

**Evaluation of National Reports
National Report from the Inspectorate
The Further Education Funding Council
1999-2000**

Foreword

As part of the quality assurance arrangements of the FEFC inspectorate we have annually published a report evaluating the previous year's institutional inspections. However, we have not examined the effectiveness of the national reports that we produce. I requested that this evaluation be undertaken using a selection of recent reports. In order to gather information, all colleges received a questionnaire in the spring term 2000. I am very grateful to the 192 colleges that took the time and trouble to reply and to those who took part in the telephone follow-up to the questionnaire.

The results are pleasing. Many colleges expressed how helpful these reports were in supporting their quality improvement strategies. Interestingly, some also commented on the value of taking part in national surveys. They felt that discussing their work outside the context of a formal institutional inspection had helped them to think in depth about what they were doing and what they had achieved.

A few colleges felt it was not possible to link the reports to quality improvements. Many made useful suggestions as to how reports can be improved. We have tried to take many of these suggestions on board when writing this report. We would welcome comments on this new format. Please send them to Sara Mogel via the FEFC website feedback section (www.fefc.ac.uk).

I hope this evaluation will not only disseminate the good practice in using national reports that exists in the sector, but also inform the new inspection system which has a remit to continue the production of such reports.

James T. Donaldson

Executive Summary

1 National reports are well received and well used by colleges. Colleges like reports that are clearly focused, have benchmarks to help them evaluate their own provision and contain examples of good practice. College would like more guidance about what to do and how to do it. The most popular report was *Effective Self-assessment*, which was named as the most useful by 76 colleges. Only eight colleges said they had not used this report.

2 Reports which were well received had the following characteristics in common:

- clear formats
- explicit pointers for improvement
- benchmarking data
- in-depth examples of good practice
- a narrow focus
- check lists colleges could use to assess their own provision.

3 Colleges criticised reports on the grounds that:

- they were time-consuming to read
- their content quickly becomes dated and this was exacerbated by the time lag between gathering the information and publication
- some lacked in-depth case studies and exemplars of good practice
- they lacked recommendations.

Recommendations

4 For the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) inspectorate:

- to include an executive summary and recommendations in all national reports
- to vary the format of national reports more
- to better publicise the accessibility of reports on the FEFC website
- to limit the time between the gathering of information and publication of reports.

5 For colleges:

- to note the common characteristics of colleges which have successfully used reports to support initiatives to improve the quality of provision
- to examine the good practice in this report and evaluate their own practice in using national reports.

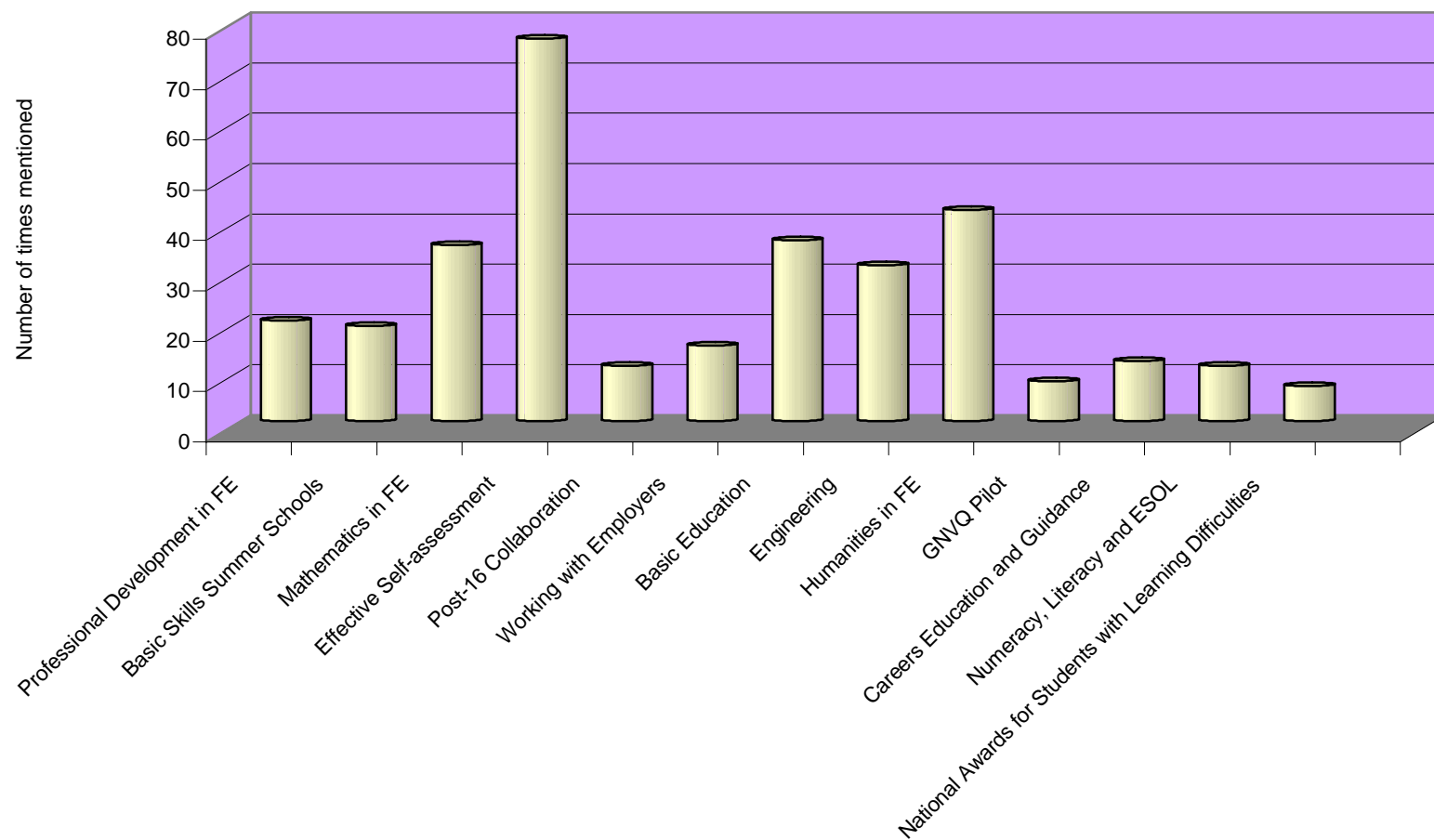
6 For Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) when planning the production of national reports on post-16 education and training:

