

How colleges improve

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

This survey examines the key factors that have contributed to sustained high performance or improvement in colleges. It also considers the factors which impede improvement in colleges judged to be satisfactory but not improving or declining and the lessons that can be learnt to help overcome these barriers.

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Executive summary

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

- 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.

Recommendations

Colleges should:

- ensure that evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of teaching and learning is clear, accurate and robust and enables swift and sustainable improvements
- improve teaching, learning and assessment by:
 - evaluating and using the views and experiences of learners and employers consistently in planning and delivering teaching, assessment and the curriculum
 - being thorough and systematic in sharing and learning from good practice
 - using information learning technologies (ILT) and their virtual learning environments (VLE) more effectively
 - ensuring learners are on the right course, at the right level, with the right support
- manage underperforming staff more effectively by making sure that the college's performance management systems, including those for measuring competency, capability or both, are fit for purpose, up-to-date and that all staff are fully trained in these aspects
- strengthen their capacity to evaluate and disseminate management information in order to influence the work of teachers and support staff, thereby improving outcomes for all groups of learners
- record and analyse the progression and destinations of learners systematically in order to measure outcomes and improve the curriculum further⁵
- train governors in governance so that they are informed about and competent in their role in shaping their college's mission and can offer challenge as well as support
- involve governors more systematically in monitoring performance, agreeing clear indicators to measure success and ensuring that they are informed of the actions taken to raise standards.

⁵ This is covered in detail in the report *Skills for employment: the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment* (110178), Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110178.

The Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should:

- promote the benefits of robust, accurate and open self-assessment in improving quality within the context of local accountability.⁶

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service should:

- continue to focus training and development on achieving effective governance and outstanding teaching, learning and assessment
- take steps to increase the involvement of underperforming colleges in its programmes
- promote the sharing of best practice between institutions in tackling common impediments to progress.

Promoting improvement through effective leadership

1. Outstanding leadership supported by good, energetic management at all levels was the essential characteristic of the successful colleges, especially in creating the desired culture and ethos. The following example describes one college's journey in moving from underperformance to becoming outstanding. It outlines the challenges it faced and illustrates the impact of leadership on the college's ethos and culture.

The college's success followed directly from the appointment of a new Principal who inherited financial deficits, demoralised staff, absence of systems to manage the college effectively, lack of investment in the site and a real loss of confidence in the college by the local community. An early inspection judged the college and its progress to be only satisfactory.

The new Principal set about transforming the college. The strategy was to tackle issues on all fronts but the overarching approach was to put the needs of learners at the core of the college's mission. The aim was to turn it from an inward-looking, defensive institution into an entrepreneurial, outward-looking and confident institution, able to manage change and make swift progress. In this way it would demonstrate its success and that of its learners to the local community and employers.

Financial stability was restored by a programme of agreed and negotiated rebalancing of costs and courses; governance was revamped with the

⁶ Though colleges are no longer required to submit their self-assessment reports to the relevant funding agencies, the BIS document 'New challenges, new chances' considers 'they are a valuable tool for self-improvement'.

appointment of challenging yet supportive governors; management systems were put in place to enable performance to be monitored and intervention to be swiftly undertaken where it was required; and roles and responsibilities were made clear. These changes were a genuine combination of leadership and management: vision from the top and managers acting with their staff to deliver it. The Principal built a team of senior and middle managers who shared his vision and created an open and transparent management style, speaking frequently to staff and involving them in decisions about change. Many of the features of the college – learner-focused, performance-driven and outward looking – closely reflected his personal approach. The staff culture was transformed. They now feel encouraged to be innovative, are proud to work at the college and are enthusiastic about their commitment to the success of their learners.

The site has been transformed and the environment within which learners and teachers work bears little resemblance to the former drab and uninviting buildings. The behaviour and expectations of learners, which managers and staff constantly reinforce, are reflected in a clean and graffiti-free site where everyone respects the environment. The college now has a good reputation in the community and for its engagement with employers.

2. The impact of ineffective or insular leadership and management was a major factor in underperforming colleges. The following example illustrates features seen in the colleges visited and in the reports reviewed.

The single factor contributing to the 'coasting' performance of one college was the failure of successive governance and management regimes to tackle significant cultural and management issues. The management of large and relatively autonomous departments was not challenged effectively; there was a significant variation in performance between them, a lack of sharing of good practice, and major weaknesses in the quality and accessibility of data. The result was that governors and managers were not able to monitor performance across the college effectively.

This failure was exacerbated by a culture of complacency reflected in, for example, setting targets according to national averages rather than good practice; a perception in several quarters that the college was better than inspectors thought, and a lack of vision and drive to raise ambition to achieve the outstanding success that similar colleges had achieved.⁷

⁷ Whether national benchmarks encourage or dampen challenging targets and improvement is discussed at paragraph 43 in *How colleges improve: a review of effective practice* (080083), Ofsted, 2008; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080083.

The priority of a new Principal was to create a new, shared vision and strategy based on a 'learners first' enterprise culture. The first task was to dispel the myth that being at or just above the benchmark was good enough.

3. Senior managers in two of the colleges visited had been successful in challenging the prevailing staff view that 'being satisfactory was good enough and not a problem'. Both colleges improved from 'satisfactory' to 'outstanding' and managers went about transforming the culture in similar ways.

Senior managers in each of the two colleges began by reviewing their vision and mission, with the corporation and staff agreeing that only outstanding would be good enough for their learners. After agreeing on restructuring that would enable the colleges to achieve their aim, the senior managers' consultations and discussions with staff were about commitment, the vision and mission. Staff who did not wish to take part in the journey that was envisaged were encouraged to leave. In one of the colleges this led to about one third of staff being replaced.

