

Good Practice

Good Practice Guide to
Beacon Dissemination Activity



Learning+Skills Council

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Introduction

Purpose

- 1 This guide is aimed principally at Learning and Skills Beacons, but it is also likely to be of interest to other providers involved in sharing good practice. It summarises the findings of an evaluation study of Beacon dissemination activity undertaken by acl consulting on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). It also gives examples of good practice to help Beacons and other providers adopt effective methods to disseminate good practice.
- 2 The overall aims of the evaluation study were to:
 - identify what had worked well in Beacon dissemination activity; and
 - assess the impact of these activities on partner colleges and work based learning providers.
- 3 Learning and Skills Beacon status was launched in March 2002. It is awarded by ministers to recognise excellent institutions that deliver high quality teaching and learning, demonstrate excellent or good leadership and to share that good practice with others. The LSC funds Beacons to share their good practice through dissemination activities and collaborative work with other colleges and work based learning (WBL) providers. The targeted activity of Beacons to share good practice is part of the *Success for All* strategy for recognising and investing in excellence and promoting innovation and excellence across the learning and skills sector.
- 4 Dissemination activity is delivered in the first year of Beacon status. This is based on a short proposal of activities and associated outcomes and the production of a brief evaluation report on completion. They may wish to continue with some Beacon activities in their second year but, to avoid Beacon status becoming a burden, there is no requirement for them to do so. There are currently 38 Beacons across the learning and skills sector.

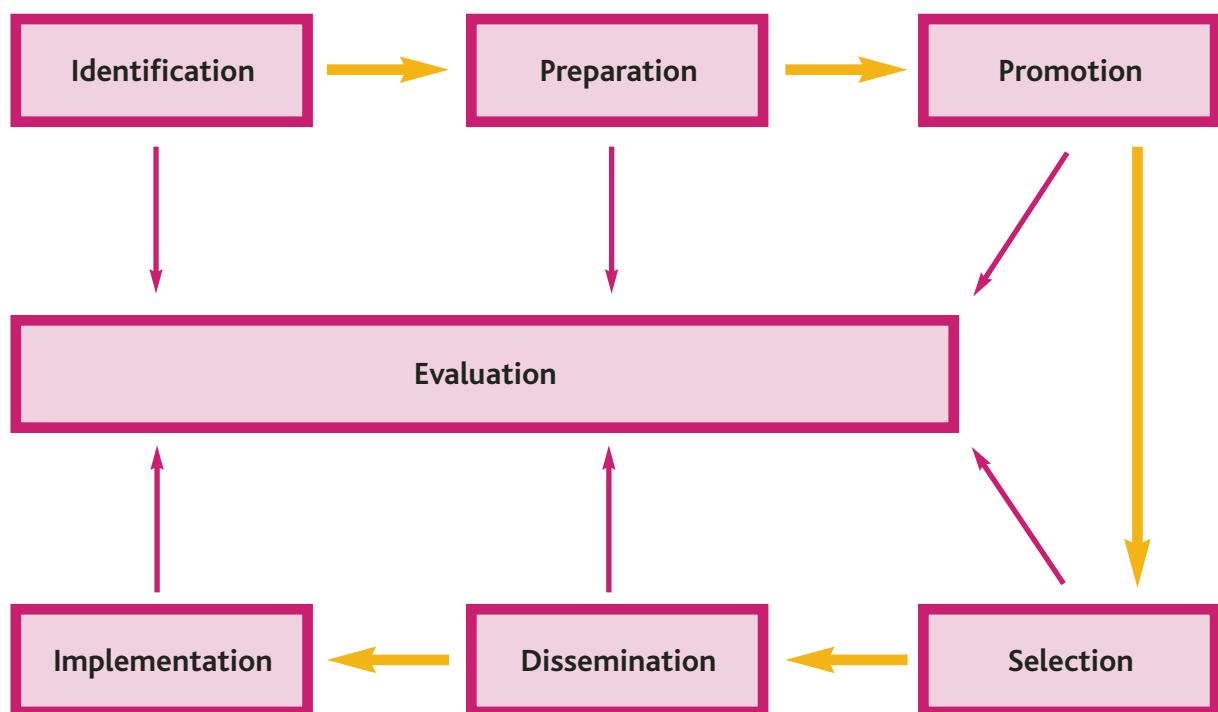
Methodology

- 5 The evaluation study comprised a review of Beacon documentation, interviews with a representative sample of six Learning and Skills Beacons and interviews with between three and four partner organisations for each Beacon.
- 6 The evaluation study draws conclusions around the LSC model framework for sharing good practice between learning providers. This model, also developed by acl consulting, includes seven stages of activity to disseminate good practice. This summary is structured around those seven stages:

