of teaching staff in managing and promoting equality and diversity in their

teaching. As a whole, this seemed like an ambitious remit for a large organisation like MCG to cover during the course of an academic year, especially considering the SLT responsible for the quality of teaching and learning comprised three core members of staff covering eight different sites across the group.

The key activities used to 'support and monitor the quality of learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)' consisted of 'professional development lesson observations', 'LTA reviews' and a 'CPD programme'. Examining the group's Learning and Teaching Plan in detail and triangulating this with the primary data collected for the case study, it was clear that lesson observations constituted the main source of evidence informing the group's LTA key aims and priorities. MCG's formal lesson observation scheme was based on a three-tiered ranking scale of: 1) Exceeding expectations; 2) Meeting expectations; and 3) Not yet meeting expectations. All teaching staff are observed and assessed against this scale each year and the outcomes of these observations then feed directly into performance management and CPD processes, with the developmental actions from observations incorporated into QI plans. In short, **MCG's organisational strategy for prioritising and improving teaching and learning was heavily reliant on the use of observation as a performance management mechanism.** This was echoed in the perceptions of project participants across the group in all data sets.

There had been a number of developments around teaching and learning both before and during MCG's involvement in the project. This culminated in the launch of a new three-year learning and teaching strategy by the SLT at a staff event in July 2018. This whole college development can be seen as evidence of the challenge faced by large college 'groups' with sites that are geographically scattered. The growth in the number of such 'groups' is a phenomenon of the last decade, during which there have been some notable examples where groups seem not to have been able to sustain improvement in teaching and learning (see, for example, Whieldon, 2019). This may be because of the significant challenges that arise when colleges merge in order

to secure efficiencies of scale and SLTs try to establish group consistency, often forced to steer a path between imposing uniform systems across diverse institutional cultures/contexts and a more laissez-faire approach. Suffice it to say, **MCG was still going through a period of significant change strategically and operationally as an organisation during the lifetime of the project.** This was acknowledged by the senior leaders responsible for teaching and learning early in the project, as they were mindful of how the 'recent upheaval' could have left some staff disgruntled and they openly accepted that this might manifest itself in their comments in the survey and focus groups.

Given the breadth and diversity of the provision and learning sites within MCG, in consultation with the SLT involved in the project, it was decided early on to restrict the case study sample to the general FE colleges that were part of MCG. This meant that the overall sample of participants involved in the project was approximately 400.

Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the case study's key findings, drawing on research data taken from the online survey, semi-structured interviews with the SLT and the CEO, focus groups with staff and MCG's Learning and Teaching Plan. Where possible, the presentation of different data sets is integrated. In other words, where thematic links occur naturally, quantitative and qualitative data are discussed alongside each other. There were chunks of quantitative data that did not lend themselves to being thematically linked with some of the qualitative data but were, nevertheless, important in their own right to report, e.g. demographic data from the sample. So as not to exclude these data and to contextualise the sample, some of these data are presented at the beginning of this section.

Demographics of the Meadow College Group sample

Just over half of the participants in the sample (n = 202) completed the online survey. The gender profile was broadly consistent with that of the sector, with approximately three-fifths female and twofifths male, as shown in **Figure 6.1.**

Figure 6.1 – Meadow College Group participants by gender

2. What's your gender?
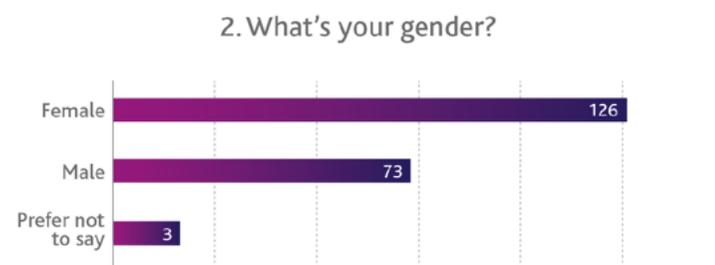
Over two-thirds of staff were aged 41+, with over half having been at MCG for eight years or more (**Figure 6.2** and **Figure 6.3**). This was significant for two reasons. First, because it meant that the majority of the staff had experienced the period of structural change and financial instability that had affected MCG in recent years and as such would be able to offer longitudinal perspectives on how this had impacted on their professional lives and those of their colleagues. This was indeed borne out by the detailed comments from practitioners in the focus groups and survey. In addition, one member of the SLT acknowledged this in a research interview: 'They will have seen really important things actually, really significant things, won't they, in the last eight years'. Second, it also suggested that despite the 'recent upheaval' of the organisation itself referred to by the SLT, there appeared to be a level of stability and continuity among the MCG workforce. Interestingly, this resonated with the comments of the CEO who acknowledged that **'unless you can create a sense of stability and positivity then you are going to have massive problems in terms of improving leadership in teaching and learning.'**

Figure 6.2 – Meadow College Group participants by age group

4. Which age group do you belong to?

Age group	Count
Prefer not to say	4
Over 55	53
51–55	41
41–50	44
31–50	38
25–30	18
Under 25	4
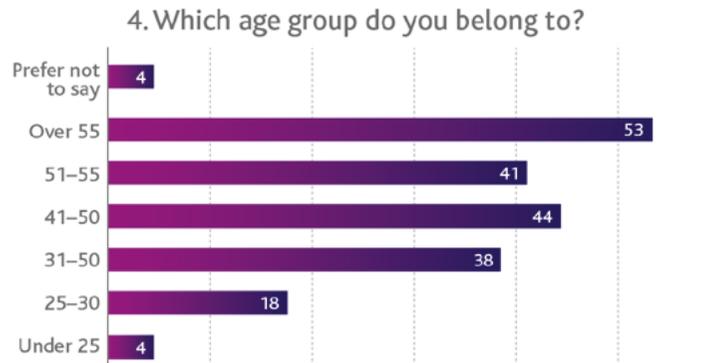
Figure 6.3 – Meadow College Group participants by length of service

11. How long have you worked at the college where you are currently employed?

Length of service	Count
20 years or more	17
14–19 years	39
8–13 years	60
2–7 years	62
Under 2 years	24
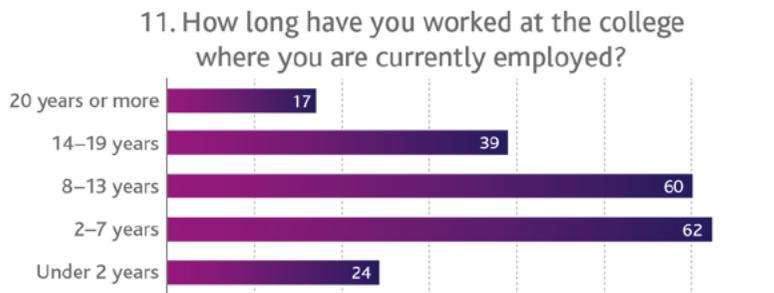
There was roughly a 60/40 split between full-time and part-time/hourly paid/other staff (**Figure 6.4**), with half employed in a teaching role, a quarter in management and just under a quarter in learning/teaching support (**Figure 6.5**).

Figure 6.4 – Meadow College Group participants by mode of employment

6. What is the mode of your employment at your college?

Mode of employment	Count
Full-time	117
Part-time	69
Hourly-paid	9
Other	7

Figure 6.5 – Meadow College Group participants by current role
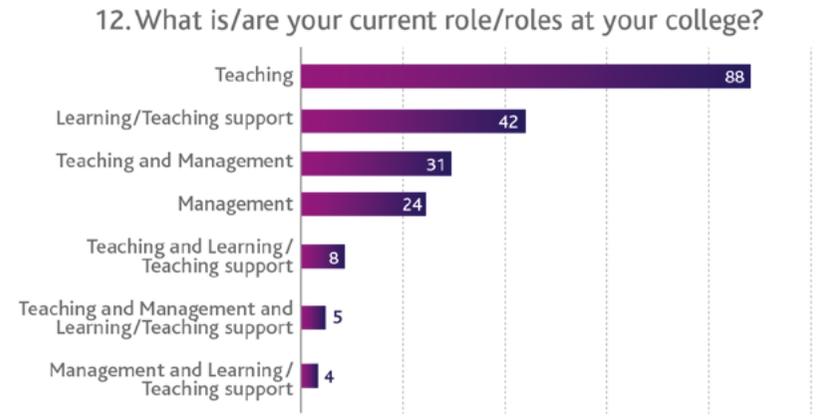
12. What is/are your current role/roles at your college?

Current role	Count
Teaching	88
Learning/Teaching support	42
Teaching and Management	31
Management	24
Teaching and Learning/Teaching support	8
Teaching and Management and Learning/Teaching support	5
Management and Learning/Teaching support	4

Sources of evidence and their impact on thinking and practice

The 'sources of evidence' listed in Q.13 of the survey (illustrated in **Figure 6.6**) generated consistently high levels of agreement among respondents, with the majority scoring in the high 90s. Responses to this question accentuated the importance of personal reflection on participants' thinking about teaching and learning and their classroom practice, along with the views and experiences of their peers and students.