Both colleges then re-aligned their systems of performance management to link with key college targets. A performance strand rewarded staff on the basis of overall college performance, an element for achievement of their own targets and a 'bonus' element for outstanding performance. As a result, pay rates in one of the colleges were better than the sector norm. The same college had no fixed number of teaching hours; a flexible model enabled managers to deploy staff resources according to developmental or quality needs.

In both these colleges, staff had a high regard for the Principal and senior management team; they showed clear commitment to and passion for their college's success. Staff at all levels felt that the Principal and senior managers knew who they were; for example, staff appreciated being greeted personally when they met senior managers around the campus. They also valued highly the celebrations and reward events that were held for learners and staff. The strong commitment of teaching and support staff, and governors, was evident in both colleges.

4. Key actions taken by colleges that became outstanding included carrying out the recommendations from inspections promptly, decisively and with conviction, improving teaching and learning and self-assessment, and instilling a culture of high aspirations and achievement. The following example illustrates the cumulative effect on a college when such actions are delayed or undertaken without collective purpose, clear direction or a sense of urgency.

The college was distinguished by an almost total lack of a culture of continuous improvement. There was no shared vision to set high ambitions or a clear sense of direction. Staff were confused about which initiative they were chasing. At all levels, the quality of management was too variable. Some managers were reluctant to make decisions and were particularly reluctant to tackle the underperformance of staff – citing union intransigence or employment law.

Governors were not focused enough on learners' performance or quality improvement. Progress was difficult to measure as data were unreliable and inconsistent. Curriculum managers could always find explanations in their own versions of data for underperformance and were not challenged by leaders. Too many staff, for some time, had had an over-optimistic view of how the college was performing. There was, therefore, little urgency to drive up performance.

While there were clear structures, these did not contribute to quality improvement. Quality improvement measures were overly bureaucratic and not linked effectively to staff development and performance review. Curriculum teams worked in silos, seeking to explain away poor performance rather than tackle it. Any attempts to drive up the quality of teaching lacked urgency. Sharing good practice was not a key feature of improvement strategies. The interests of staff seemed to take precedence over those of learners.

5. The outstanding colleges visited and the high-performing colleges whose reports were reviewed shared some common characteristics: collective responsibility and accountability, and shared ownership of the leadership's values, vision and ambition for the college, its community and its learners. In these colleges, staff spoke confidently about their leaders and managers in a way that inspectors did not hear as frequently elsewhere. There was no complacency but, rather, a sense of direction and knowledge, driven from the top. Knowledge, for example, was applied to understanding and using management information and data; knowing how to improve teaching and learning; understanding self-assessment; and providing the right support for learners. Leaders and governors were responsible for putting these aspects in place. In one improved college this happened quickly, as illustrated here.

On the collective retirement of the senior management team, the new Principal found the task was not to motivate staff, many of whom were keen for change, but to provide the know-how and tools to do it. The previous inspection had judged the college as satisfactory; a member of staff described it as 'happy and friendly but unambitious'.

The departure of staff who did not want to be part of the vision and mission was negotiated successfully. A new senior management team was

appointed, with expertise in finance and quality improvement. A new, concise strategic plan was produced, based on consultation with staff – a deliberate tactic to demonstrate new leadership – and a move to different premises was put on hold since this had been diverting the attention of staff from learners, employers and the wider community.

A tier of curriculum/course managers was introduced, whose first responsibility was to improve quality; at the same time, a quality improvement framework and a new process for self-assessment were established, beginning with teachers' evaluations of their own teaching. Previously, senior managers had written the college's self-assessment and shared it with staff, with the result that staff had little experience of and expertise in self-assessment. A good professional development programme changed attitudes. Data were made accessible, and senior managers helped staff to understand and take responsibility for making improvements themselves – in a 'no blame' culture.

When inspectors asked about the changes, the views of staff could be summed up as: 'We did not know what we did not know. We recognise the impact of the Principal and senior managers now in terms of their knowledge, support and visibility.'

6. The way in which the management of change and college restructuring takes place is as critical to success as the changes themselves. The visits provided examples, such as that above, of how colleges handled change well. The following illustrates some of the common features.

When the new Principal took over a high-performing college, he made the necessary changes at once but was careful not to alienate staff by criticising his predecessor. He acknowledged the positive aspects that could be built on. An extensive 'listening exercise,' gathering the views of staff, learners, parents and employers, informed his perceptions and actions.

Gaining and acting on feedback from these groups was made a high priority and was one of the key objectives in the college's new strategic plan. The feedback was used to endorse and refine the vision and values. A draft restructuring plan was produced. This was amended in the light of feedback from all interested parties and then implemented. Timescales, key milestones and commitments were published and kept to. No redundancies were planned but all staff were consulted about their roles. These were reviewed to show how staff could help to achieve the college's priorities – achieving outstanding outcomes for learners; inspiring and supportive leadership and governance; excellent user engagement; and

an exceptional culture of equality and diversity. The outcome was that staff sensed a new era, felt part of it and were not complacent.

Acting on feedback was central. In addition to common channels, such as surveys and focus groups, the Principal and senior managers met learners and staff at lunchtimes, at the beginning or end of the day, and dropped in on lessons. A rota was set up requiring all staff to visit areas of the college other than their own, to talk to learners and colleagues and to gather their feedback. This had a major impact on reinforcing values and behaviour, and on improving communication.

7. Attention to improving outcomes for all learners was the most consistent feature of successful colleges; it was the most prominent aspect, both in colleges visited and in those whose reports were reviewed. This clear commitment to learners is illustrated vividly here.