- to build upon the established good practice in producing national reports
- to note the welcome for focused reports, in particular curriculum surveys
- to use the information in this report when designing the format of reports
- to ensure the continued publication of benchmarking information through national reports, to support providers in their own evaluation
- to ensure effective dissemination of national reports at a regional level.

Evaluation

7 One hundred and ninety-two colleges replied to the questionnaire about national reports. Those who mentioned particularly interesting examples of how the reports had supported quality initiatives in their college were then contacted by telephone. As part of the questionnaire, colleges were asked to name the report that they found most useful. Not every college completed this section of the questionnaire. Some colleges mentioned more than one report.

The following chart shows the frequency of those mentioned.



8 Common characteristics of reports which were well received were those which had:

- clear formats
- explicit pointers for improvement
- benchmarking data
- in-depth examples of good practice
- a narrow focus
- check lists colleges could use to assess their own provision.

9 Many colleges mentioned how these reports inform them about developments and help them to review their own provision. One college said ‘reports inform discussion at senior management team meetings and shape thinking, contributing to the development of actions.’ Reports are well used as a source of information and ideas in many colleges. Another college said that the reports were ‘extremely useful publications which can be used to drive improvement’. Curriculum area reports came in for much praise. They often give support to curriculum managers in setting their own provision within a national context. As a college said they ‘enable the curriculum teams to compare their approaches, methods and practices against the inspectorate’s identified best practice nationally.’

10 Colleges often mentioned that national reports were useful in preparing their self-assessment report, enabling them to analyse standards nationally and make judgements about their provision. Many colleges had used them in preparing for inspection. In particular, they found that the report on effective self-assessment was helpful both with the processes of self-assessment and in preparing the report to inform their inspection. There were also many comments about how national reports had helped colleges which had received an inspection grade 4 or 5 for an area of their provision, draw up their action plans. Especially useful in this context had been the examples of good practice, although, as one college said, ‘knowing how not to do it was useful too’.

11 There were comments about how valuable the reports were to new managers. One college said that the curriculum area report had been useful in the induction of the new manager, giving a clear agenda for action and helping to inform staff about the direction of the department. Colleges also found the reports helpful when reviewing provision or starting up new provision. Some mentioned, for example, how helpful the report on basic skills summer schools had been in setting up or reviewing their basic skills provision.

12 Some of the colleges involved in gathering information for particular reports found the exercise useful. It gave them time to think about the initiatives and their outcomes. It was also an opportunity for staff to discuss work of which they were proud outside the constraints of an institutional inspection. One college even described its involvement in the national exercise as ‘enjoyable’!

13 Although the questionnaire did not refer explicitly to the chief inspector’s annual report, many colleges mentioned it in their comments. It met with universal approval. There were many comments on how valuable the benchmarks for such things as lesson observations and attendance rates had been in assessing their own provision. One college would have liked all such quantifiable data to have been collated into an annex for ease of access. It is obvious from the comments that many colleges make good use of these annual overviews of the sector when producing their self-assessment reports.

14 Colleges criticised national reports on the grounds that:

- they were time-consuming to read
- their content quickly becomes dated and this was exacerbated by the time lag between gathering the information and publication
- some lacked in-depth case studies and exemplars of good practice
- they lacked recommendations.

15 Some colleges found it hard to make a connection between national reports and improvements. As one said, 'odd ideas and titbits will be picked up by colleagues from any report. These may well be incorporated into practice without fanfare, but establishing a clear causal link or action between your reports and something specific happening is simply not possible.'