Figure 6.6 – Sources of evidence that impact on thinking and practice (Meadow College Group)

13. The sources of evidence listed below have an important impact on my thinking and practice:

13.10. Reflecting with others

13.9. Personal reflection

13.8. Awarding bodies' comments

13.7. External employers' comments

13.6. External examiners' comments

13.5. Senior managers/leaders' comments

13.4. Peers' comments

13.3. Student performance

13.2. Student participation

13.1. Student feedback

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable
- Not assigned
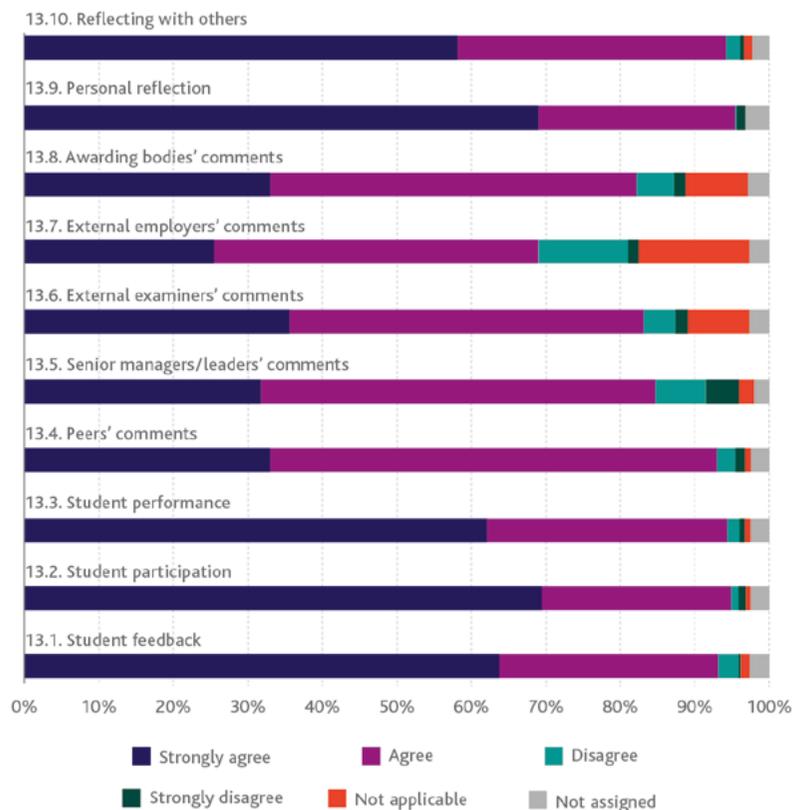
Research/wider reading, keeping abreast of developments in one's subject area, attending conferences, external training/ courses, parents' feedback and peer observation were all among the most commonly cited other examples of sources of evidence that had an impact on their thinking and practice in participants' qualitative responses to Q.14 of the survey.

Improving teaching and learning at Meadow College Group

Like the previous two case studies in this report, staff at MCG reported their awareness of a wide range of activities associated with improving teaching and learning in their workplace (**Figure 6.7**). This included a mixture of 'formal' activities that were clearly central to MCG's Learning and Teaching Plan discussed in the introduction (e.g. assessed performance management observations, subject reviews), along with more 'informal' activities (e.g. informal conversations with colleagues, personal research on teaching and learning). Three activities noticeably stood out from the list of options: 1) informal conversations with colleagues; 2) CPD delivered by colleagues; and 3) assessed performance management observations. The juxtaposition of these activities and the respective value attached to them emerged as a significant pattern from the MCG case study data, which, in some cases, was indicative of some of the competing agendas and tensions involved. These issues are explored in more depth below when discussing the key themes to emerge from MCG's data.

Figure 6.7 – Activities associated with improving teaching and learning (Meadow College Group)

Activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace that you are aware of

Activity	Value
Other	3
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter	86
Informal conversations with colleagues	180
Teachmeets	21
Partnership work with other organisations	95
Subject/programme review with colleagues	149
'Personal' research on teaching and learning	107
Academic research on teaching and learning	45
External conferences	77
Teaching triangles/squares	14
Professional Learning Communities	41
Mentoring	122
Formal programmes of study/qualifications	119
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers	128
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues	174
Unassessed peer observations	125
Assessed performance management observations	177

What staff considered the three most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning and their perceptions of the college's priorities revealed some significant differences. A comparison of the responses in **Figure 6.8** shows that the three most prioritised activities for staff were: 1) mentoring; 2) unassessed peer observations; and 3) CPD events delivered by external speakers. In contrast, staff perceived the priorities of the group to be: 1) assessed performance management observations; 2) CPD events delivered by colleagues; and 3) subject/programme reviews. Staff perceptions of the group's priorities closely aligned with those articulated by the SLT in interviews, along with those documented in the Learning and Teaching Plan. However, when it came to the priorities identified by staff, there were clearly differences of opinion between what they considered to be most valuable compared to what they believed the group (i.e. SLT) valued the most. Many of the activities mentioned by staff involved some type of collaboration with their peers. For example, among the top four priorities were mentoring, unassessed peer observations and informal conversations with colleagues. What these activities/interactions had in common was not only a greater degree of informality in that they sat outside of the formal mechanisms considered the spine of improvement for teaching and learning by the SLT, but also that they also carried with them a greater level of professional agency for teaching staff.

The most prioritised activities for improving teaching and learning
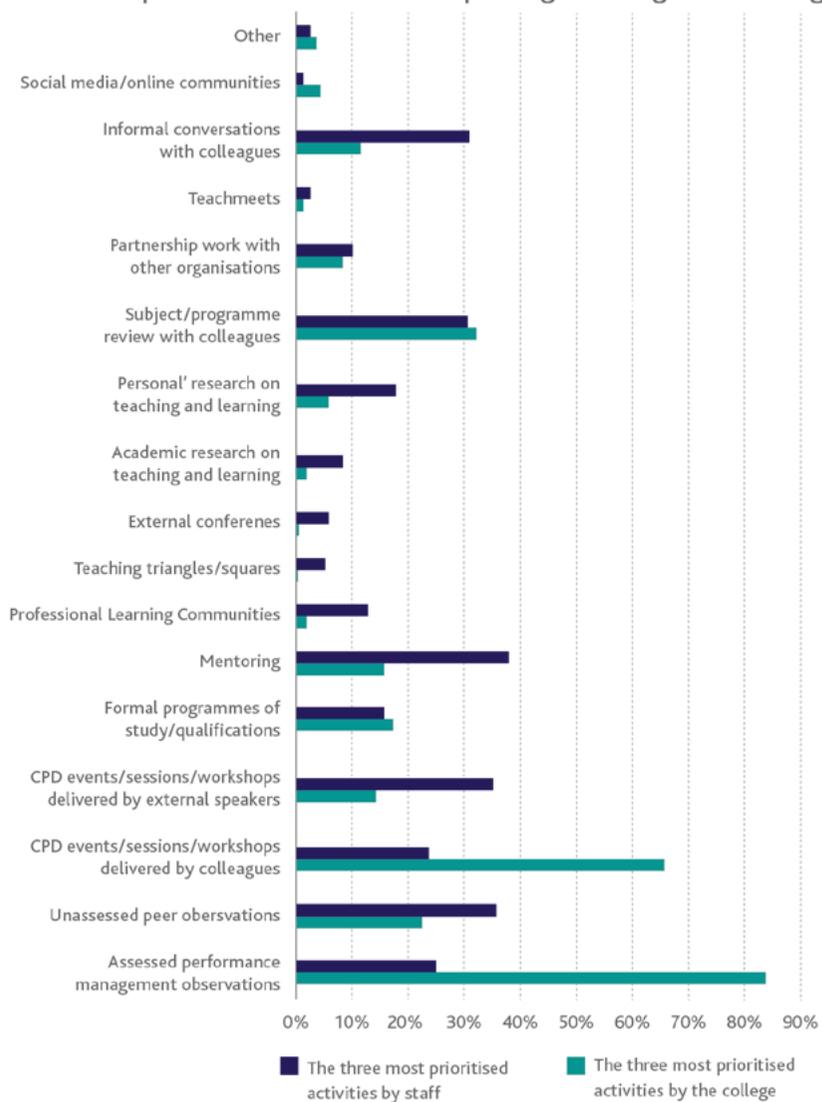
The follow-on question in the survey that asked participants to explain their choices generated a wealth of qualitative responses, some of which elaborated on their rationale in great depth. While it is beyond the scope of this report to include a comprehensive sample of these responses, the extracts below provide a good insight into some of the recurring themes to emerge from the survey's qualitative data:

I think we can learn a lot from each other and sometimes we miss the important little conversations that could make all the difference. We have a wide range of experienced teachers working across an incredible range of curriculum but I don't think we tap into others' experiences enough. (Respondent 64)

Having informal feedback from your peers rather than the more formal management ones. Providing time for a proper mentoring programme for new tutors or for staff delivering new programmes would prevent problems further down the line. (Respondent 127)

***Colleague informal chats are the most important in my opinion because you can reflect, discuss, elevate and improve your lessons**, resources, behavioural strategies, etc, without feeling assessed or put on the spot. This mode of reflection and evaluation occurs naturally and you are more likely to be very honest about your performance, shortcomings and worries.* (Respondent 191)

For me, being observed by my peers, not just managers, is important to understand the perspectives of all of the team (there are great teachers that I could learn from, who are not managers. (Respondent 32)

Mentoring is supportive but developmental and I have personally been helped with this in my role. It is also cost effective as doesn't have to be too formal and can be led by the staff. (Respondent 85)

Sharing of peer and mentoring practice is a more rapid method of improvement on the coalface so to speak and feeding back. (Respondent 105)

A strong narrative to emerge from the staff voice in the online survey and subsequently in the focus groups converged around the important role played by the 'informal networks' in which they interacted about teaching and learning. **Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue, sharing and comparing thinking and experiences of teaching and learning through mechanisms such as peer observations, mentoring and informal meetings were all highly valued by practitioners,** despite not necessarily being acknowledged by formal systems and policies in the group's Learning and Teaching Plan. To a certain extent, staff engagement in these activities is indicative of what Wood (2014, p. 231) refers to as when 'teachers act as nomads, finding creative and subversive spaces to reassert professionalism' away from the surveillance and beyond the formal control of a centralised management structure. As Wood (2014, p. 228) explains:

> *Nomadic thought can be linked to the moment-to-moment professional thought of the teacher in the way they reflect on their work, the ways in which they co-ordinate and make decisions constantly, every day. But it is also the understanding of pedagogy and education which is central to the professional identities of teachers.*

As Wood goes on to argue, teachers acting as 'nomads' can thus be seen as a form of 'soft power', where they seek to assert agency over their work through their professional judgement and actions. In the case of MCG staff, it was clear from listening to them talk about their work that they did so not because they were motivated by the act of subversion per se. Instead, because of their situated understanding of their own and their students' needs, they often made local, context-specific decisions on the basis that such decisions were best suited to optimising the fulfilment of those needs in what were clearly very challenging and circumscribed circumstances.