One of the colleges visited reviewed and designed its policies, plans and procedures on the primacy of the learner. The driving force for the college was the question: 'How do actions, decisions and behaviour have an impact on learners?' This was the starting point for making decisions on all aspects of the college's practices and processes, particularly in terms of support areas, so that the staff in, for example, finance, partnership working and site management could see how they contributed to the college's success. The self-assessment process included the support areas, featuring their contributions to outcomes for, and the impact on, learners. The finance director held the view that, 'We are not just concerned with our current learners. We consider our past and future learners as equally important to our success and reputation.' Meetings considered the question of impact on learners as part of their rationale and partnerships were not entered into without considering this. This is how the principle becomes practice and part of the culture.

8. The influence of leadership on a college's culture and ethos was clear in all the 18 colleges visited. Although there was no one particularly effective style, certain features of leadership style were more apparent in the outstanding colleges visited.⁸
9. A culture of trust, dispersed leadership and accountability illuminated the outstanding colleges. Determined, energetic and enterprising leadership and management were balanced by a collaborative, listening and persuasive style. Leaders and managers set out the vision and carried staff with them to make sustainable changes. The learner and the community were put at the centre of a college's mission.

⁸ Ofsted inspections judge the impact of leadership and management. Where leadership and management were judged to be either good or outstanding, the most frequent descriptions of style were 'inclusive' and 'decisive'.

10. Persistence, patience, and the presence and visibility of leaders were more influential than personality, presentation and the display of management 'muscle'. Three of the outstanding colleges visited had the following feature in common.

The Principal and the senior management team took turns at the gate to welcome learners or see them at end of the day. They asked them about their day and course and reminded them that theirs was a listening college; that their views were welcome and taken seriously.

It was also the policy that a senior manager attended all events. The investment of time was small but the return was big in terms of successful engagement with learners, employers and other stakeholders.

11. In the outstanding colleges visited, leaders were dynamic in tackling problems and anticipating problems of performance. They supported innovation and enterprise and they empowered staff, as in this example from an outstanding college visited.

One of the first actions of a new Principal was to give full support to staff to reinvigorate links and partnerships with employers and the local community, which had many small to medium businesses. Each curriculum leader redeveloped their Business Focus Group, engaging with new businesses and employers, as well as student ambassadors who were former learners or apprentices. Members of the Business Focus Group came to the college to talk to learners, prospective learners and their parents or carers about their particular vocational areas, explaining the realities and requirements of the industry. They also supported learning and teaching as specialist guest speakers.

As well as helping to adapt the curriculum and widening learners' vocational choices, the strategy encouraged employers to take a more active role in the training for and development of their curriculum area. For example, in the area of hairdressing, beauty therapy, barbering and theatrical make-up, several groups of level 3 learners gained vital work experience and nearly all learners gained employment in the local area.

12. Leaders and managers were decisive, prompt and effective in acting to remedy areas of concern, particularly those arising from inspection.⁹ The following example illustrates how one college took appropriate action to identify key strengths and areas for improvement in its curriculum self-assessment – a

⁹ Reports of 10 colleges judged as outstanding showed that recommendations from their previous inspection had been carried out; reports of 10 colleges with a decline in performance showed that some recommendations had not been carried out.

recommendation from its previous inspection report – and, as a result, improved its quality improvement process. This was an important factor in the judgement of ‘outstanding’ at the college’s last inspection.

The college changed its management information system to produce reports based on tracking learners’ performance within a clearly structured quality cycle. This started at subject level, fed up to college level and then into the overall self-assessment report. From the information on how learners performed (broken down by different groups), curriculum managers produced individual curriculum reviews and action plans that informed the college quality improvement plan. These plans were monitored regularly and were successful in improving teaching and learning. The monitoring of the plans was tied to the system of lesson observations which, in turn, linked to the staff appraisal system. As a result the college’s self-assessment report was closely related to improving teaching and learning for all learners.

13. Although staff in two of the outstanding colleges described the leadership as autocratic, they recognised that this style was tempered by other members of the senior executive team who collaborated more with staff. The structures and quality improvement mechanisms in these colleges, including good professional development, were effective, communication was open, and staff felt they could make their views known. Rather than fearing their leaders, they were in awe of them. They felt empowered and proud to work at these colleges, describing it as hard work but rewarding.
14. In three underperforming colleges, in contrast, the staff felt too directed by an overly autocratic leadership that contributed to a distinct culture of blame. The staff were demotivated and mistrusted their managers. A clear divide existed between those ‘on the ground’ and managers.
15. In one of these underperforming colleges, staff considered the performance management system to be punitive. The result was little or no sharing of good practice, frequent changes of teachers, and instability, attributable to teachers failing to cope with pressure. Challenge to and questions about decisions made by senior managers were not acceptable. Staff reported to inspectors that they were seen as unhelpful or awkward; managers, in their turn, were told by senior managers they were not managing their staff properly. Such lack of challenge (both being challenged and challenging) was a common feature in the inspection reports reviewed, both of the inadequate colleges and some of the satisfactory (and ‘stuck’) ones.
16. Four of the underperforming colleges focused too much attention on new building projects, the estate or maintaining finances. The quality improvement processes were ineffective and too paper-based. The systems for observing teaching and learning lacked credibility. Staff paid lip-service to self-

assessment, the promotion of equality and diversity was not a priority, and the staff blamed the college's systems for bringing in 'unsuitable' learners. In three of these four colleges, success rates had remained static over three years and there was no urgency or ambition for learners. The staff felt that senior managers were pursuing their own agenda; when questioned, however, the managers felt that staff had to understand and cope with the pressures in pursuit of a greater good in the future. These managers had not communicated effectively and convincingly with their staff to get them 'on board'.