16 There were many comments about wanting more explicit guidance about both what to do and how to do it. Some suggested that good practice colleges should be identified including having a contact name and telephone number published. Others wanted a more research-based approach with case studies reported in depth. Colleges suggested that the questions posed to gather the information for reports could usefully be shared with the sector. Since the survey was undertaken a good practice database has been added to the FEFC website.

17 The vast majority of colleges commented on the amount of time that reading the reports took. The suggestion of using an executive summary was made several times. One college felt that a less standard format and a clearer differentiation between national and institutional reports would encourage more people to read them. Not all colleges are aware that reports are available on the FEFC website and that they can be copied, which accounted for some of the remarks about the small number of hard copies sent to each college. One college suggested that there should be an 'electronic mail alert' when new reports are added to the website. There was no consensus as to whether the reports should be in A4 or A5 format, with both sizes having their advocates. One college suggested it would be helpful to have some blank space in reports so that they could add their own notes.

18 Many colleges wanted the inspectorate to make explicit recommendations. Often the *Basic Education: Making a difference* report was quoted as good practice in this area. It was the 'suggested course of action' approach in the 'making progress' section of the report which colleges found so useful.

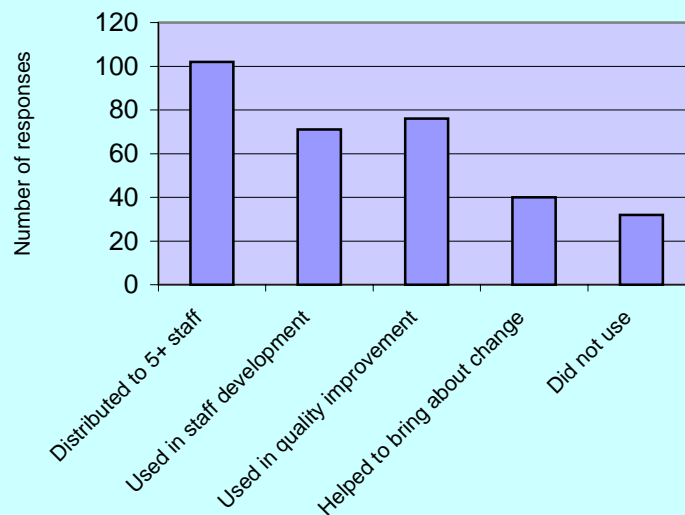
19 There was some disquiet over the limited dissemination of the contents of some of these reports. Colleges would like to see more regional activities, linked to the publication of reports. Where these had happened, they had been welcomed. In particular, events attended by inspectors who had worked on the report were found to be very useful. Some colleges and consortia of colleges had organised their own events and invited inspectors to participate.

20 A number of colleges raised the issue of what will happen after the change of the inspection system in April 2001. In particular, there was a concern that the 'feel for the sector' would be lost. Sixth form colleges expressed the view that they would like separate reports about their part of post-16 education to be produced by the FEFC inspectorate currently and later by Ofsted. Some concern was expressed that a curriculum report might be 'so broad as to be of little use' in the future.

Professional Development in Further Education

21 This was the one report that many colleges did not remember receiving. It may have been because it was published over a year before the questionnaire was sent out. However, it suggests that despite the publicity for this report in the national press and trade journals and a national conference, and five regional conferences organised by the AoC and FEDA it did not have a high profile among college staff. We have assumed that if the college could not remember receiving the report then it did not use it. Those who used it found it very helpful. One college said it 'provided a firm basis to evaluate the college systems and procedures'.

Responses to the questionnaire

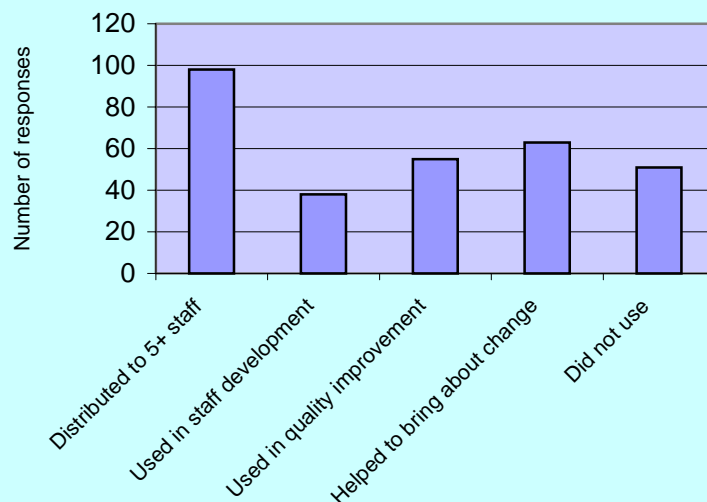


One sixth form college reviewed its own processes after reading the report. Their application form for external training now includes a question on how the activity will support the college's objectives. The college adopted the use of a staff satisfaction questionnaire to evaluate both internal and external training courses. These evaluations inform termly monitoring reports which go to the college executive and the college's strategy and planning group. The college also set up a computerised record system of all internal and external staff training, including costs implications. This provided better access to information on training activities.