In contrast, it was interesting to note that in the survey question that asked staff to identify the least-important activities for improving teaching and learning, assessed performance management observations were ranked the second highest after 'engagement with social media/online communities'. The reasons given for this in a follow-up question were similar to those discussed in the previous case study of Midshire College and predominantly highlighted the following key factors:

- Failure to capture authenticity of classroom practice (i.e. 'fake', 'showcase' lessons).
- Lack of validity and reliability of assessment-based observations.
- Box-ticking, data-driven exercise.
- High levels of stress and anxiety.
- Observer subjectivity.
- Lack of credibility of observer judgement in subject area.
- No impact on improving teaching and learning.

These reasons provided by the staff at MCG were not particular to the organisation itself but reflect much of the criticism of performative models of observation unearthed in other research in the field (e.g. UCU, 2013). The experiences and perceptions of staff in relation to MCG's two models of lesson observation (i.e. formal performance management observations and peer observations) are discussed in further detail below.

The importance of organisational and financial (in)stability for improvement

MCG was not only distinctive because of the size of its provision but also the geographical spread of the sites under its governance. An interview conducted with the group's CEO provided an important frame for understanding the focus group data and indeed some of the online survey data. A picture emerged of significant financial and organisational instability in MCG's recent history, which was allegedly triggered by the disruption caused

by a previous principal who had 'imposed massive organisational change, creating a new structure where curriculum was king', which took primacy away from individual sites and resulted in multi-million pound losses for the group. One index of this is evidenced by the changes in the group's senior leadership, with four different principals in post over a six-year period. MCG's CEO explained that the group context was dominated by the SLT being forced to focus on two key priorities: 1) to mitigate the damage of a financial predicament that involved having to find savings of millions of pounds in a context of national cuts to college budgets; and 2) to implement strategies to bring consistency to the group's provision across its multiple sites, some of which had only been recently acquired. These two strategic objectives were closely linked, with a high level of added complexity because they involved the implementation of quite drastic efficiencies.

In one focus group, the impact of restructuring and job losses was very apparent. A team leader enumerated the changes in staff at her site and the way the shift in responsibilities was mediated by her manager:

> *There used to be two [job role] , four [job role], two senior tutors, five [job role] and three [job role]. Now it's me doing all of them on point eight and nothing's changed in terms of how many classes, how many students. But they just say, 'Oh no, do you know what, I've put you that you're in a spreadsheet and that's what it comes out as.'*

The reference to spreadsheets is significant here. The spreadsheet is a technology of technical rationality. It enables accelerated and decontextualised decision-making and to that extent can be viewed as a key tool in managerialist positivism (see Smith and O'Leary, 2013). Here it appears to replace the need to justify a complex and contextual human judgement, but that could be a product of the widespread re-organisation the group was forced

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6 The job roles have been omitted here to protect the anonymity of MCG and the speaker.

to undertake to satisfy funding bodies. In the passage above, the spreadsheet appears to act as a mechanism for generating an objective and de-politicised decision within a highly charged working context. **There was an acknowledgement in the SLT group interview that this period of great structural change and financial difficulty had taken its toll on the workloads and mental well-being of some of the staff.** The impact on quality was also recognised by middle managers and teaching staff at MCG as when the following question was posed by a team leader in one of the focus groups, it was met with a chorus of consensus: 'Is it possible to maintain quality when you're being pared back to the bone?'

The question perfectly encapsulates the MCG dilemma. A key finding from the Hill Top case study was that **colleges need to construct a long-term narrative that transcends the straitjacket of annualised funding arrangements and the omnipresent Ofsted inspection cycle.** An important ingredient of such a strategy is the creation and consolidation of stability as part of that journey. Clearly, in the case of MCG, the move to becoming a large group, the financial predicament that subsequently emerged, the cuts and organisational restructuring necessitated by this had had a serious and lasting impact on any such effort.

Size matters – managing improvement over multiple sites

The group's multiple sites present a challenge in any drive to improve teaching and learning in a consistent way across a wide geographical area, with staff in each location who may have established practices relating to this. The practicalities and difficulties of managing across multiple sites, the struggle to create and then implement organisation-wide policies and strategies for teaching and learning across MCG with consistency was a key theme in the case study data. The problematic and challenging nature of policy-making for the group, especially given its scale and diversity, was made doubly difficult in the

context of the shrinking of college budgets nationally. This required the deployment of limited resources across a large and dispersed organisation, or, as one of the SLT aptly articulated, 'we have to get used to doing more with less'. The fact that the SLT responsible for managing the QA and QI of teaching and learning across the whole organisation consisted of only three core members of staff was a case in point.

One common approach adopted by the SLT to address the issue of limited resources was to use 'whole college days' to provide CPD but also to address the need to establish a sense of group identity among staff. One team leader remarked in a focus group that the 'One group, one college mantra seems good in principle but it's more difficult to achieve in practice'. While achieving a shared culture may be a desirable strategic aim for a large group like MCG, it can risk making staff feel as if a culture is being imposed on them from above. If the culture is perceived as being distant from an existing localised value-set, then this can have negative effects. Such effects may be exacerbated further by the (necessarily) data-driven nature of college management in the current context of high-stakes accountability. So, while the SLT of an establishing college group may require the production of baseline data to inform a fully representative picture of what is happening in terms of students recruitment, retention and achievement, etc., this data-gathering exercise, if dragged out, may risk tarnishing staff perceptions about the ethos governing the actions of the college's SLT:

> *I actually feel that the college has been run as a business. I feel very strongly that data, retention, achievement is definitely up there as opposed to... Although, obviously, within the teams we work very hard, often there are often things that I think, 'Yeah, it's a business'.*

The passage above may not be illustrating anything new about the tensions that exist between mediating the data-heavy demands of high-stakes market accountability and meeting the needs of students, but the data from MCG suggested that

these tensions may be heightened in 'college group' settings. Put another way, it is understandable that, in a context of high-stakes accountability, a college group SLT may put the emphasis on the production of performance data that is consistent across all its sites in order to address the demands of external agencies such as Ofsted. What needs to be recognised though is that this emphasis can carry with it a significant cost.

Whether or not it is a product of the centralisation of senior leaders, the staff perception was that senior leaders were remote, as evidenced by the following focus group comment:

> *I know they're outside of here but within this building, this corporation, that top and that bottom must meet somewhere because it's all in isolation. So they sit up here or do whatever it is they do, we are then given or told we're doing something wrong or we need to do better or more for less and all the rest of it, and from my level you just see everyone's miserable, they're as miserable as sin, I think. I'm not because I've gone past that stage. They're not listening to the educators. They're telling the educators what to do but they're not listening to ... it's not a two-way system.*

What is striking about this passage is that, perhaps because of the size of the task, 'management' seemed to have eclipsed leadership. The notion of structured autonomy, a feature of distributed leadership discussed previously, seems entirely absent. Instead, the group is imagined in disaggregated, hierarchical and binary terms, as a 'top' and a 'bottom'. The communication between these discrete parts appears uni-directional. This breakdown in the dialogical relationship that is fundamental between different parties for communication to be effective is a product of senior leaders viewing management as an activity or series of tasks that is single-authored and that speaks primarily to itself and to external agencies. Through this lens, management becomes a formula by which a set of objectives are 'actioned' and replaced by another set of objectives. The danger within an organisation that is perceived to be divided in the way this

focus group participant describes is that management can end up becoming a self-referential activity. Needless to say, the impact of this on the improvement of teaching and learning in a college is significant. At best, it means that teachers' efforts are disarticulated from quality mechanisms and the supportive scaffolding they need to achieve improvement is undermined – leading to atomisation and a retreat into the classroom. At worst, it means no improvement takes place while the SLT sharpens and intensifies data-gathering activities that largely have no discernible impact on practice.

The wider context of funding cuts and the way these played out across MCG's multiple sites featured extensively in the focus group data. Notably, staff commented on the impact of this on quality:

> *We've all been subject to massive staff cuts, you know and I see, because my role is kind of, I get an overview of what's going on, is that everybody has got so much to do, people are doing the work of two and three people at times… On different sites, they're rushing between X and Y campus to teach and how is it possible to keep an emphasis on quality when you've pared back to the bone with staff resources?*

This passage reflects how, in a multiple-site context, cutting a college's central resource, its staff, can lead to an increase in staff spending time travelling between sites. This is significant for the study if we remember the importance of the informal times and spaces in which teachers can share experience and reflect together on their everyday practice. Staff travelling between sites works against this by effectively reducing collegial contact time.

> *Also as well, I think that, a lot of the time, the emphasis is on results and statistics and achievement, so sometimes you do have to sacrifice the quality of teaching and learning to make sure that you're hitting figures and results – but then quality, yes, quality of teaching and learning needs to give results.*

Anyone who is familiar with the body of research that focuses on the funding-driven nature of FE in the UK will recognise how the drive to make performance data preeminent can and does result in a fracturing of any meaningful link between 'figures' and the socially embedded practices of teaching and learning. What the MCG data adds to this picture is the sense that in straitened circumstances, the pressures within a college to 'sacrifice the quality of teaching and learning to make sure you're hitting figures and results' are increased.

Some staff spoke about the guided learning hours being cut, which was attributed to the financial constraints of MCG, along with the SLT seeking convergence towards a 'fairness agenda'. It emerged in an interview with the CEO that the group had absorbed reductions differently in some instances and there had been a lack of consistency between the way in which reductions in resources were managed across sites. With this in mind, they undertook a process of rationalising guided learning hours across courses. Thus, although efficiency savings appeared to be a key driver, they were not the only one. While there was clearly anxiety and frustration among teaching staff about the impact of these cuts on the quality of teaching and learning, they were mindful that the specific challenges and circumstances of the group made it a nigh on impossible task for senior leaders to manage. The coordination and management functions within a single college are complex enough, once multiple sites are added, then the complexity of the task is exacerbated. Focus-group participants perceived that some managers had an impossible workload, openly acknowledging that Derek, a core member of the SLT team, 'has got 50 jobs to do himself'. But, arguably, the sympathy they expressed is liable to contribute to a sense of disconnect between the socially situated practices of teaching and learning and the significant issues arising in the interactions between teachers and students and the functions of management and leadership that sit centrally.