17. One of the colleges visited concentrated on addressing the downturn in its funding.

Senior leaders planned to increase revenue streams and income to offset the downturn in funding they had anticipated. They therefore looked to overseas markets, and particularly to one area where the college had contacts. Several visits took place and plans were made. However, in doing this, the college's focus was diverted from current learners to accommodate the changes needed. The result was that success rates decreased markedly. The situation highlighted that the college's middle management structure was too light: managers had too much to do and there were problems with effective communications across the college.

18. In one of the underperforming colleges, the use of 'review and accountability' meetings between senior and middle managers, referred to as 'ritual humiliation' by staff, illustrated how the tone, manner and clarity of communication affected the staff's perceptions of this process.

To engender accountability and responsibility in each curriculum area, managers set fortnightly meetings in the annual cycle of monitoring and review of progress against targets. It became clear that there was a mismatch between the understanding of middle and senior managers about the purpose of these meetings. The main concern of senior managers was the financial performance of each area; the middle managers thought they were attending to discuss the performance of learners and staff – attendance, progress, observation of teaching and curriculum. They found the meetings focused on why they were not controlling costs such as staffing, printing, stationery and equipment more effectively. Staff expressing concerns were told not to complain and reminded that managing their budget was their prime role as middle managers.

The outcome was that staff felt unsupported and did not know what was expected. Managers 'played safe' and focused on administrative activities and reducing costs to the detriment of improving quality and the curriculum.

19. This example contrasts with the approach of a high-performing college – and the improvements made in a shorter time. The message that not improving was not an option was communicated effectively.

The key aspect was the transformational leadership and management introduced by the new Principal. From the beginning he made it clear that his approach was based on values and a vision of excellence, backed up by robust and effective management.

The Principal was highly visible and accessible to staff and learners. He knew all his staff by name. He established a wide range of communication channels, including whole-staff meetings with him, so that all staff knew where the college was in terms of its progress. Staff could express their views without fear of recriminations and recognised the value of objective and informed feedback.

Through recruiting managers who were energetic and able to implement this approach, everyone knew what was acceptable behaviour and performance and what was not. By introducing measures to monitor all aspects of performance and give support where it was needed, the Principal tackled underperformance and satisfactory provision. In sum, the culture changed quickly.

20. Such examples demonstrate the impact when leadership styles and management structures complement one another. Strong monitoring systems are effective in ensuring that actions are taken promptly to remedy problems. Middle managers are supported well by senior leaders, and the part that these middle managers play in ensuring that strategic priorities become operational realities is clearly defined and understood.

Middle management

21. The review of college reports and the visits confirmed that colleges were more effective where there were simple structures in which staff understood their roles and responsibilities and knew where to turn for support for themselves, their colleagues and learners. This was a distinct feature of the outstanding and improving colleges. However, unsurprisingly, no preferred model emerged from the visits and the review of reports, since no one particular management structure would fit all settings.
22. In the colleges visited, inspectors saw the value of good middle managers. Typically, these middle managers are curriculum or course managers. They put strategic decisions into practice, acting as the link between senior leaders who make the executive decisions and operational staff who teach, assess or provide support. They also manage and monitor staff performance. A common way of viewing this is that leaders ask, 'Are we doing the right things?' and managers ask, 'Are we doing things right?'

23. Two examples from the outstanding colleges visited illustrate different ways of deploying middle managers. Each was effective.

Senior managers in the management model of an outstanding college visited were not involved in operational matters; their job was to set clear strategic frameworks for achieving the college's goals after consulting fully with the college's management team. The middle managers implemented these frameworks.

One of these frameworks concerned the improvement of teaching and learning. The delegated powers that these heads of department had over their budgets and how they spent them – even to the appointment of different categories of staff within their budget allocation – gave them a real sense of empowerment within a framework of tight accountability for actions and for achieving targets. Because they were trusted, the culture was one of innovation and 'thinking outside the box'.

One example of this was the extension of work experience through an 'earn to learn' scheme. This proved highly popular with learners. They were allocated a job role within the college where they accumulated rewards in terms of cash and credit towards college facilities, such as food and drink in the refectory and access to visits as part of the enrichment programme.

In another outstanding college, the middle managers were curriculum leaders whose prime responsibility was to improve teaching and learning in their curriculum areas. They did not have a budget but were otherwise responsible for anything concerning teaching and learning: managing teachers, timetabling, the deployment of staff, requesting cover, asking for the appointment of new staff. They were actively involved in the latter. Requests were rarely turned down.

Although they also had a teaching commitment, they were free to use their time supporting teachers, scrutinising assessments, interviewing and meeting learners, and doing whatever they considered to be the priority in terms of ensuring high-quality teaching, learning and outcomes for learners. The performance management system assessed them on the performance of the learners in their area.

24. In both these colleges the right balance existed between autonomy and accountability. Managers, although empowered to drive improvements to fit the needs of learners in their curriculum areas, were subject to robust performance management so that progress was closely monitored. Any areas of underperformance could then be quickly identified and action taken.

25. These examples both show the equal importance of the behaviour of staff and the culture of a college on the one hand and the right structures for the college on the other. In contrast, one college's problems arose from middle management.

The college's senior leaders and managers knew why the college was in the position it was; they knew what had worked and what had not, and they knew what to do about it. The key challenge lay within a middle-management tier where not all the managers were able or willing to manage their teaching staff and to tackle a culture where staff saw learners as a problem. Feedback indicated to senior managers that certain middle managers were diluting their messages and complaining that they were being undermined. Options open to senior managers included training and support for middle managers, disciplinary or capability actions, or another restructuring.