Basic Skills Summer Schools

22 There was much praise for the timeliness of this report. It was used by many colleges to evaluate the summer school they had run in the previous year. One college said it had made them 'more confident about building upon their successes of the previous year'. Another college decided not to run another summer school after using the report to evaluate its provision. Other colleges were encouraged to provide a summer school as they could use the report to assist their planning. A number of colleges, in their replies, said that they had improved their practice after reading the report.

Responses to the questionnaire

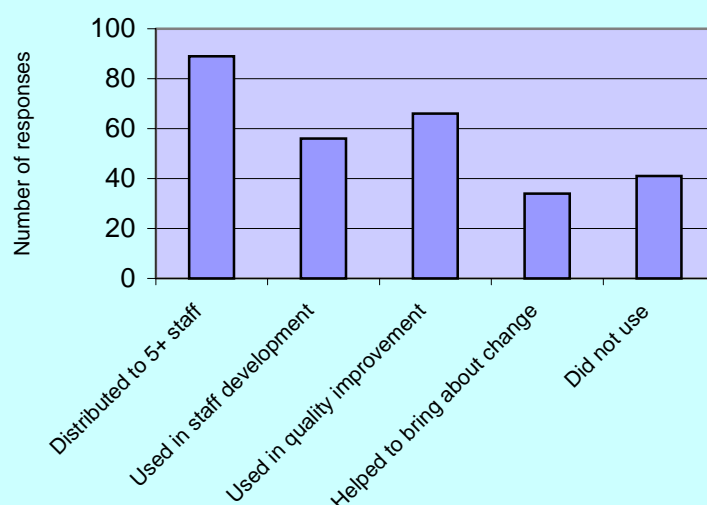


One college in the Yorkshire and Humberside region had run a basic skills summer school in 1998. They used examples of best practice in the report as a basis for planning the next summer school, tying it in with the introduction of a new qualification. Training sessions were held for staff, focusing on the implications of double staffing, the new qualification, the demand for key skills support and matching the curriculum to national vocational qualifications (NVQs). As a result of the success of the 1999 summer school, the course was run as a pilot induction for full-time NVQ craft students who were not employed. That pilot was successful and plans are under way for the introduction of the course across the college. Key skill support and retention rates within the college have both improved.

Mathematics in Further Education

23 Colleges liked the clear subject focus of this report. Those that used it to review their provision found it helpful. One college changed its entry criteria to general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) mathematics courses after reading the report and undertaking extensive value-added research to review their curriculum. The report was often used to support staff development activities for mathematics teachers, including the work on learning styles. Two colleges mentioned using the report to support the development of an action plan in response to poor inspection outcomes.

Responses to the questionnaire

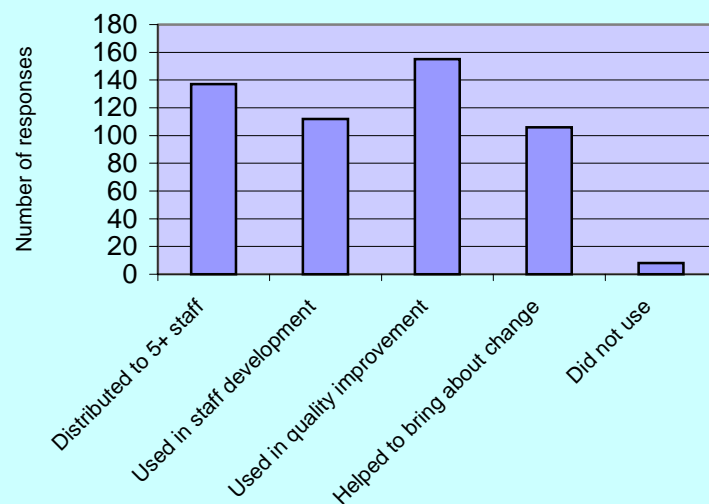


One college, which was already looking at how it organised and devolved responsibilities for mathematics teaching across the college, used the examples of good practice in the report to identify weaknesses and to focus on what needed doing. Staff examined the profile of mathematics provision and introduced additional qualifications. The report also highlighted for the college the problems associated with not having a cross-college view of mathematics. As a result, a more systematic method of providing mathematics across the college was introduced and vocational programme leaders and mathematics specialists were brought together for the first time.

Effective Self-assessment

24 This report was exceptionally well received. Colleges found it both supportive and helpful. There was much praise for the straightforward style and the examples of good practice. Many colleges described how this report had led to improvements in both the process and outcomes of self-assessment. Some felt it was a major factor in the accuracy of their self-assessment report. One college said the report was used 'to streamline, focus and improve practices and procedures'. Many colleges said the information on lesson observations had been particularly useful to them when setting up their own observation systems.