In the SLT group interview, issues of size and scale featured prominently as illustrated in the following extract:

Working in a large college group is very difficult but we're getting better at it! To be honest, we're only just beginning to understand the difference between 'vertical' and 'horizontal' matrices… Everyone being involved and consulted is really important but having ownership of one voice and us being very clear about that is a challenge.

The references to matrices here relates to the decision to move away from 'a campus-based to a curriculum-based' structure. This is something that is not explicitly linked to the improvement of teaching and learning in the Learning and Teaching Plan, but that is because the plan centres on the roles and activities of individuals working within the group, while making no mention of different sites. The extent of 'ownership' of the group's strategic vision for improving teaching and learning was something that the SLT were keen to grasp and, indeed, the research team were specifically asked to enquire about this during the focus groups. Staff's 'ownership' of this new strategy was seen by the SLT as a key indicator of success, as they acknowledged that it might take some time for this to happen. Indeed, **there was little evidence from the survey or the focus groups that teaching staff felt a sense of ownership.** What this underlines is that plans and documents providing a descriptive overview of quality processes that have been written mainly with an external audience in mind often amount to the representation of an aspiration. Through abstraction and decontextualisation, they can also risk undermining the shared institutional understanding of the complex and often locally determined human interactions between teachers that are the fundamental building blocks of improvement in teaching and learning.

The interview with the MCG CEO provided important background information on the origins of the 'curriculum-based' structure. Referring to the previous principal, he described a shift from a federated structure within the group, in which each college enjoyed a degree of autonomy, to one in which 'curriculum was king'. This effectively 'took primacy away from the individual sites' but, in his view, was a change brought about 'without

any developed organisational plan'. At the same time, as the college moved to this 'faculty-style' management structure that grouped staff through subject areas, according to the CEO, 50 per cent of the leadership team changed. Once again, the pressure to establish and sustain a corporate identity may have informed the decision. Certainly, it can be viewed as a move away from local to centralised management.

Formal vs informal lesson observations

There were two models of observation in use at MCG. The main model was what the SLT and the group's Learning and Teaching Plan referred to as 'professional development' observations. These were 'formal' observations underpinned by a performance management agenda; all staff were obliged to undergo one of these observations every year. Each curriculum area has its own observation lead, whose responsibility it is to carry out the observations. As mentioned in the introduction, staff were assessed against a three-tiered ranking scale of: 1) Exceeding expectations; 2) Meeting expectations; and 3) Not yet meeting expectations. In the event of a member of staff not being deemed to meet the expectations, this would trigger a re-observation in a six-week period. Conversely, the other model of observations in use was 'peer observations', which were informal, optional and primarily used to focus on areas for development identified in the formal observations. There were some inconsistencies and disagreements among participants about the different models of observation in place at MCG, particularly regarding their purpose and value.

Formal observations are monitored closely at MCG, with the data and documentation produced from them feeding into formal monitoring/accountability systems and processes. In contrast, this was not the case for peer observations, as they were not recognised as being of commensurate value by the group's formal systems and as such sat outside any data trails. Ironically, however, it was the peer observations that staff identified as being of most value. The 'professional development' observations

were, according to some staff in both focus groups, 'not really linked to improving teaching and learning' and 'of no real value'. When these views were shared with the SLT in a group interview, they accepted that they were 'fair comments' and that they still had some work to do on observations.

The overwhelming **view of practitioners about the group's formal 'professional development' observations was that they were of little relevance to their professional needs and had little or no impact on improving their teaching and/or their students' learning,** as evidenced by the comments from focus group participants in response to the following question:

> *Can I just go back to the institutional machinery around the observations, the formal observations; to what extent do they plug into improving teaching and learning in your areas?*
>
> *I don't think they do if I'm being honest with you.*
>
> *No. I don't think they do.*
>
> *They're a system and a process that you have to go through and I know full well as a team leader… it should be nice and informal and relaxed, and they're not, they're actually, I feel, they're a barrier to good quality teaching personally from what I've seen.*

Staff were similarly critical of the recent introduction of 'walkthroughs' or 'learning walks', which were considered too 'snapshot' and 'superficial' to glean any useful information and were more about informing LTA reviews, action planning and other 'bureaucratic mechanisms' than providing meaningful insights into teaching and learning:

> *They've embedded a thing called 'walkthrough' so at any time you can have an observation come through where they walk through your classes, observe what's going on, how the learners are reacting, which is meant to be non-graded and no feedback necessary, just go in and open doors. But*

whatever they pick up tends to be on the next agenda, what we're looking at, so it's more like a spy mission where they come and they do a walkthrough, they look at you, 'Oh don't worry, we're only just going to do this', unannounced sometimes, which puts the learners off. And they come in and they pick up anecdotal things they're seeing … and then they feedback as a managing group and it's the next thing on the LTA, they're looking at things and saying, 'Right, this needs to be changed'.

The common themes to emerge from staff at MCG about their views and experiences of lesson observation were consistent with research in the field and what is already known about observations in FE (e.g. O'Leary, 2014b; Gleeson et al, 2015). Despite the established evidence base identifying the ineffectiveness of performance management driven models of observation and their counterproductive consequences (e.g. UCU, 2013), the reality is that they continue to dominate in most FE institutions, with MCG no exception. MCG's engagement with observation as a multi-purpose mechanism for simultaneously attempting to address QA and QI issues was largely consistent with its use in many institutions across the sector. In other words, despite the rhetoric in institutional policy documentation, its main purpose was as part of ongoing QA audits, adding further weight to the argument that it predominantly serves the performance management agendas of the institution rather than the professional needs of individual practitioners. This can be seen as a clash of the two Qs, i.e. QA vs. QI, with the former overpowering the latter and the latter being pushed out of the equation at the expense of what some researchers in the field have referred to as 'burdensome accountability and regulation' (Keep, 2018). One of the effects of this imbalance is that it can perpetuate a top-down approach to improving teaching and learning, a by-product of which can be a schism between management and teaching staff.

As well as being repeatedly described as a 'fake' and 'box-ticking' exercise, the formal observations were also identified as being

responsible for increasing levels of stress and anxiety amongst teaching staff. In contrast, there was a consensus among participants that **peer-based models of observation made a positive contribution to their professional learning** and thus their value should be acknowledged by the SLT and the group as a whole. However, as discussed previously, the importance of peer observation seemed undermined by the prioritisation of the formal model and its generation of performance data.

Middle managers (curriculum leads) responsible for carrying out the observations talked about how difficult it was to fulfil these commitments. The two biggest challenges they faced were coordinating and navigating their movements across multiple sites and fitting these visits in to congested schedules:

> *The practicalities of us when we're teaching and when we're managing over multiple sites, it's very, very difficult to put into practice when you've got, you know, maybe a line manager who doesn't have any time to get around everybody in a week and write up everything so that it then becomes a useful process. It's a difficult thing to achieve, really difficult to then sit down with them and feed back to a teacher after having observed them, set them a target, you know, talk to them about strategies, you're just not going to get time.*

An interesting perspective that seemed to be excluded from the observation process was that of the learning support/advice team. In one of the focus groups, a member of staff from this team mentioned that although they played an active role in collaborating with lecturers to plan and co-deliver teaching, they had no involvement in the formal observation process. This contradicted what members of the SLT said in their interview, when they remarked that they observed the learning support/advice staff in the same way as lecturers, though they added a caveat to this statement: 'they have a formal observation, but they haven't gone completely into the cycle in the way teachers will'. The SLT emphasised the importance of the role of learning support/advice staff and how pleased they were that so many had responded to the survey.

In contrast to the formal, performance-management observations, peer observations were highly regarded by staff. However, based on comments in the focus groups and the survey, involvement in peer observations seemed sporadic and was undervalued by senior leaders.

> *So, peer observations are amazing CPD. We've got amazing resources within our teaching staff and peer observations are really important. So we've got to the point where it's been acknowledged that people need time to do peer observations and hopefully this year that time will be allocated to people to be able to do that, but it hasn't happened yet and hasn't happened for years.*
> (P3 – Focus Group 1)

Role of teacher education in driving improvement

The role of ITE at MCG is worthy of comment in relation to the improvement of teaching and learning. Historically, many colleges, particularly larger ones, have taken the decision to 'grow their own' teachers by establishing in-house courses (e.g. DET, Cert Ed) to provide staff with the opportunity to become qualified. This continues to be the case despite the unhelpful findings of the Lingfield Report (BIS, 2012), which appeared to suggest that the qualification of teachers was an extraneous consideration. As already illustrated in the Hill Top case study, ITE has frequently played an important role in stimulating thinking and the sharing of ideas and good practice about teaching and learning. Another important aspect is that the teacher education team, as a result of the social networks established through engagement with subject specialist mentors, often attains a degree of visibility that makes them an invaluable resource

that is informally accessible to staff across the institution. The survey data on how leadership should work in relation to the improvement of teaching and learning also connects with this way of using the ITE team:

> *Leadership should be about facilitating a collegiate approach to T & L. Allow experienced, well-qualified staff to engage with one another and best practice (where evidence-based), in developing approaches to T & L that are CONTEXTUALISED.*

Participants in the focus groups expressed nostalgia for the time when the ITE team could come out and work with them in a bespoke way:

> *When they had lots of people in their department, they were amazing.*

> *Absolutely … You could just go and say, 'I've got these learners and we want to do something innovative, this is what I want to teach, what do you think?' and they were fantastic, they were really…*

> *They'd come and spend half a day with you.*

> *God, they were worth every penny, yes.*

> *But that hasn't happened for years.*

There are a number of points to emphasise in this exchange. There is the familiarity of the people whose advice is being sought, the inference of a high level of trust between them and the staff and, notably, the accessible nature of the service offered. It is significant that teaching staff should proactively seek their support, rather than their role being one of reactive intervention. The passage represents the ITE team as people whose role is to foster and sustain discourse around pedagogy. The role is locally deployed and informal. The elective quality of the model also stands out. The overall effect can be described as de-centred and culturally embedded.