Background

- 3 Learning and Skills Beacon status was launched in March 2002. It is awarded by ministers to recognise excellent institutions that deliver high quality teaching and learning, demonstrate excellent or good leadership and to share that good practice with others. The LSC funds Beacons to share their good practice through dissemination activities and collaborative work with other colleges and work based learning (WBL) providers. The targeted activity of Beacons to share good practice is part of the *Success for All* strategy for recognising and investing in excellence and promoting innovation and excellence across the learning and skills sector.

Seven Stage Model of Good Practice Dissemination



Stage 1: Identification – What to Disseminate

- 7 As Beacons are generally good to excellent in most areas of their activities, they have a wide range of good practice that would be of interest to other providers. Beacons have adopted two approaches to identify the areas of activity and good practice that they are willing to share with other institutions.
- 8 Beacons usually choose to share information about areas of their activities where they feel they have something special to offer. Colleges generally prescribe the areas they will disseminate to keep this activity at manageable levels. This is primarily a **supply-driven approach**.
- 9 In contrast, WBL Beacons and a minority of college Beacons adopt a **demand-driven approach**. In this instance, potential partners approach the Beacon with their own set of needs and this determines the areas of activity to be disseminated.
- 10 With this approach, the Beacon does not exclude any areas from the discussions. The approach has disadvantages in that it can be time consuming for the Beacon and the lack of clearly defined areas for discussion could make it difficult for partners to make that first contact with the Beacon. However, it is also highly responsive.
- 11 Factors which could restrict the areas that Beacons are willing to disseminate include:
- competition issues with partners;
 - capacity of their own staff to be involved in dissemination activity; and
 - duplication of effort with other dissemination initiatives.
- 12 Discussions with Beacons revealed that most would appreciate guidance on the aspects of their work that would be of benefit to a wider audience. For example, Beacons had identified areas for dissemination in their locality through discussions with their local LSC.
- 13 UK Skills has been appointed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to manage the Learning and Skills Beacon Unit and the selection and award processes. Information on the full range of activities of the Beacon Network members will be available on the website www.beaconstatus.org

Good practice:

- Do not be too ambitious in the number of areas of activity that will be disseminated and the number of staff that will be involved.
- Work based learning providers may find it beneficial to be more prescriptive about what it is they have to disseminate.
- Consider setting up measures to monitor the success of the dissemination activity at the outset so that the impact of the interaction can be evaluated.
- Consider discussing with the local LSC the areas that would be useful to other local providers.

Stage 2: Preparation for Sharing Good Practice

14 Within college Beacons, the preparation and agreement of a dissemination action plan is a significant task involving extensive internal consultation. It is important to ensure that the range of dissemination activities is agreed and is given a realistic schedule. Staff also need to be made aware of their level of involvement. College Beacons have benefited by appointing a key person to oversee dissemination.

15 Internal preparation within WBL Beacons may be less complicated as fewer staff are typically involved in dissemination activity. This makes preparation simpler, but is likely to put more pressure on key staff who undertake the dissemination.

Good practice:

- Ensure that there is commitment to proposed dissemination activity from those responsible for delivering it.
- Appoint someone to co-ordinate and oversee all dissemination-related activity.
- Retain focus – ensure that you continue to maintain, develop and improve your own provision.
- It is important for the provider that is disseminating good practice to be aware that its reputation is 'on trial' during any dissemination event. A well-planned event will enhance it; a poorly planned event will almost certainly damage it.
- When dissemination activity involves an event, it is helpful to brief staff to ensure that they are clear about what will happen and when.
- External consultation at the planning stage, particularly with the local LSC, is essential.