Responses to the questionnaire

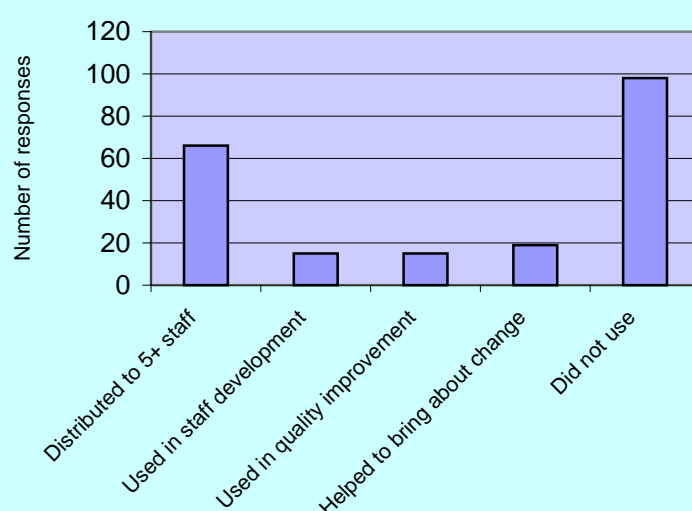


A general further education college had found there was a large variation between the way in which different parts of the college monitored teaching and learning. Observation of lessons was sporadic and conducted inconsistently. As a result of the report, the college set up a group to highlight and disseminate good practice. This led to the adoption of a standard procedure for lesson observation based on a regular cycle. As a result of the first cycle of observations, a check list of good features and examples of good practice were put together in a 'Good Teaching Guide'. This is now updated annually in the light of end-of-year reports on lesson observations.

Post-16 Collaboration: School sixth forms and the further education sector

25 This was a joint report produced by Ofsted and the FEFC inspectorate. A large number of respondents said they had not used this report. Those who did liked the large number of examples in the report. They found the way it highlighted factors most likely to lead to successful collaboration especially useful. One college used it in a meeting with other post-16 providers in its area. Another college said it provided good supporting evidence when it was trying to forge links with schools in its locality. One general further education college said the report contributed to it significantly extending its links with schools and sixth form colleges.

Responses to the questionnaire

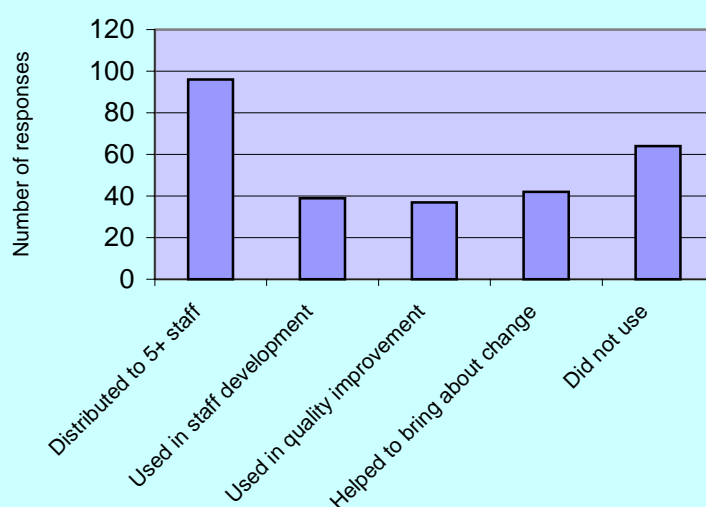


A general further education college in the North West region used the report to improve its relationship with the joint sixth form centre of two local schools. The college principal used the report as a source document in talking to the schools. He felt the report gave legitimacy to the process of collaboration and helped to bring people together. The college and the sixth form centre have started joint planning. The senior manager responsible for curriculum in the college and the head of the sixth form centre meet regularly. There is now a closer fit between the two timetables so students have access to a wider range of provision. The college is offering its enrichment programme and practical activities for general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) courses to sixth form centre students. College students can choose from general certificate of education advanced level (GCE A level) subjects in both the college and the sixth form centre.

Working with Employers

26 As with the report on collaboration, a fairly high proportion of colleges said they had not used this report. This may be because of the more general nature of the two reports when compared with reports which focus on narrower issues. The report on working with employers contained many examples of good and best practice. Colleges appreciated these and found them informative. One college said the report had led them to review and improve their practice as far as work experience was concerned. Another said the report was ‘used to underpin the employer partnership programme delivered through the Workers’ Educational Association and UNISON “Return to Learn” programme of courses.’

Responses to the questionnaire

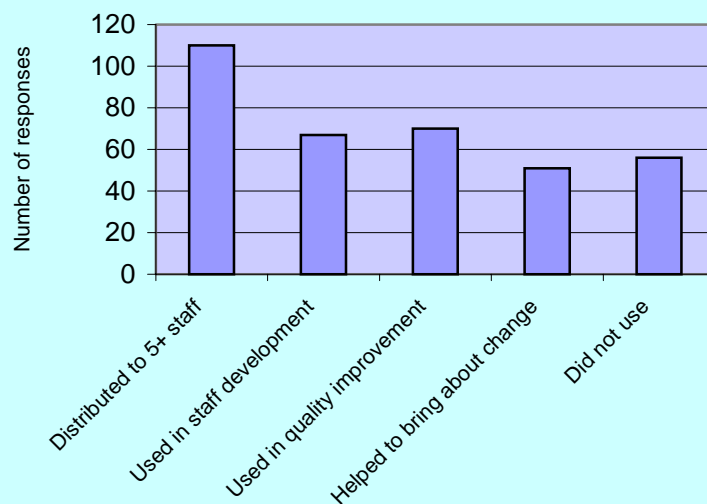


A specialist college was already working with employers but found the report highlighted good practice on which they were able to build. The college arranged a floristry demonstration for small and medium-sized employers combining it with a wine and cheese party. In total, 120 employers and students attended this event. It raised the profile of the college among employers and led to an increase in work experience placements for students.