The focus groups at MCG talked about the diminished role of the ITE team, which was acknowledged by a member of the SLT, who stated that there was an intention to re-establish it going forward. Staff viewed this decline as contingent on the massive restructuring the college had gone through: their team has shrunk so much that it's down to one person. There was evidence in staff comments that the ITE team had a particular 'insider' status that heightened their value as a resource for the local improvement of teaching and learning. They were viewed as 'internal' staff who were able to offer 'objective' and critical advice on pedagogy. This was advice that was respected by staff who felt that they were supportive but also ready to address a range of issues. This model contrasted sharply with the whole-college CPD day approach to improving teaching and learning in a number of important ways. The temporal aspects are perhaps most significant here. The deployment of ITE staff as a mobile resource of ideas and advice needs to be seen as a long-term improvement strategy. It speaks to the perception that **improving teaching and learning is about painstaking engagement in local (and subject specific) discussions with teachers about pedagogy which builds gradually to bring about changes in practice,** the most significant of which is the establishment of an ongoing localised discourse about the improvement of teaching and learning. Through this lens, the advisory role of the ITE staff takes on a preventative aspect, tackling issues at grassroots. The whole-college CPD approach on the other hand seems in comparison to be an attempt to deal with symptoms.

Staff also mentioned how having students (either pre-degree Certificate of Education or Postgraduate Certificate of Education) enabled knowledge spill-over within departments as the students often brought 'fresh ideas and practices' with them into their subject areas.

Models of leadership

Any commentary about the leadership at MCG has to take account of the tremendous instability brought about by the multiple changes of principal, but also the enormous scale of financial savings of having to deal with a multi-million pound debt that the college was having to make at the time of the research. The interview with the CEO suggested that the size of the debt was connected to strategic decisions made by a previous principal. This had necessitated the implementation of huge changes across the group. These particular and challenging circumstances are crucial to framing the commentary that follows.

Understandably, then, the SLT focused on data and saw the quality of teaching and learning in relation to that:

> I think the message is as well… in September… we want to be: 'Look at the learners, are they in the right place? Look at the learners are they in the right place?' Not: 'Look at the learner numbers and don't lose them, look at the…'… It amounts to the same thing, actually.
>
> Yes, it does amount to the same thing, yes.

This is a revealing exchange because it illustrates how circumstances like those in which MCG found itself can lead to an emphasis on a 'bums-on-seats' pressure to recruit. In addition, the conflation of 'good' retention figures and good teaching and learning is problematic. The syllogism that retaining students equates to good teaching and learning is a product of a dysfunctional funding system. While good teaching and learning is likely to mean that students are retained, this may not always be the case. It does not follow that if retention is not good, there must be a problem with teaching and learning. There is no absolute correlation here but this perspective is the kind of shorthand that results when SLTs focus on institutional data, without engaging at an appropriate depth with contextual considerations.

The most obvious impact of these financial circumstances as far as the improvement of teaching and learning goes, relates to resources. The issue of material resources surfaced in both focus groups, as well as in the online survey. Given the particular financial difficulties the group had endured in recent years and the fact that staff had complained about it in the last staff survey, it came as no surprise to the SLT that it continued to be an issue for staff. The reduction in staff numbers was also broached in the focus groups.

The survey produced some informative responses about the relationship between leadership and teaching and learning.

Figure 6.9 – Links between leadership and improving learning and teaching at Meadow College Group

31. Leadership in my college is clearly connected to improve learning and teaching.
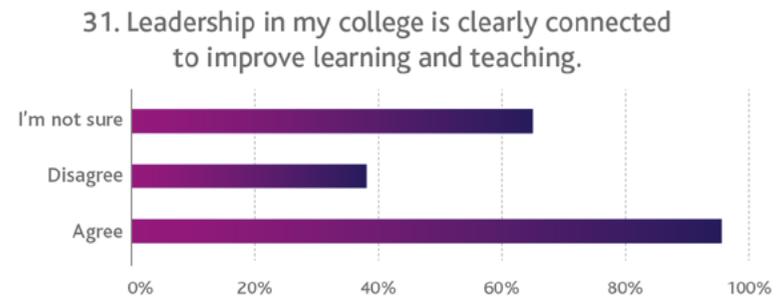
Figure 6.9 shows that less than half of the project's participants (n = 96 or 47.5%) agreed that leadership was connected to improving learning and teaching at MCG, with just over a third (n = 68 or 33.6%) responding 'not sure' and just under a fifth (n = 38 or 18.81%) 'disagree'. Some of the qualitative comments in the follow-up question in the survey drew attention to how other issues had been prioritised over the quality of teaching and learning, notably the financial health of the group. MCG's finances and its recent history was interpreted by staff as aspects of a wider, sectoral picture that had inevitable knock-on effects for teaching staff:

You know, it's a product of what's happened to FE; it's no one's fault, you know? Teaching and learning for teaching staff, as far as that goes, is nigh on non-existent.

The sense of powerlessness that the group is caught up in bigger (economic) currents beyond the control of its staff is debilitating and the source of low expectations regarding the professional learning opportunities that underpin any healthy educational institution.

For the SLT in these circumstances there may be a compulsion to 'enact leadership' – to be seen to be making decisions and 'rolling out' initiatives. Arising from the cultures of accountability that have come to characterise leadership in FE providers, this sense that: 'I have power and I have to act' (SLT participant) is a product of performative working environments in which senior leaders feel the need to be seen to make a difference to justify their appointment. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck between maintaining the solvency of college finances (and thereby the jobs of staff) and focusing on the improvement of teaching and learning. Put another way, **it is remarkable that there was any discussion about the need to improve teaching and learning at MCG given the dramatic savings it was being forced to make over a two-year period.** In view of these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that staff perceived the SLT to be remote. They also felt that they were being bombarded with one initiative after another. A team leader from one of the focus groups outlines a key consideration as to the prioritisation of any initiative:

[T]he first thing I think of is the impact on the learners it might have, and if that's minimal then that straightaway sort of goes to the bottom of the pile or, you know, through that filter, as such. I think if something you've been given and asked to do and to cascade down to your staff is going to have a significant positive impact on your learners, I think that's something that goes towards the top of the list, I would say.

This is evidence that MCG teachers perceived there to be a lot of top-down directives, some of which worked against their ability to maintain the existing quality of teaching and learning and/or improve on that. Staff thus make judgements on SLT policy and use their discretion in relation to the extent to which they engage and take ownership of them. Teachers' perceptions are governed by an on-the-ground sense of what is possible – something of which they do not believe SLT are fully conscious. There is leadership in the filtering of SLT initiatives that teaching staff undertake here.

The staff also saw middle managers as acting out a filtering role:

There is a feeling that senior management come in with these directive strategies… and they think they've got a fix-all so they can cut four out of five of the teaching staff and then send them in and then whip them for not being amazing or put them through the matrix and then send them in and say, 'Why is your session not amazing?' and staff are feeling like: 'Oh my god, what do you want from me?' So, I think those good managers, middle managers as you called them, left are the ones who are kind of filtering out some of the information that they don't think is important.

Here the top and bottom modes of leadership are in tension with each other: one effectively cancelling out the other. Given the size of the organisation and how stretched resources are, the SLT faces additional pressures and challenges in knowing how best to 'do more with less' and in collaborating with middle managers and teaching staff to try to address the areas of teaching and learning that need to be prioritised.

The disconnect between SLT and the teaching staff has a powerful impact on the ability of teachers to enact anything more than a tightly boundaried agency:

I really enjoy my job with the students and that's what I believe my job is. All the other stuff that actually is out of

my control and nothing to do with me, I was starting to get sucked into it. And the ... what's the word? They talked to us in that meeting about developing us as members of staff, but actually I don't see any of those things so I'm happy to do things for myself... I actually openly said, 'I don't give a shit what goes on because it's nothing to do with me. This is my job and that's what I'm here to do and I'm going home at the end of the day'.

Some staff from the focus groups had retreated into their classrooms as the only place in which could experience agency. This is an understandable response to a turbulent and unstable working environment. It suggests that, in terms of improving teaching and learning, staff in this position may be difficult to reach. It suggests further that whole-college CPD days are likely to be ineffective. On the other hand, the kind of informal and collegial relationships that the ITE team used to offer would seem to offer a positive way forward.

While it is true that the SLT faced a great number of challenges, teaching staff provided insights into the complexities of their day-to-day work. In particular, they talked about having to deal with pastoral issues and the complexities of supporting students' needs. Teachers exercised considerable leadership in fielding these aspects of their work and saw them as a necessary frame for maintaining the standard of teaching and learning. However, focus group participants felt that this was not recognised or supported by a 'remote' SLT that was focused on data. One vocational teacher complained about the impact of the former Skills Minister Matt Hancock and his decision to make compulsory the attainment of English and Maths GCSE for 16–18 year olds with complex (often socio-economic) issues:

We were saying about we lead them to the maths and English group and we pass it on.... So the maths and English team, no disrespect, they've got a hard enough job, the kids don't want to learn it, they haven't learnt it in school, but they do their bit, but there's no answers for me for the

parents, progression and what have you. If they take them off my statistics are done, I get hit with the corporate stick, if I don't progress them I get hit with the corporate stick. We as teachers are in a quagmire, we're talking in a trough now, we're in the dark ground and we've got no leadership for it.

This passage illustrates how, for this MCG teacher, improving teaching and learning is underpinned by strong pastoral support that reaches out beyond the classroom to address needs that students may bring into the college from their lives outside. In this case, the pressure on the vocational teacher to retain and progress students when they are being forced to take additional subjects 'they don't want to learn' renders her effectively powerless. Not only that, but she feels that the data-driven approach taken by managers (in response to a funding model that focuses on performance data) penalises her for factors that are outside her control. There is also a suggestion that she feels pressurised to 'progress' students who may not have achieved the qualification. Here we see that the kinds of localised, student-centred leadership that teachers are able to exercise going unrecognised by 'management'. The same teacher also emphasised her role in relation to social justice. Her leadership can be seen in her advocacy in safeguarding the educational opportunities of poor and vulnerable students whom, she felt, the college was ready to write off in order to maintain a management focus on complying with funding paperwork:

We had somebody that had issues with anxiety and that and I said, 'I am not signing their paperwork and you are not getting rid of them', and they just backed down.