26. The visits to the colleges also showed clearly the importance of middle managers in securing good outcomes for learners. Of the 18 colleges visited, outstanding and improving colleges had settled and effective middle management. Three colleges had new middle managers and three were in the process of review and change. The colleges all recognised the importance of effective and well-trained middle managers and their role in ensuring that strategic priorities were put into practice.

The role of governance

27. The visits to the colleges and the review of inspection reports showed the importance of the relationship between governors and college managers in ensuring a culture of accountability and success. The influential role of governors in understanding their responsibilities and thus establishing a clear learner-centred ethos was strong in the outstanding colleges visited and correspondingly weak in the other colleges.
28. In the best examples, governors had a wide range of expertise and experience and were highly committed to the success of the college. They worked well with senior managers to develop a clear vision for the college. The performance and standards of the college's work were monitored rigorously.
29. One chair of governors, when asked what good governance looked like, said: 'Our role as governors is not to do but to make it possible for others to do their jobs, but we have to ask questions and have the information to make the right challenges when needed.'
30. The arrangements for governance in one outstanding college illustrate well how governors maintained the balance between informed and constructive challenge and their clear separation from involvement in management while at the same time being actively engaged.

The governors had a well-informed clerk who worked closely with the 'search committee' to ensure the right balance and mix of skills among governors. The search committee was very active, maintaining a waiting list of potential governors to ensure the full complement. An annual programme of governor training activities used internal and external expertise in addition to the regular short training slot before each governors' meeting. Additionally, governors attended staff meetings as observers, as well as staff training sessions and updates (including on human resources and finance).

Each curriculum area had a link governor who was informed about the targets and progress against quality assurance plans. The governing body monitored and tracked performance regularly against targets. This was done through clear reports that included teaching and learning. The governors also validated the college's self-assessment report. This included their own self-assessment where governors reported on the targets for their own performance that they had set and monitored. In this way, they had a thorough knowledge of the college. By asking the right questions and having the right information, they were able to challenge both financial and academic performance rigorously.

31. In the weaker colleges, governance was characterised by one or more of the following features:
- a superficial or inadequate understanding of the priorities and problems facing the college
 - ineffective communications between governors and the college's leaders and managers
 - insufficient governor training about purpose, roles and responsibilities
 - too strong a focus on finance or property to the exclusion of key aspects such as monitoring outcomes, the quality of teaching and learning, or curriculum strategy.
32. The following examples from two colleges provide cautionary illustrations.

In one college visited there was very little training for governors. The clerk and a previous chair were of the view that this was an unnecessary expense. They considered that governors were responsible for their own development, especially as they were chosen for their expertise. Governors received very little information on the college's performance other than an end-of-year report and they were asked for their formal approval of the self-assessment report. Meetings focused on the property strategy, staffing and pay. This changed with the clerk's retirement and subsequent changes of chair. The governing body is now at full complement after a period of low attendance and difficulty in recruiting.

In another college visited, training for governors, including an annual conference, had been established. The problem, however, was one of focus, supply of information, and their understanding of the college.

The close relationship between the chair, clerk and the small senior management team, together with the tight financial position, meant that governors' meetings focused on monitoring finance, receiving audit reports and considering proposals for restructuring staffing. Restructuring took place regularly as a way of responding to downturns in learner recruitment. Governors' links with curriculum areas ceased. Data were accepted uncritically, and reports on the college's performance often appeared low on the agenda, forestalling detailed scrutiny and discussion. The college's coasting performance was not questioned and outcomes for learners, around the national average, were ascribed to ineffective curriculum management – another reason for frequent restructuring. Reports from visits by Ofsted were heavily edited before being presented to governors to provide an optimistic view that the college was doing well. The arrival of a new Principal and chair of governors changed all this.

33. Governors have a key role in establishing accountability mechanisms, including sound risk assessment and clear early warning indicators. But this requires that they are well-trained and well-informed, able to ask the right questions, and have access to performance data and other information about the college's work. When this happens, governors are in a position to take collective responsibility for challenging managers and making the right decisions, ensuring that their college's priorities and activities focus on its learners and its community.

Teaching, learning and assessment

34. This is the area where colleges often over-grade themselves when their self-assessment judgements are compared with those from inspection. Unrealistic or over-generous self-assessment can be a stumbling block to further improvement. The outstanding colleges had robust systems for evaluating the effectiveness and quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and for making further improvements.
35. The system in one outstanding college visited ensured that all teachers continued to improve teaching and learning.

The senior management team was visible and active in ensuring that teaching, learning and assessment improved continually. As well as regularly and carefully monitoring the outcomes from formal observations of teaching, senior managers dropped into lessons and, around the college, talked to learners about their lessons and experiences. They used these details with information collected formally from course representatives, from surveys of teaching and learning, and from focus

groups, to assess the quality of teaching and learning and agree improvement targets.

The college's programme of continuing professional development was linked closely to achieving these targets. This was done through formal training and through a more personalised approach, linked to the performance management system. This ensured that individual needs and the staff's targets, identified through performance management, were met.

To maintain outstanding outcomes and improve teaching and learning further, the outcomes from performance management were linked to individual staff members' pay. This, in turn, was linked to whole-college performance, based on a number of measures, including success rates and the progression of learners. Managers were assessed against their own targets which were tied closely to the performance of the school or programme area they managed. In turn, the appraisal and performance of teaching staff were informed by lesson observation grades and performance against personal targets (related to teaching).

Staff told inspectors that these arrangements worked well. They spoke highly of the college and their own successes. Learners enjoyed their lessons, enjoyed coming to the college, and liked being able to have a say in their learning.