Basic Education: Making a Difference

27 Colleges liked the clear style of this report. Many praised its brevity and focus. Some said it was easy to use with staff because it was simple to copy and attractive to read. There were many examples of colleges reviewing their own provision in the light of the messages in this report. One college had ‘completely reorganised [their] provision’ after using the report to help them undertake a review. Another college said the report was ‘very useful in informing the college’s strategy for basic and key skills. It was used alongside other national reports which, taken together, informed the college’s own work in relation to basic and key skills’.

Responses to the questionnaire

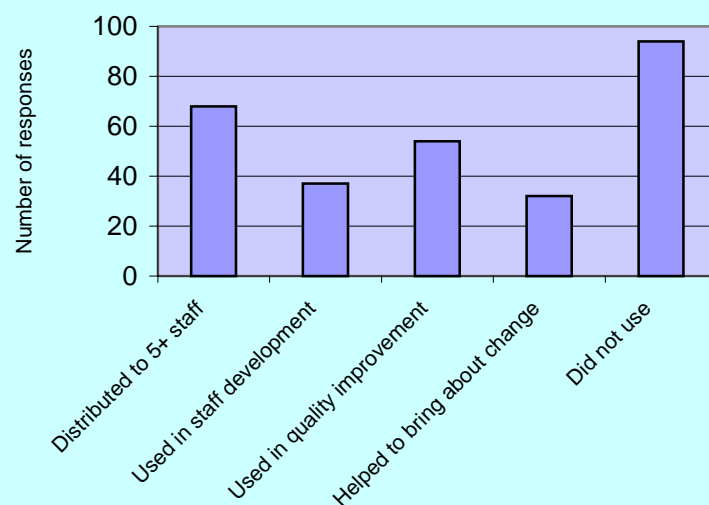


A specialist college used the report to re-assess programmes offered to students with learning difficulties and to revise its application procedures. Historically, the college had run courses for nursery nurses and for students with severe learning difficulties. There was no progression between the different courses and no integration of students with learning difficulties. The college decided to broaden its curriculum by designing its own accredited course. Previously students had applied for a particular course in the college. Now students apply to the college and receive guidance on the most suitable course and the most appropriate path for progression.

Engineering

28 Many of the respondents did not have engineering provision in their college and thus did not use this report. As with other curriculum reports, the clear focus on one area of the college's work was appreciated. Colleges used the benchmarks in the report to review and assess their own engineering provision. In particular, mention was made of measuring provision against the best practice outlined in the report. One college said that a combination of the information in the report, its external verifiers' reports and its achievement and retention data had led to the development of new level 2 courses in engineering. Another college used the report to help with the systematic introduction of key skills within their engineering provision.

Responses to the questionnaire

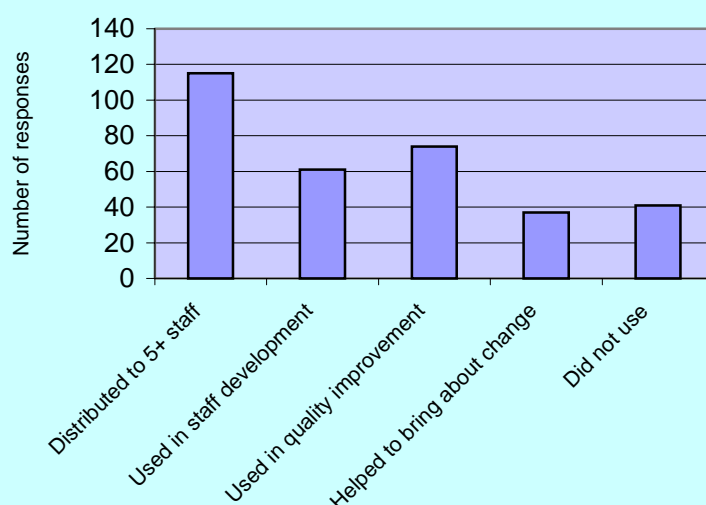


A college in the South East region used the statistics in the report when making a presentation to the motor sports forum as part of its successful bid to become the training centre for Formula One team mechanics. By using the report, they were able to refer to national trends in engineering. This information also led them to a review of class sizes and the portfolio of courses in engineering. Changes include offering the GNVQ and NVQ qualifications together, to develop the academic and practical skills demanded by the motor sports industry.