Stage 3: Promotion – Getting the Message Out

16 Beacons have adopted a range of effective methods to communicate their dissemination activities to potential partners.

Approaches Used by Beacons to Disseminate Good Practice:

- Mediation through third parties – most often through local LSCs, but also the DfES and LSC national office, as they may have a view on which learning providers could benefit from work with a particular Beacon.
- Mail-outs to all potentially interested learning providers.
- Inspection reports – these have been used to identify learning providers that might benefit from working with a Beacon.
- Common awarding bodies – some Beacons' dissemination activity has been targeted at partners using the same exam specification as the Beacon.
- Learning provider websites – these have been updated to contain a description of Beacon-related activities.
- Conferences and presentations.
- Through third party materials and activities. For example, the Association of Colleges (AoC) has promoted the work of some college-based Beacons.

17 Beacon colleges, in particular, have developed processes for identifying, contacting and visiting 'good' providers to collaborate and share good practice. However, evidence from the evaluation study shows that successful approaches to 'weak' providers are best made through the local LSC.

18 The evidence also shows that local LSCs need to work with more WBL Beacons to facilitate partnership working with other WBL providers. This approach has worked well in the Black Country. In cases where WBL Beacons have not engaged with their local LSC, they tend not to be contacted by potential partners. If they are contacted, it tends to be by providers that are judged as 'good' rather than those that are in need of more support.

19 The timing of promotion activity is also important. From the potential partner's perspective, there may be times in the year that are best avoided. It is also valuable for the partner to schedule time to implement the ideas being shared.

Good Practice:

- Promotional materials need to be targeted at an appropriate level in the potential partner – invariably, initially at least, this means senior management.
- If a Beacon plans to work with a poorly performing learning provider, it is best to make the approach through local LSCs.
- Plan promotional activity to ensure the work is manageable.

Stage 4: Selection – Choosing Potential Partners

20 Beacons are generally clear about their 'ideal' partners to share good practice. Potential partners range from those that are weak and in need of support to those that are strong, but not yet excellent. Some Beacons also choose to work with middle-range providers.

21 In its evaluation study, acl consulting proposes a model for choosing the number and type of partners to work with.

- WBL Beacons should focus on working with partners that have a few specific areas to be addressed. Due to limited staff resources to carry out dissemination activity, WBL Beacons may benefit by choosing to work with a small number of partners.
- College Beacons may benefit by choosing to either:
 - work with many providers with relatively few and minor areas to be addressed; or
 - work with a few providers with many issues to be addressed.

22 For Beacons that work with partners that have multiple areas to be addressed, it is important to work through the local LSC, which will have an overview of the full range of support available to the partner.

23 When selecting partners, most Beacons adopt a 'filter mechanism' to identify which of the potential partners they are best placed to help and identify the good practices that it would be most appropriate to share. Filter mechanisms can take the form of written correspondence or telephone conversations to establish exactly what support the partner requires.

24 When sharing good practice is restricted to a limited number of partners, it would be helpful to make this clear to avoid disappointment among other potential partners. It would be helpful to signpost potential partners to alternative sources of support.

Good Practice:

- Beacons need to be clear about the type of partner they wish to work with, the areas of good practice they will share and the number of partners they can work with.
- Unless the Beacon is 'open to all', it should use some form of filter mechanism to identify potential partners it is able to help.
- Beacons should be clear about and communicate the good practice information they are willing to share and the number of partners they are prepared to support.

