

Report summary

How colleges improve

A review of effective practice: what makes an impact and why

The purpose of this review, commissioned by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), is to promote and accelerate improvement in the college sector. It highlights the effective practice of successful colleges in raising standards or sustaining high performance. It also examines the factors which can lead to decline, or impede the progress of underperforming colleges, and what can be learnt to help overcome such barriers. This review complements and updates Ofsted's report, *How colleges improve*, published in September 2008.¹

During May and June 2012, inspectors visited 10 general further education colleges, two land-based colleges, two sixth form colleges, two independent specialist colleges and two specialist designated colleges of adult education. An analysis of the published inspection reports of 55 colleges inspected between September 2009 and May 2012 provided further evidence.²

The importance and impact of outstanding leadership and management cannot be underestimated. All the elements this report identifies are inextricably linked to the actions and behaviour of leaders and managers, and the example they set. The determination and drive of senior leadership teams in making sure their visions and values became the culture and ethos of their colleges were evident in the colleges that were outstanding or improving quickly. In these colleges, staff at all levels were more ready, willing and able to accept change; they could describe clearly and convincingly what their college stood for. As a result, leadership teams were better placed to act decisively to tackle underperformance and secure improvement.

The governors of good and outstanding colleges were well-informed, received the right information and could challenge managers vigorously on the college's performance. Problems occurred when governors did not know what questions to ask or when relationships with senior leaders were too close.

¹ *How colleges improve: a review of effective practice* (080083), Ofsted, 2008; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080083.

² The information and data in the report relate to the Common Inspection Framework, revised September 2009.

The worth and value of high-quality, appropriate and effective staff training were evident in the colleges visited and in the review of reports undertaken. Effective staff training was vital in helping staff and colleges to respond successfully to changes in government policy or in their locality, such as the redirection of government funding to apprenticeships and work-related learning. Colleges made good use of their own expertise in routinely sharing good practice across departments. The best continuing professional development was linked to sound and productive performance management; it recognised and promoted improvement while also dealing effectively with poor performance.

In the colleges visited, the spur to action was good management information, particularly relating to learners' performance.³ Good management information was clear, accurate, authentic, available and timely. The improving and high-performing colleges used such information effectively to challenge, motivate and make changes. It gave these colleges confidence, self-belief and knowledge about themselves and their learners, and it was the basis for robust and accurate self-assessment. These colleges had established a culture of critical self-review in which the process of self-assessment brought about improvements. It was not about simply assuring quality; the colleges ensured they evaluated and reported on all aspects of their provision, including the learning taking place in employers' settings and the work of the subcontracted partners. The result was a climate where feedback, both encouraging and critical, was accepted positively and acted on.

In the colleges that managed change most effectively, internal communication was very good. They paid appropriate attention both to the straightforward exchange of routine information and the dissemination of key and critical messages. Mechanisms for communicating effectively with learners, employers and other stakeholders were well developed in the successful colleges and led to improvements.⁴

The reputation of the outstanding and improving colleges rested not only on inclusivity with a strong sense of belonging and respect – among staff, learners, stakeholders and the community – but also on the fact that their learners were successful. They benefited from effective teaching, learning and assessment, and a curriculum that was matched well to their needs and interests, as well as to those of employers and the community. The support for them through tutorials and enrichment activities was well integrated with teaching, learning, the curriculum and the recruitment of learners.

³ When the term 'learner' is used it refers to all groups of learners that colleges serve, for example full-time, part-time, adults and apprentices.

⁴ The term stakeholder includes a range of groups and people such as schools, employers and community groups.

While no single explanation emerged as to why colleges underperform, there were often several interrelated reasons and common features. These included:

- weak governance
- a lack of direction and urgency from senior leaders in tackling underperformance
- an acceptance of the ordinary and a lack of self-criticism
- no sharing of good practice
- ineffective teaching and learning
- too strong a focus on budgetary control to the detriment of curriculum development
- the deletion of courses without apparent rationale.

Inspectors found limited capability, capacity or desire to deal with change, let alone improvement.

Although funding agencies no longer require colleges to conduct a self-assessment and submit an annual report, the most successful colleges show clearly that thorough self-assessment is key to quality improvement. For a college to publish its discerning self-assessment on its own website is a resounding demonstration of accountability and transparency in the use of government funds for education and training. It also serves as a public record of the college's commitment to raising standards and the steps it is taking to offer the best experience for its learners.

Key findings

The successful and improving colleges in this survey shared some of the following characteristics.

- Senior management teams had a clear vision and direction for the college, and a genuinely collaborative approach. They knew the needs of their local area well and had already taken positive action to develop further links with employers and providers of apprenticeships.
- Governance and accountability were strong. Governors were skilled in asking discerning questions and calling for the right information to assess performance.
- Leaders and managers were decisive, prompt and effective in acting to remedy areas of concern, particularly those identified through inspection.
- Self-assessment was integral to the work of the college rather than a 'bolt-on'. It included all key processes and areas of work, for example, work subcontracted to other providers. Self-assessment was accurate, evidence-based, involved all staff and brought about improvements.
- The links between self-assessment and management information were well-established. Questions were not asked about access to or the quality of data, but

what the data signified. The evaluation of performance by curriculum teams was informed strongly by a good understanding of management information and data.

- There was a strong focus on getting the curriculum right and ensuring that support for teaching and learning improved outcomes for learners at all levels.
- Classroom teachers, both part- and full-time, as well as support staff, understood the value of assessing their own performance objectively.
- Where restructuring had taken place, all the staff involved were committed to it. Good communication and professional development underpinned this. Genuine engagement with staff led to changes that were sustainable rather than being short-term, 'quick fix' solutions.
- Good continuing professional development (CPD) had been linked to effective performance management and an 'open classroom' culture. Sharing good practice across departments and areas was expected.
- The views of learners and employers were used effectively to improve teaching and learning and not simply to improve support or general facilities.

Colleges in which performance declined or was not improving shared some of the following characteristics.

- There was complacency, and a lack of ambition, direction or vision from senior staff. Too often leaders and managers were overly preoccupied with finance or capital building projects to the detriment of promoting good teaching and learning or developing the curriculum. Governors did not set clear institutional targets or monitor performance well enough.
- A defensive and inward-looking approach predominated. The college was slow to accept change or to act when data showed decline. Actions from previous inspections were not carried out. In a few cases, a college refused to recognise the inspectors' findings.
- Self-assessment was weak and the use of management information was poor. Too frequently, the result was an over-generous self-assessment report that lacked critical insight and did not provide a secure basis for improvement. Evaluations of the quality of teaching, learning and assessment lacked rigour; teachers and managers did not use management information systematically to monitor learners' progress. There was, at best, only a superficial assessment of work that was subcontracted to other providers.
- Staff changes were poorly managed, with a consequent loss of expertise. These changes were often accompanied by management initiatives that were not explained to staff properly.
- Temporary staff made up a large proportion of the staffing. They were not properly managed, either because internal arrangements for performance management were weak or because lines of accountability for staff employed through external agencies were unclear or absent.

- Senior management teams were unsettled by frequent changes in personnel or relied too much on external consultants working in key roles for an extended period.
- The sharing of good teaching among staff was not systematic.
- Communication was poor with a tendency for staff at different levels not to take ownership for decisions or responsibility for actions, resulting in a culture of blame.

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