Humanities in Further Education

29 Colleges found the report useful in setting the national picture. They liked the fact that there were sections for each of the main areas of humanities provision. Many mentioned the value of the benchmarks within the report. One college said the report 'gave focus to and informed the management of change to improve critical areas of the college'. Another college had used the report to set the context for exchanging good practice. One of the colleges, which had been involved in collecting information for the report, said that they had found this a productive experience.

Responses to the questionnaire

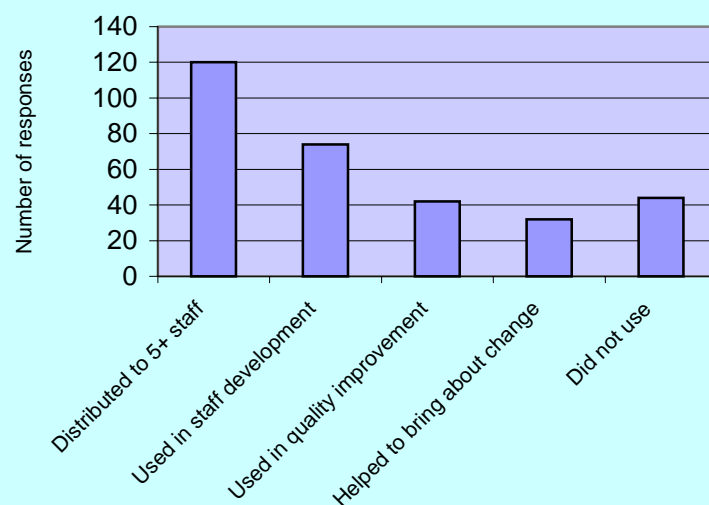


A college, which was awarded a grade 4 for part of its humanities provision, found the report most useful as it prepared for reinspection. It had already taken action to improve teaching and learning. When the report was published staff were able to use the benchmarks in the report to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in attendance, retention and achievement. It helped the college to identify where more work was needed. The curriculum area was awarded a grade 3 on reinspection.

GNVQs: Evaluation of the Pilot of the New Assessment Model, 1997 to 1999

30 This was another joint report by Ofsted and the FEFC inspectorate, covering the period 1997 to 1999. Many colleges found it useful in reviewing their assessment processes, but some commented that it had come rather late in the development of these courses. A college which was having difficulties with GNVQ courses appointed a new manager who then used the report as a basis for the changes she was making and to persuade staff of the appropriateness of these courses of action. Recent moderator reports have remarked on 'the improved approach across the college'.

Responses to the questionnaire

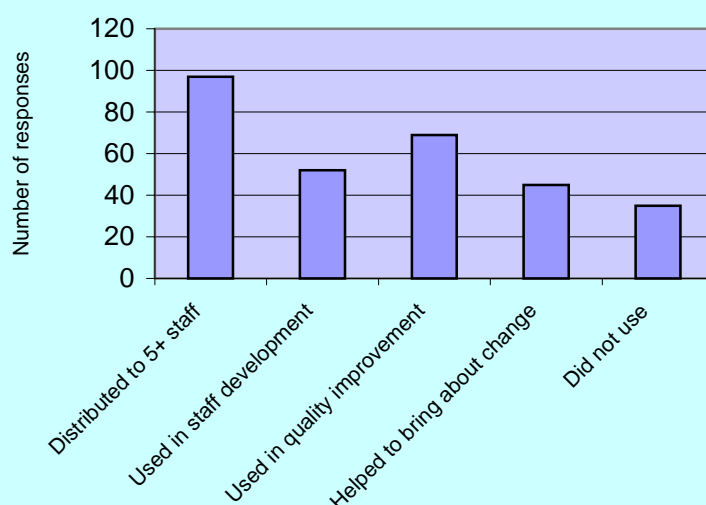


A general further education college in London had been a pilot college for GNVQs and wanted to use the experience it had gained to deliver curriculum 2000. As a result of the report, it introduced an action plan involving: 'blocking' key skills within the timetable; making modifications to its accommodation; enhancing the tutorial system and training all teachers in key skills. The college shifted the emphasis from classroom teaching to a tutorial system, which included effective tracking of students' progress. Students have an individual action plan and timetable, and there is a termly review of their progress.

Careers Education and Guidance

31 The check list for colleges was a very popular feature of this report. As one college said 'it helped us to ensure best practice was in place'. The report was also helpful to colleges in their self-assessment. Some colleges have shared the report with colleagues in the careers services. One college said that contact with the local careers service had improved after college and careers service staff had examined the findings of the report together. Students now receive better advice on progression, follow-up procedures are stronger and there is improved access to information.