Stage 5: Dissemination – Ways to Share Information

- 25 The majority of college Beacons have both internal and external dimensions to their dissemination activities:
- **Internal dissemination** involves working with relatively weaker curriculum areas of the Beacon to raise standards to those in the rest of the college. This is generally done on an internal consultancy basis.
 - **External dissemination** involves sharing of good practice with external partners through one-to-one contact, information on websites and conferences.
- 26 **One-to-one contact** was extensively used and found to be the most effective way of sharing good practice. The approach allows the partner to negotiate which areas of good practice will be shared. Several Beacons and their partners have valued a 'tailored approach'.
- 27 Beacons have adopted a number of strategies to combine dissemination activity while maintaining focus on their own delivery. These include:
- appointing a part-time member of staff to handle all Beacon dissemination activity
 - designating one day of the week as 'Beacon day'
 - bringing partners to the Beacon; and
 - restricting the number of partners.
- 28 It is unlikely that one visit to a partner will suffice. A follow-up visit helps to clarify issues and put effective processes in place.
- 29 For consultancy work, having more than three partners to each Beacon can be counter-productive. It is important to be clear about the purpose of the first contacts with partners.
- 30 Use of websites to disseminate good practice to partners has had only limited impact to date. However, there is evidence that partners can benefit from access to a Beacon provider's intranet.
- 31 Conferences were used infrequently by Beacons to share good practice. However, Beacons are often asked to contribute and showcase their provision at nationally organised events.

Good Practice:

- Beacons should plan for follow-up contact with their partners.
- For one-to-one interaction to work, the Beacon needs to be open-ended in its response to partner needs and involve practitioners at an appropriate level.
- Do not try to 'cram' too many partners into one visit - the value of the dissemination activity to the partners will suffer.
- Partners (and Beacons) get a lot out of talking to learners - build time for this into visits.
- For WBL Beacons in particular, try to ensure that all are clear about why the Beacon-partner interaction is taking place.
- For evaluation purposes, create a statement of each partner's baseline position before the interaction begins. Immediately after the interaction develop a summary of the activities and how the partner intends to implement change.

Stage 6: Implementation – The Impact of Sharing Good Practice

- 32 The impact that a Beacon can have on its partners is difficult to measure in precise terms. Involvement can be too recent and changes too incremental to measure immediately. It is important to distinguish whether improvements are a direct result of Beacon or other involvement.
- 33 Some Beacons may have quantitative data, but this usually relates to internal dissemination. Re-inspection reports by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) can demonstrate the improvements made as a consequence of Beacon interaction. Qualitative impacts relate primarily to changes in processes and procedures which may yield quantitative impacts at some future stage.
- 34 Potential barriers to change need to be avoided. Poor communications, lack of action planning and a lack of effective management can hamper the partner's efforts to implement change. Changes need to be supported at a sufficiently high level in the partner organisation.
- 35 Although impact can be hard to measure, the evaluation study identified some examples showing where Beacon activity with partners had a positive outcome:
- partners can have a greater degree of confidence in the quality of practice shared;
 - dissemination activity is more structured with a clearer focus for both the disseminator and partner;
 - Beacons and partners are empowered by the obligation and funding available to disseminate good practice; and
 - staff at Beacon providers and their partners are motivated by the Beacon status. Beacons often commend good practices within their partners that provide a boost to the partners.

Good Practice:

- Encourage and work with partners to action plan for change.
- Try to ensure that the right person attends the dissemination activity. Partners need buy-in from management.
- Review the changes made and use the statements of each partner's 'starting position' as a baseline for measuring impact.

Stage 7: Evaluation – Measuring the Impact of Changes

36 The following information needs to be collected for evaluation purposes:

- At or before the first discussions with the Beacon, a **statement of each partner's starting position** – essentially information that outlines the 'nature of the problem' and why the partner is seeking to work with the Beacon (stage 5).
- Immediately after the dissemination, a **summary should be made of the activities that took place and the ideas and potential areas for change** the partner went away with for their own institution (stage 5).
- At an agreed date in the future to **review what changes were made and their impact**. The timing of this follow-up may vary with each intervention, but it should not be delayed for more than nine months. Ideally this will include an examination of how the partner would have fared without input from a Beacon. In cases where anticipated changes did not achieve the desired or expected result, it would also examine why this was so (stage 6).
- At an agreed time in the future, one or more assessments to quantify the impact of the changes.

Good Practice:

- Ensure that the evaluation is considered from the outset of any dissemination activity. Good evaluations are those that are integrated into all stages of the process.

Further information:

Investing in excellence and good practice website
<http://goodpractice.lsc.gov.uk/>

Learning and Skills Beacon Unit
<http://beaconstatus.org>

UK Skills
www.ukskills.org.uk

Support for Success Quality Improvement Programme
www.s4s.org.uk

Learning and Skills Development Agency
www.llda.org.uk

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