36. One of the main reasons for over-generous judgements appears to be that a college's evaluation of teaching and learning is often based on the college's profile of lesson observations. These observations are carried out internally, often complemented or validated (or both) by external peer review. In the majority of cases noted by inspectors, the teachers were given at least two to three weeks' notice of the observation, a day for observation was often identified and, sometimes, even the specific session to be visited. It is common practice for teachers who achieve a grade of at least good to be observed formally only once a year and, often, for the profile of a college to be based on these single observations.
37. Using one, or at most, two observations to classify staff into categories can also explain over-generous profiles of teaching and learning. Staff whose lessons have been judged to be satisfactory or inadequate have the chance to improve; if they do, this is reflected in the grade, contributing to a more positive profile.
38. Too much focus on the quality of the teaching and not on its impact on learning, progress and attainment is still common during observations; assessment is too often overlooked or not given enough weighting, and judgements are made without reference to learners' views.¹⁰ The following

¹⁰ Eighteen of the reports reviewed included recommendations to improve assessment.

example shows the successful involvement of learners by a teacher who set out to improve this in his college.

On a BTEC Level 3 Diploma, the teacher decided that the way to improve learners' achievement was to involve them more actively in lessons. He asked for feedback at the end of each lesson. Learners rated each session online, using four grades from outstanding to poor; they also had to make suggestions for improvement. The teacher used the comments to amend the next lesson or series of lessons.

One very successful example was an occasion when learners asked for a glossary of technical terms. Instead of simply providing a glossary, the teacher used an online discussion forum to ask each learner to give his or her own definition of specific technical terms. All the learners could see the definitions submitted and the group, prompted by the teacher, amended or modified them. The learners first expressed the term in their own words; this helped other learners to develop their understanding. The building of the definitions in this organic way supported learners' understanding of concepts because they had to know what lay behind the technical terms.

The success of this approach was one of the factors that contributed to the increase in the learners' satisfaction rating from 72% in 2010–11 to 93% in 2011–12 and an increase in retention rates from 90% in 2010–11 to 96% in 2011–12.¹¹

39. Using the views of learners and, where appropriate, employers, to help improve teaching, learning and assessment can be a constructive and effective way of enhancing formal observations. It also helps to avoid a possible lack of rigour and validity that might arise from relying solely on observing teaching and learning in order to assess and report on its quality.
40. An improving college that wanted a more holistic and rigorous view of teaching over time changed its practice to include the views of learners.

Following an inspection, and as part of refreshing its 'learner voice' strategy, the college reviewed how it judged teaching, learning and assessment. After each formal observation had taken place, the teacher left the room or workshop and the observer discussed the session with the learners. The learners were asked to what extent the session was typical and for their feedback on how they thought the teaching might be improved. The observer's judgement was discussed later with the teacher. The observer did not ask learners to judge the teacher, but rather the teaching.

41. One of the differences between underperforming colleges and more successful and improving colleges, as seen both during the visits and in the review of

¹¹ Figures supplied by the college's management information data.

reports, was that the outstanding and improving colleges saw observing teaching and learning as a means to an end and as an integral part of the process of improving quality, outcomes and self-assessment.

42. Inspectors' main purpose in collecting evidence about teaching and learning during an inspection is to make an overall judgement on the quality and standards of the provision being inspected. This is quite different from a college's assessment of individual teachers as part of their professional development. It is important that, if colleges simulate the inspection approach, they also work with individual teachers to support their development. They should not treat one inspection-style observation each year as the only assessment of a teacher's performance.

A Vice-Principal of a satisfactory college considered that judgements of teaching and learning – in his own college and in others – were too heavily influenced by what was perceived to be Ofsted's approach. He felt that too much weight was given to single lessons, with each teacher observed once or, at most, twice in a year. In his view, the practice did not take sufficient account of how single episodes of teaching were related to teaching and support for learning as a whole. The system relied too heavily on teachers accepting the judgements of others, with the risk that staff assessed as 'good' continued to teach in the same way. In other words, the system did not do enough to promote critical self-reflection and longer-term development, even though it was closely linked to performance management, professional development and other ways of improving. The Vice-Principal therefore consulted staff and learners about how the college could introduce a more robust system, using feedback in the form of questionnaires, and focus groups of learners and others, such as employers.

43. Colleges should reflect whether their own systems are robust and sufficiently suitable to promote excellence, for example, how assessment, learning and teaching are observed off-site, where an increasing amount of work is done in employers' settings or with subcontractors. In one of the colleges visited the challenge facing managers was to improve teaching and learning from satisfactory and change attitudes about observations.

In making changes to the system of observing teaching and learning, the college realised it had to change the outlook of a minority of vocal but influential teachers who perceived the process as unhelpful and bureaucratic. They disagreed, for example, about grading.

To convince teachers about its intention to improve lessons, college managers introduced a programme of supported action experiments, enabling individuals to tackle problems creatively or to devise imaginative ways to improve learning. The programme was supported by advanced

practitioners and peers through developmental observations that were not graded. The views of learners were also sought.

Topics for development were in six categories, although teachers had a free hand in designing their experiments:

- active learning
- capturing learning
- peer learning
- learner motivation
- tracking and assessment
- e-learning, summarising and organising.

Staff responded well to these supported and experimental opportunities because they could see immediate results. Interim evaluations also showed examples of a positive impact on learners. The programme stimulated the interest of staff and contributed to lessening the resistance to changes that were proposed, moving from three weeks' to 48 hours' notice for an observation within a one-week window.

The college's assessment was that it had improved its observation of teaching and learning; it considered that the process was both rigorous and supportive. Staff found that the different elements of the programme were helpful, such as sector improvement reviews (akin to mock subject area inspections) and peer reviews. Mentoring and shadowing led to improvements for staff whose teaching had been judged to be 'satisfactory'. Learners also benefited.