For focus group participants, just as with Midshire College, the observation mechanism did not function to improve teaching and learning. Instead, they talked about devising their own peer-observation schemes within departments or sharing between staff in specific subject areas across different campuses. So the emergent picture once more was that **there were spaces in which reflection could take place but their value went**

unrecognised within the college as they were institutionally marginalised and locally determined. The SLT's failure to recognise and support these spaces for collegial reflection is a key finding as it represents a missed opportunity.

Focus-group participants also provided a small number of examples in which the actions of 'management' were seen in a positive light. Typically, these were examples when teachers felt they had engaged in dialogue and had been listened to as knowledgeable practitioners:

> the management putting faith in you… you know, and listening to what you've got to say about the course, like you said, so it's all pull together and they listen, and then they've been growing on it as well, and it's the momentum has grown.

It is interesting that the group identity signalled by the phrase 'all pull together' is achieved when staff feel valued and 'listened to'. This suggests that the goal of achieving a consistent sense of corporate identity and ownership of the improvement of teaching and learning may depend on communicative relations that are dialogical. The overall picture that emerges from the MCG data in relation to modes of leadership is that teachers' leadership is being stifled and undervalued but it survives as a resource waiting to be engaged.

Time

Temporality provides an important lens through which to explore how leadership plays out in the improvement of teaching and learning in the MCG. Its financial situation obviously impacts in temporal terms for both staff and students on some sites. Focus-group participants from one site reported how there had been a reduction in guided learning hours for some courses. Here, then, a combination of circumstances, including the decisions of an ex-principal, had led to a more pressurised experience of time in the present. For some staff this took the form of having to travel

between sites with minimal travelling time. For others it was about a reduction in the time available to deliver courses.

In addition, some staff commented on being pressured to work additional hours in order to secure their employment. Obviously, in circumstances in which there are ongoing job losses, this pressure might be felt more keenly. Focus-group participants experienced these additional hours as an intensification of their work. There can be little doubt that this detracts from teachers' focus on improving teaching and learning in their classes:

> It is (more) hours, but when you've still got a job… now in September because of it.
>
> And that's the problem, and you get to a point you either stand your ground and say, 'Do you know what, I'm not going to do this anymore,' but if we don't… we'll be out of a job, so…

A corollary of this intensification and increase in teaching hours was a consequent reduction in the amount of time staff had to reflect and talk to colleagues and compare notes about their teaching. This was also linked to the wider theme about the importance of informal conversations among colleagues in helping them to focus on and work collaboratively on thinking about their teaching and improving what they do. There are echoes in this of the data from Midshire College. For example, focus groups talked about CPD being imposed and reducing the opportunities for departmental development and collegial time that could be valuable. MCG staff felt the way that 'whole college' events were used was not as productive for them in terms of developing teaching and learning as they might be.

Not that the coming together was viewed negatively. Survey feedback from staff acknowledged the value of curriculum specialists from different sites being able to share experiences:

> The use of formalised 'events' around the improvement of teaching and learning are valued by staff, particularly

in specialist subject areas: allowing or promoting the availability of tutors going to trade shows or other colleges would be a valuable way of increasing tutors knowledge and keeping them up to date with industry improvements.

But there was a sense that an existing resource was being under-used:

We have a wide range of experienced teachers working across an incredible range of curriculum but I don't think we tap into others' experiences enough.

Despite these comments, the overwhelming view of the staff who completed the survey was that these 'whole-college' events should not displace or be prioritised over more informal fora in which staff can share experiences and reflection about their day-to-day teaching:

I think that teachers could learn a lot from each other if they shared their practice more and a culture of continual development was adopted.

Having informal feedback from your peers rather than the more formal management ones.

These comments once more point away from (potentially resource-heavy) initiatives that take their cue from an SLT-led vision of what constitutes 'Good' or 'Outstanding' teaching and learning. Instead, they suggest a low-tech and authentic range of practices and activities. The absence of a locally situated space for reflection between (subject) colleagues was also perceived to militate against the effective impact of whole-college CPD:

I'd like a bit more time, time to breathe, so that I could reflect, so I could look at my lesson and think, 'How did that go?'

In another echo of the data from Midshire College, focus-group participants and survey respondents commented that the ideas presented at CPD events rarely looped back into their practice

because there was not time or space for implementation. It is important to recognise that implementation here is not viewed solely as the implementation of a new idea/practice by an individual teacher. Of course, it can be that, but teachers are more likely to operationalise a new idea in a discursive and collegial space where risk-taking and experimentation is seen as a shared and collectively valuable practice. The data would suggest that where staff are experiencing a sense of atomisation (as suggested by the 'retreat into the classroom' detailed above) within the college, whole-college CPD is perceived as episodic and as having little impact on practice, as there is neither the time nor the impetus for new ideas to be followed up.

Conclusions

The MCG case study is inevitably framed by a particularly difficult financial situation. The reduction of resources and staff contingent on this gave a sense that both managers and teachers were often preoccupied with 'fire-fighting' in the present to the extent that any orientation towards the future was necessarily short-term. In spite of the best efforts of staff at all levels across MCG, there was little doubt that, in the words of a team leader, 'the quality of teaching and learning has suffered as a result of cutbacks'. The financial difficulties experienced by the group had led to redundancies, reduced resources, increased workloads for staff, with time for teaching preparation and development significantly curtailed.

Financial instability, leading to staff turnover and a drastic set of efficiency savings therefore militated against the construction of the kind of long-term narrative that we consider as fundamental to facilitating tangible improvements in teaching and learning. **The case study data reinforced the premise that the improvement of teaching and learning occurs first and foremost at the local level.** Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue, sharing and comparing thinking and

experiences of teaching and learning through mechanisms such as peer observations, mentoring and informal meetings were all highly valued by practitioners, despite not being afforded the same importance by formal systems and policies in MCG's Learning and Teaching Plan.

At its most basic level, teachers need to be supported and allowed to take time to learn in spaces that may be separate from their classrooms. In other words, teachers may require time and space that sits outside the rhythms of their everyday work of teaching and carrying out administrative tasks. This is a reflective space and, by definition, a social space in which they can interact with colleagues. The data from MCG provided evidence that such space and time had been squeezed to the very margins of teachers' everyday work. This, in our view, represented the single greatest obstacle to the improvement of teaching and learning at MCG.

Summary

Table 6.1 – Key lessons from Meadow College Group for improving teaching and learning

- Financial (in)stability has far-reaching consequences for teaching and learning and maintaining a high level of quality.

- Organisational instability and uncertainty has a disruptive and detrimental impact on a college's improvement plan/strategy.

- Tensions and ambiguities arise when there is a blurring of the boundaries between competing and conflicting agendas of quality assurance and quality improvement, as evidenced by the contrasting views of the value of the formal (performance management) vs the informal (peer observation) models of observation.

- Failure to consult and actively involve practitioners in the creation of an organisational plan for improving teaching and learning can create a gulf between the shared understanding of practitioners and senior leaders.

- Middle managers play a crucial mediatory role between top-down management priorities and protecting their staff from what they perceive as excessive accountability activities that add little value to improving teaching and learning.

- Managing teaching and learning work across multiple sites is problematic and can erode time for teacher development and collegial collaboration.

- Providing support for teaching staff to interact with peers/colleagues in 'informal networks', creating discursive spaces and time for staff to compare, share and reflect on their practice is vital to foster a culture of continuous self-improvement.

- Situating teaching and learning improvements in local contexts (i.e. subject teams, departments) increases the likelihood of sustainability and meaningful improvements.

- Teacher education teams have an important contribution to make to institutional efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sections 4–6 of this report presented and critically discussed the findings that emerged from each of the three case studies involved in the project. Differences in size, geographical location, past and current institutional contexts inevitably contributed to painting a variegated picture across each of these case studies. The choice of a small-scale, in-depth case study research design a priori excluded the intent and possibility of generalisation. However, by juxtaposing the three cases and assessing them against the conceptual framework produced in this report, it is possible to distil a number of overarching themes and issues, as well as teasing out implicit comparisons and recommendations.

Overarching themes

- **Leadership models** – evidence of the effectiveness of **integrated models of leadership** (e.g. the seamless, three-pronged model of leadership at Hill Top) as well as the challenges of **fractured models of leadership** (e.g. top-down, traditional models of leadership at Midshire and Meadow). **Where is the leadership locus?** Is it firmly located in the SLT? Is it classroom-based or a blended version? Are senior leaders consciously enacting a model of leadership?

- **Addressing external circumstances – the more unstable the environment, the more 'command-and-control' leadership becomes the norm.** There is a need for leaders to protect the internal environment from the external, e.g. influences such as Ofsted, financial instability. Are there external burdens that circumscribe the enactment of leadership in FE providers? Do these

external burdens influence the thinking and decision-making of SLTs to pursue traditional or transformational models of leadership? Is Ofsted a force for instability?

- **Climate of emotional stability** established among staff as a result of buying into and implementing an institutional vision of improvement in teaching and learning that is shared.

- **Formal vs informal systems and policies for improving teaching and learning** – informal discursive pedagogy, peer-led, non-assessed, owned by teachers (e.g. teaching triangles, internal CPD, mentoring, non-graded/peer-based models of observation) or formal, assessed and external (e.g. graded observations). Opportunities to engage in professional dialogue, **sharing and comparing thinking and experiences of teaching and learning through informal mechanisms and interactions are highly valued by practitioners.**

- **Improvement is incremental** – improving teaching and learning is a time-consuming, incremental process underpinned by sustained investment and engagement at a local (subject/programme specific) level. It involves ongoing discussions with teachers about practice and the creation of a localised discourse about improvement.