Responses from the questionnaire

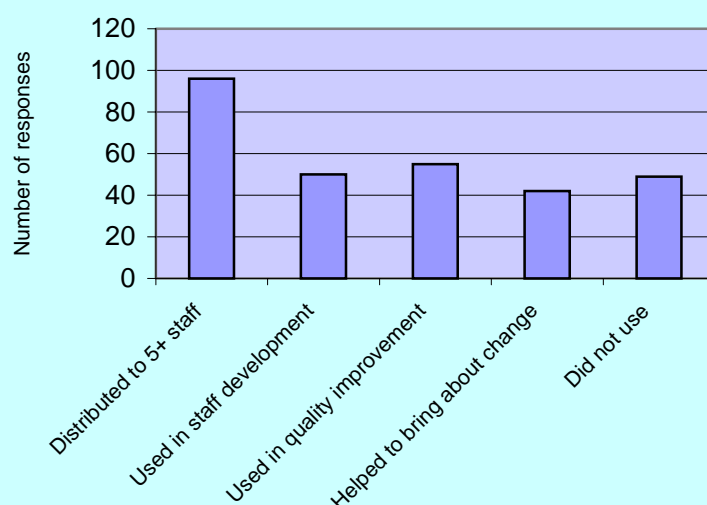


A specialist college was prompted by the check list of questions to review its provision for careers interviews. Previously, students were offered guidance interviews on demand, but take-up was low and students often left it very late in their course to ask for an interview. Under the new system, the college operates a programme of timetabled guidance interviews for all level 2 students. These include a short 'start-up' interview followed by a longer interview when the student wants one. The approach has been well received by younger students who are often undecided on progression routes. It has not been so well received by older students who tend to have a clearer idea of their next step. The college is now introducing a different system for the two age groups.

Numeracy, Literacy and ESOL: Evaluation of Entry and Level 1 Awards

32 There was some confusion between this report and the *National Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties* report in some of the replies. Colleges mentioned the usefulness of this report in reviewing their own provision, sometimes as part of the preparation for inspection. One college used the report to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their provision, benchmark their performance and draw up an action plan for improvement. Another said the report led to ‘an alteration to the mode of delivery and curriculum content of entry-level programmes, making them “more streamlined”’.

Responses to the questionnaire

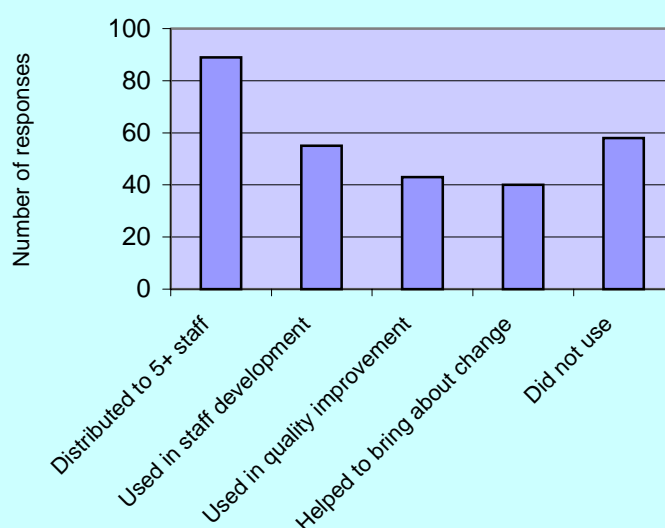


In a college in the West Midlands, the report was used to identify and confirm good practice and to support operational planning relating to basic skills. This review led to the creation of a new management post to co-ordinate the further development of basic skills. The amount of additional support for the basic skills of literacy and numeracy has doubled, when measured in terms of funding units. Teaching material has also been produced in conjunction with the Teacher Training Agency to support literacy and numeracy hours in local schools. Other vocationally related basic skills materials, have been developed for use by primary school teachers.

National Awards for Students with Learning Difficulties

33 Responses from colleges indicate that the report has led to many reviews of provision. Some colleges mentioned the timeliness of the report, because its publication coincided with the college's own evaluation of provision in this area. One college said the report was 'informative and aided curriculum planning and development'. A number of colleges used the report to develop more effective individual learning plans. One college said the report was helpful in supporting its inclusive learning initiatives.

Responses to the questionnaire



A college in the East Midlands used the report as the basis of a two-day staff development event for all staff providing discrete courses for students with learning difficulties. As a result of the event, the college further developed its arrangements for individual action-planning, putting the plan at the heart of the curriculum. The report also changed the college's view of the use of accreditation. It now examines what is essential and when it is appropriate, instead of insisting on a blanket approach to accredited awards.

Recommendations

34 For the FEFC inspectorate:

- to include an executive summary and recommendations in all national reports
- to vary the format of national reports more
- to better publicise the accessibility of reports on the FEFC website
- to limit the time between the gathering of information and publication of reports.

35 For colleges:

- to note the common characteristics of colleges which have successfully used reports to support initiatives to improve the quality of provision
- to examine the good practice in this report and evaluate their own practice in using national reports.

36 Colleges that reported the most positive outcomes from using reports had:

- targeted the distribution of the reports
- used information in the reports to benchmark realistically their own provision
- carefully monitored the outcomes of using the reports.

37 For Ofsted and ALI when planning the production of national reports on post-16 education and training:

- to build upon the established good practice in producing national reports
- to note the welcome for focused reports, in particular curriculum surveys
- to use the information in this report when designing the format of reports
- to ensure the continued publication of benchmarking information through national reports to support providers in their own evaluation
- to ensure effective dissemination of national reports at a regional level.