44. Visits to outstanding colleges provided examples of how good practice was disseminated to improve teaching, learning and assessment. The college described below capitalised on staff's responsiveness and receptiveness – or as one senior manager put it: 'It is easier to get people to see and hear when their eyes and ears are still open.'

All the teaching staff had one hour a week to spend on staff training, updating and the sharing of good practice. Staff started to use the time to meet informally, sharing strategies and 'thinking outside the box'; one member of staff called it 'organic development'. The time was accounted for because it was linked to performance management in which staff had to demonstrate the outcomes.

The same college was very effective at sharing good practice. A particular feature was to use senior managers to coach staff. The Principal and Vice-Principal met heads of school daily for intensive coaching and the sharing of ideas. In addition, more experienced middle managers coached the less experienced.

Based on its experience of inducting new staff, the college ensured that new teachers shadowed an experienced colleague for up to six weeks

before being allowed to teach on their own. The result was that when teachers started to teach, they were well prepared, confident, and familiar with the college's expectations and ways of working. The college's outstanding success rates suggested that this approach was effective.

45. Ensuring that teaching and assessment support learning effectively and bring about good outcomes for learners at all levels was a characteristic of the outstanding colleges. They understood what contributed to excellent outcomes, including what enriched the overall experience of learners; they also knew the barriers and, where necessary, acted swiftly to remedy problems, as in the following example.

A college identified that low retention on level 2 and some level 3 courses arose because of the way in which learners were recruited to them. It altered its procedures to provide better pre-course guidance and selection, as well as ongoing support in college. Features included:

- one-to-one interviews with learners and their parents in the last year of school
- summer college
- induction, featuring assessment of literacy and numeracy skills.

This 'entry into college' process culminated in a 'make your mind up' day with learners and their parents to agree finally whether the course and level were right for each learner.

The college provided two hours of tutorial support a week – judged outstanding at inspection – including a weekly one-to-one session. Progress and attendance in lessons and workshops were closely monitored using a 'student organiser' – a diary and individual learning plan – in tutorials. The complementary enrichment programme was effective in enhancing learners' employability skills and their enjoyment of college. This holistic approach led to improved retention and success rates well above the national average.

This was done in line with refining the curriculum to focus particularly on vocational qualifications and to provide good skills, employability and strong progression routes. The college's higher education provision raised aspirations and offered opportunities for higher education locally.

46. The visits and the review of inspection reports identified the following as ways of improving teaching and learning further.¹²
- Using learners' views and experiences, as well as those of employers and other stakeholders, systematically and formally to improve teaching and learning was one of the distinguishing features of outstanding colleges and those that were improving. Not all colleges, however, had embedded the use of learners' views as part of moderating the accuracy and validity of teaching and learning profiles.
 - The colleges that improved quickly knew their priorities for improving teaching and learning, gained from observing teaching and learning, from self-assessment and other improvement strategies. Managers and teachers pursued these priorities vigorously and relentlessly. Tutorial and enrichment activities were seen as integral to enhancing learners' experiences.
 - Information learning technologies (ILT) and virtual learning environments (VLE) were useful in improving teaching and learning and sharing good practice. Four of the outstanding colleges visited had good VLEs that were used effectively and most of the colleges visited had invested significantly in ILT. The level of staff training, however, lagged behind. Although there were examples of good and excellent practice across curriculum areas, overall the consistency of use, effectiveness and impact varied.
 - Embedding equality within teaching and learning through providing a range of suitable and different learning activities, as well as promoting understanding of diversity in lessons and enrichment activities; both required development.

Getting the curriculum right: Being inclusive

47. The most successful colleges in this survey had a clear mission based on improving learners' knowledge, skills and achievement, and promoting social inclusion. They had reviewed their curriculum to ensure that it matched the needs and aspirations of their learners, as well as the priorities of employers and their local community.¹³ An outstanding college visited typified this approach.

The college had built an outstandingly diverse portfolio of interests, all of which, in some way, contributed to enriching the learners' experience and opportunities. This led to sustainable employment and also brought in revenue. The college saw good enrichment as an essential aspect of its

¹² The report, *2020 vision*, although directed at schools, is also pertinent to improving teaching and learning in colleges; *2020 vision: report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group*, DfE, 2006; <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6347>.

¹³ Paragraph 5 of Ofsted's report, *Learning: creative approaches that raise standards*, sets out the common aspects of a good curriculum. These include inclusiveness and preparation for the next stage or phase of learning. *Learning: creative approaches that raise standards* (080266), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080266.

work; it helped learners to enjoy their learning, achieve their qualifications, and attain economic well-being and independence.

Over a period of five years, the college had reviewed its curriculum, restructured its staffing, brought in fresh income streams and invested its efforts in developing local partnerships with employers and businesses. Sound management and shrewd investments, together with accessing various funding streams, had enabled the college to invest in new developments, fund learner entitlement and enrichment activities, and subsidise across different elements of its provision.

A very broad range of curriculum subjects and levels provided good progression routes from entry level to higher education in most sector subject areas. Its excellent links with employers and local communities created additional opportunities for real vocational experience for learners and encouraged wide participation. A strong emphasis on providing opportunities for learners to gain an awareness of career opportunities helped them to develop good employability skills. The full-time learners greatly appreciated a nationally accredited award for employability skills, taught as part of the tutorial programme. This contributed to securing employment.

The facilities owned or run by the college included a garden centre, restaurants, shops, a pre-school in a local village, and an equine centre. These helped learners to gain employment. Excellent facilities for adult learners with learning difficulties were provided on an estate – which was in very poor condition when the college took it over. These learners now have aspirations, take qualifications when appropriate, and some gain work.