- **Orientation towards the future** – role of vision/transformational leadership/risk-taking in the three cases. How important are the personal attributes of senior leaders in pursuing a particular path? Are visions of leadership undermined by shifting policy landscapes?

Implications and recommendations

- **The integrated, three-pronged model of leadership based on fundamental trust and mutual synergy between SLT, middle management and staff works better.** Why? Because there is a greater sharing, distribution of leadership and a 'buy-in' among staff at different levels. For example, in the case of Hill Top,

there was evidence of a 'Holy Trinity' of leadership, with seamless connections between the three levels: 1) Enlightened vision from the SLT; 2) Effective middle management to communicate and implement the vision; and 3) Practitioners willing to embrace the vision and take ownership of it. When one or more levels fail then there can be a tendency to fall back onto a more traditional, fractured model of leadership.

- **Reconceptualising leadership so that teaching and learning is the focal point must incorporate substantial ownership of methods/strategies, authority and ultimate responsibility to be devolved to staff.** Unless you empower practitioners to lead activities then it is unlikely to succeed.

- **Visionary, courageous leadership that challenges Ofsted inspection regimes and opts for long-term, bottom-up, integrated growth pays off.** Hill Top College is a case in point, as it reinforces the 'other' possibilities open to FE providers. There is another way!

- **Change in culture** – high expectations, ambition, growth mindset, aspiration, motivation must equally drive teachers, learners and senior managers. **Communicating the message of having high standards/expectations pays off. This also connects to the underlying purposes of education as an antidote to a marketised agenda.**

- **Financial pressures resulting from enhanced marketisation/commodification must be challenged collectively,** proposing policy alternatives with a unified sectoral voice, which leads to issues of FE governance reforms.

- **Stability as a platform for improvement** – creating a sense of stability provides a fundamental platform for improving leadership in teaching and learning.

- **Dedicated time for improvement** – staff need dedicated time to share, compare, discuss and reflect on their practice. Senior leaders need to reduce 'time-stealing' accountability activities whenever possible to allow time for discursive and reflective interactions about teaching and learning.

- **Improvements in teaching and learning need to be grounded in local contexts,** departments, subject areas; a one-size-fits-all approach does not work and there are no 'quick fix' solutions.

- **Leadership approaches to improving teaching and learning need to actively involve those that teach,** drawing on their expertise and experience. The improvement of teaching and learning is an activity that has to originate with and be owned by teachers. One example of this is CPD activity, which needs to be discussed and planned collectively in order to ensure that it meets the needs of staff.

- **Visibility of senior leaders** – senior leaders need to remain visible to staff when it comes to discussions, planning and the implementation of teaching and learning improvements. This requires them to maintain a presence that demonstrates that teaching and learning is a priority for them.

- **Experimentation** – Staff need to be encouraged to experiment and take risks in their work to help them and the organisation learn and improve the quality of teaching and learning.

- **Orientation towards the future** – FE providers need to construct a **long-term narrative** that transcends the straitjacket of annualised funding arrangements and the omnipresent Ofsted inspection cycle.

Take-away

Improving teaching and learning is about creating an environment in which collegial interaction can flourish. It is a process that is locally defined and rooted in subject specific/course contexts. It is socially situated and is shaped by sustained human interactions. To flourish, it requires adequate time for teachers to share thoughts and reflection on their practice, not in single events scattered throughout the year, but in regular, ongoing informal interactions that have allocated time and space. Teachers need time and space to try out new ideas, skills and interventions and to reflect on their impact and effectiveness with colleagues. For this to happen, there needs to be a greater balance between centralised systems and policies that control how teaching and learning is monitored and improvement is managed in order to allow flexibility for teachers to discover things themselves and take ownership of their own professional learning. Finally, teachers are best placed to improve their practice, and collaboration with their colleagues is essential to driving meaningful and sustainable changes and improvements to their practice.

> *It's not for me to tell a teacher how to do their job. It's about removing the barriers to help them do their job well. As a senior leader, I need to listen as much as possible to put the right interventions in place, to monitor those interventions and continue to work with staff to improve them.* (Senior FE leader)

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Appendix 1 – Online survey

Research project on the role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in FE

Introduction

Dear colleague,

FETL have commissioned a national research project on the role of leadership in prioritising and improving teaching and learning in FE. Your college is one of three case studies across the country involved in this study and a key part of the research is this online survey.

The survey is designed to gain an insight into activities at your college that aim to improve teaching and learning and the role leadership plays in these activities. Data gathered from this survey will be extremely valuable in analysing how leadership in FE teaching and learning is perceived and experienced.

This survey is open from 9th May until the 15th June 2018.

Your participation is entirely optional and voluntary.

Your identity will remain anonymous and your comments confidential in all publications.

Data captured from this project will be kept securely on a university password protected server and will only be accessible to the project team.

Should you wish to withdraw your data or make changes to your answer(s) at any stage before the final report is produced (February 2019), please contact us and quote your unique identifiable number.

Once the project has been completed, data will be destroyed after five years of storage. It may be used for future publication purposes but you are assured that your identity will remain protected.

The whole survey is likely to take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Please take your time to read the questions and options carefully and answer the questions as truthfully as possible.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Thank you very much for your time.

Professor Matt O'Leary
Project lead
CSPACE
Birmingham City University

email: Matthew.O'Leary@bcu.ac.uk

Consent

By ticking the box below, you give your informed consent to take part in this project:

I understand that participation is entirely voluntary.

I understand my right to anonymity and confidentiality.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw at any stage of the project without prejudice. Should I withdraw from the project, my data will not be included in any disseminations/publications.

1.   I agree to take part in this online survey.

        Yes
        No

Participant profile

Categories used in this section of the survey are taken from definitions/categories used by national organisations/census (e.g. ONS) and/or your institution to ensure the consistency in representing the population.

2.   What's your gender?

        Male
        Female
        Prefer not to answer

3.   What's your ethnicity?

        Arab
        Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi
        Asian/Asian British – Indian
        Asian/Asian British – Pakistani
        Asian/Asian British – Any other Asian background
        Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – African
        Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – Caribbean

Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – Any other background
Chinese
Mixed – any other Mixed Multi Ethnic background
White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British
White – Irish
White – Any other White background
Any other Ethnic Group
White – Gypsy or Irish Traveller
Prefer not to answer

4.   Which age group do you belong to?

        Under 25
        25-30
        31-40
        41-50
        51-55
        Over 55

5.   Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

        Yes
        No
        Prefer not to say

6.   What is the mode of your employment at your College?

        Full-time
        Part-time
        Hourly-paid
        Other

        6a. If you selected Other, please specify:

7. What is the terms of your employment at your College?

Open-ended/permanent contract
Fixed-term contract
Zero hours contract
Variable hours contract
Other

7a. If you selected Other, please specify:

8. Which department do you currently work for?
[A list provided by case study colleges]

8a. If you selected Other, please specify:

9. What is the highest teaching qualification you hold relevant to your current role?

PGCE
Cert Ed
DET
DTLLS
PTLLS
CTLLS
I don't have one.
Other

9a. If you selected Other, please specify:

10. How long have you worked in further education?

Under 2 years
2 – 7 years
8 – 13 years
14 – 19 years
20 years or more

11. How long have you worked at the college where you are currently employed?

Under 2 years
2 – 7 years
8 – 13 year
14 – 19 years
20 years or more

12. What is/are your current role/roles at your College? (Tick all that apply)

Teaching
Management
Learning/Teaching support

Sources of evidence influencing improvements in teaching and learning

To be answered by all staff with teaching and/or learning support responsibilities

13.   The sources of evidence listed below have an important impact on my thinking and practice:

The sources of evidence listed below have an important impact on my thinking and practice:	Strongly agree	Agree	disagree	strongly disagree	Not applicable
Student feedback					
Student participation					
Student performance					
Peers' comments					
Senior managers/leaders' comments					
External examiners' comments					
External employers' comments					
Awarding bodies' comments					
Personal reflection					
Reflecting with others					

14.   Please provide examples of other sources of evidence that have an impact on your thinking and practice if they are not listed above:

Activities associated with improvements in teaching and learning

15.   Tick all the activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace that you are aware of:

Assessed performance management observations
Unassessed peer observations
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers
Formal programmes of study/qualifications
Mentoring
Professional Learning Communities
Teaching triangles/squares
External conferences
Academic research on teaching and learning
'Personal' research on teaching and learning
Subject/programme review with colleagues
Partnership work with other organisations
Teachmeets
Informal conversations with colleagues
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
Other

15a. If you selected Other, please specify:

16.   In your opinion, what does the College identify as the **three most prioritised** activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace?

Assessed performance management observations
Unassessed peer observations
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers

Formal programmes of study/qualifications
Mentoring
Professional Learning Communities
Teaching triangles/squares
External conferences
Academic research on teaching and learning
'Personal' research on teaching and learning
Subject/programme review with colleagues
Partnership work with other organisations
Teachmeets
Informal conversations with colleagues
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
Other

16a. If you selected Other, please specify:

17.   In your opinion, what does the College identify as the **three least prioritised** activities associated with improving teaching and learning that occur in your workplace:

Assessed performance management observations
Unassessed peer observations
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers
Formal programmes of study/qualifications
Mentoring
Professional Learning Communities
Teaching triangles/squares
External conferences
Academic research on teaching and learning
'Personal' research on teaching and learning
Subject/programme review with colleagues
Partnership work with other organisations
Teachmeets
Informal conversations with colleagues

Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
Other

17a. If you selected Other, please specify:

18.   In your opinion, what do **you** consider the **three most important** activities associated with improving teaching and learning in your workplace:

Assessed performance management observations
Unassessed peer observations
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers
Formal programmes of study/qualifications
Mentoring
Professional Learning Communities
Teaching triangles/squares
External conferences
Academic research on teaching and learning
'Personal' research on teaching and learning
Subject/programme review with colleagues
Partnership work with other organisations
Teachmeets
Informal conversations with colleagues
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
Other

18a. If you selected Other, please specify:|

18b. Please explain your answers:

19. In your opinion, what do **you** consider the t**hree least important** activities associated with improving teaching and learning:

Assessed performance management observations
Unassessed peer observations
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by colleagues
CPD events/sessions/workshops delivered by external speakers
Formal programmes of study/qualifications
Mentoring
Professional Learning Communities
Teaching triangles/squares
External conferences
Academic research on teaching and learning
'Personal' research on teaching and learning
Subject/programme review with colleagues
Partnership work with other organisations
Teachmeets
Informal conversations with colleagues
Social media/online communities e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
Other

19a. If you selected Other, please specify:

19b. Please explain your answers:

Understanding of leadership in teaching and learning

20. I understand what the strategic priorities of my College are in relation to teaching and learning

Yes
Yes, but only a little
No

21. I understand what the strategic priorities of my department/programme area are in relation to teaching and learning

Yes
Yes, but only a little
No

22. I know who the people are that make the decisions about the strategic priorities of teaching and learning in my workplace

Yes
Yes, but only a little
No

23. I know staff at all levels in my workplace are consulted on teaching and learning strategies

Yes
Yes, but only a little
No

24. I have the opportunity to contribute to thinking and practice around improving teaching and learning in my workplace

Yes, very often
Yes, occasionally
No

25.   I am encouraged to take responsibility for improving my teaching in my workplace

Yes, very often
Yes, occasionally
No

26.   I have played an active role in bringing about change in teaching and learning policy in my workplace

Yes, very often
Yes, occasionally
No

27.   My College sets standards in teaching, learning and assessment

Yes
No
I am not sure

27a.   (if Yes) The College makes me aware of what it considers 'good' or 'effective' teaching, learning and assessment.

Yes
No
I am not sure

28.   The teaching and learning improvement policies in my workplace are implemented in practice

Yes, most/all of them
Yes, but only some
No
I am not sure

29.   Improving teaching and learning is a leadership priority in my workplace

Yes
No
I am not sure

30.   I feel empowered to make decisions about my own professional development in my workplace

Yes, always
Yes, but only sometimes
No

31.   Leadership in my college is clearly connected to improving learning and teaching.

Agree
Disagree
I am not sure

31a. Please explain your answer:

32.   Leadership in the FE sector is clearly connected to improving learning and teaching.

Agree
Disagree
Not sure

32a. Please explain your answer:

33.   Do you have any other comments you wish to make about the role of leadership in improving learning and teaching? If so, please type them into the box below.

Ending the survey

Thank you very much for your time.

Please click 'Finish' to submit your answers and collect your unique participant number.

Should you have any questions about this survey or would like to amend/withdraw your responses, please email Matthew.O'Leary@bcu.ac.uk and quote your unique participant number.

Appendix 2 – Focus Group & Interview Questions (example)

1.   Are there specific initiatives/policies that have been introduced/are currently in place to focus on improving teaching and learning? Can you explain what they are and how they work?

2.   What was the original rationale for the introduction of these initiatives? Are they targeted at addressing specific aspects of teaching and learning?

3.   How were they presented to staff?

4.   How are these initiatives/policies implemented?

5.   How is the impact of these initiatives/policies being monitored and/or measured?

6.   How do these initiatives/policies connect to the strategic vision of the College in terms of focusing on and prioritising the improvement of teaching and learning?

7.   How do they connect with other activities relating to improving teaching and learning?

8.   What resources have been invested in implementing and evaluating these initiatives/policies?

9.   In the context of this college and FE as a whole, what do you consider are the key ingredients of ensuring that you prioritise and improve teaching and learning?

10.   Can you create a map of the initiatives/projects/events that you think have helped you to ensure that you've been able to prioritise and improve teaching and learning?

11.   How is CPD organised in the College? What are the drivers for the focus of CPD activities? What form do these activities take?

Additional questions/lines of inquiry based on online survey responses

1)   Teaching triangles (impact on practice and thinking about practice, implementation, evaluation, leadership thinking on the role of triangles in improving T & L)

2)   Internal CPD delivered by colleagues (What does this consist of? How is this coordinated? When and where does this take place? Is the value/impact of this activity monitored?

Appendix 3 – Two cycles of improving teaching and learning

The two cycles included here bring together some of the key insights from the data drawn from the three case studies. The cycles are an attempt to represent opposite ends of a spectrum in terms of the response made by SLTs to the challenges of improving teaching and learning. With this in mind, we openly acknowledge that they simplify and present an overly binarist overview of these two possible institutional responses.
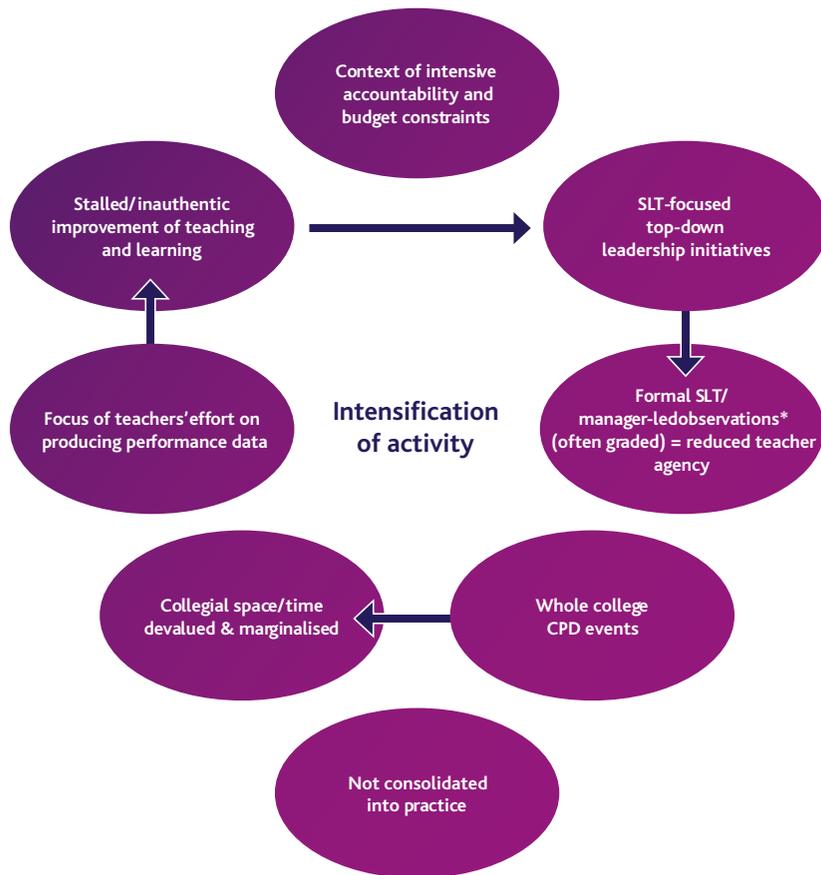
The first cycle illustrates the kind of response to the environmental pressures created not only by agencies such as Ofsted but also by changing funding and curricular demands. One way of viewing this response is as a tightening of command and control from the centre. Typically this involves the displacement of quality improvement by quality assurance. Pressured by a competitive context, FE providers become fixated on gathering performance data and then command-and-control leadership becomes locked in a cycle of imposing new initiatives. In a cycle of diminishing returns, these initiatives are negatively affected by the reluctance of staff to buy in fully. They may also be resistant to 'yet another' initiative. Most importantly, this kind of leadership response serves to consolidate the dissociation in teachers' minds between 'outcome paperwork', the administrative representations (and simulations) of teaching and learning, and the complexities of dealing with real lived experiences of teaching and learning within (and beyond) the classroom. The data suggests a trend of responses in these circumstances. Teachers tend to retreat to the sanctuary of their classroom and, effectively, disengage from the college's quality processes.

Context of intensive accountability and budget constraints

SLT-focused top-down leadership initiatives

Formal SLT/manager-led observations* (often graded) = reduced teacher agency

Whole college CPD events

Not consolidated into practice

Collegial space/time devalued & marginalised

Focus of teachers' effort on producing performance data

Stalled/inauthentic improvement of teaching and learning

Intensification of activity

*not linked to staff appraisal

The second cycle represents a situation in which the response to the same high-pressured environment is a loosening of top-down control and a devolving of leadership and consequently 'ownership' to teachers. In this response, SLTs can have an impact by creating conditions and through establishing initiatives that support 'structured autonomy' in which teachers are able to exercise agency. Our suggestion is that colleges need to take a long-term view of improving teaching and learning. Viewed as a narrative that unfolds over a number of years, the increments in improvement are gradual and take place over a long period (e.g. a decade). The improvements occur through a process of initiatives yielding their maximum return, with another change being needed when that plateau is reached.

The distinction between the two cycles can be summarised through the idea that one of them better recognises that improvement in teaching and learning is brought about *by teachers rather than managers*. Teachers are the staff who, with support, identify the issues, attempt to address them, then make the changes. Teachers need to be released to lead in this area of activity. Managers have to concentrate on establishing the conditions in which this can take place. This is why the second cycle foregrounds the informal spaces and times that teachers are afforded to reflect collectively and locally on their practice.

We recognise that stability is a key facilitator of the kind of approaches we advocate. Currently, stability may be in short supply in the FE sector. The three case studies presented here all dealt with unstable environments. But only one of these effectively fostered an environment in which teachers themselves were habitually discussing their everyday practice. 'Ownership' cannot be achieved in any other way.

The cycle diagram contains the following nodes:
- Context of intensive accountability and budget constraints
- SLT-directed, distributed leadership
- Key middle leaders with cultural capital and trust
- Informal, locally devolved/dept-led, peer observations* = enhanced teacher agency
- The positioning of ITE team as a crucial resource for promoting discussion about pedagogy and a culture of collegiality and reduced risk development
- Fewer whole college CPD events. Emphasis on distributed local/dept level CPD
- Conscious privileging of collegial space/time
- Authentic improvement of teaching and learning

Structured autonomy

Intensification of activity

*not linked to staff appraisal