48. All the outstanding and improving colleges visited were judged at inspection to be good in terms of promoting equality and diversity effectively. In the best examples, the promotion of equality and diversity was, like self-assessment, integral to planning. It was seen in terms of narrowing the gap for learners through good teaching and learning, matched to learners' different needs; in promoting social inclusion; and in the appreciation of cultural diversity within the curriculum, and inside and outside the college. The inspection judgements for equality and diversity, teaching and learning, and outcomes for learners suggest there is a strong relationship between these three aspects; in other words, learners are more likely to succeed when their individual needs are properly met and when they feel included.
49. The Principal of an outstanding college, who chaired its very active equality committee and has a close personal involvement, said:

'The active and effective promotion of equality and diversity creates a supportive climate and culture of fairness and respect, dignity and sense

of belonging in which learners and staff can flourish; it engenders the ethos where rights and responsibilities balance each other to allow teachers and learners to develop autonomy and accountability; it enhances and gives prominence to closing the achievement gap between learners, providing a clear focus for college to make sure no learner is left behind. It puts inclusive learning at the heart of the college's work and enables learners to make good progress from their different starting points.'

50. Colleges may be risk averse and refuse to admit learners who have multiple needs; the colleges visited did not adopt such an approach. What distinguished the successful from the less successful colleges was how effectively and promptly they assessed and met the different needs of learners who required more support. They offered learners a suitable course at the right level, and outstanding support, for example for literacy, numeracy or learning English, helped learners to succeed. Teaching, learning and assessment were invariably good. Effective management information systems enabled the performance of different groups to be analysed and suitable follow-up action to be taken.
51. The following extract from the report of a college judged to be outstanding for equality, outcomes and its overall effectiveness highlights the impact of such an approach in securing high success rates for different groups of learners.

'Both male and female students achieve well. Success rates for almost all minority ethnic groups are in line with or higher than those for all students. Success rates for students who are looked after are very high. Young people not previously engaged in education or training achieve and progress well. Students receiving additional learning support and those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities achieve highly. Success rates for 14–16-year-old school pupils are high... Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities gain good employability skills and are able to live independently.'

52. In evaluating outcomes for different groups of learners, colleges have become more self-critical and reflective. Checking how well they are meeting the different needs of their learners engenders questions about why some learners succeed and other do not. In particular, it prompts scrutiny of a learner's journey, starting from his or her first introduction to the college and all the way through.
53. One of the outstanding colleges visited used the 'learner journey' and a review of its student charter to foster equality and inclusion for staff and learners. Outcomes in the college were already well above the national average but, in common with other outstanding colleges, it was self-critical, with a sense of urgency about and commitment to continuous improvement. The college saw this activity as a way of improving further the experiences and progress of its learners.

The college decided to make its new student charter a 'fully used and working document'. It wanted to combine a statement of its ethos and values with the stages of the journey taken by a learner who engaged with the college, starting from recruitment through to advice about progression. Managers used focus groups of learners and staff to review the processes and draft the document before an equality impact assessment was conducted. Governors then discussed and approved the document.

Managers and staff then began planning how to put the charter into practice, for example in tutorials and reviews. The aim was not only to assess the standards and expectations set out in it but also to ensure that the ethos and commitments to equality and inclusiveness were being reinforced in all the college's work.

Self-assessment

54. The review of inspection reports and visits found that in the outstanding and improving colleges, self-assessment was integral to the work of the college, included all the key processes and areas, and led to improvements. It was thorough, self-critical and generated clear action plans.
55. The process of self-assessment is now embedded in the majority of colleges. However, despite the guidance and support available for colleges, the effectiveness of self-assessment in improving quality and performance still varies too much.¹⁴ A review of the inspection judgements for the effectiveness of self-assessment showed that of 258 colleges 9% were judged outstanding, 40% were good, 40% satisfactory and 11% inadequate.¹⁵ This corresponded closely with the judgement for leadership and management.
56. Key features of effective self-assessment from the visits and review of inspection reports are described below.

Purpose and rationale made clear

57. Although the concept of self-assessment is well established, its purpose as a tool to improve the experience and outcomes for learners is not always made clear, especially where lengthy and detailed documentation does not keep bringing attention back to the impact that self-assessment should have on all learners, and the role of teachers and support staff in this. The performance of subcontractors is often given insufficient attention during the self-assessment process. One of the outstanding colleges visited made the purpose clear in

¹⁴ Both the Association of Colleges and the Learning and Skills Improvement Service have provided much informative and useful guidance on this; the Excellence Gateway has examples of good and best practice.

¹⁵ The wording of the judgement is: 'How effectively does self-assessment improve the quality of the provision and outcomes for learners?'

using 'Improving outcomes for all groups of learners' as the starting point of self-assessment.

All areas of the college, both academic and support, evaluated themselves. The process was simple, the documentation was brief and the purpose was clear: explain, with examples, how your work is helping and supporting learners to achieve success. There was a set of simple prompts. For curriculum areas, the leader of each subject and course produced a brief review that focused on explaining the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The two or three action points that had to be included were then discussed with the Principal and became performance targets for staff and priorities to be monitored and achieved. In this way the Principal knew personally what was going on in each curriculum area. The process also gave teaching and learning high status.

Ownership and culture

58. The visits reinforced the importance of involving staff in ways that were appropriate to their level and requirements. Helping staff to understand the bigger picture and how their work and that of their team fitted into self-assessment ensured ownership, both of the process and actions for improvement. One of the first actions of the new Principal of an underperforming college was to refresh and give meaning to self-assessment, as described here.

Senior managers found that the time spent by managers – as required by the Principal – in explaining to staff the purpose and process of self-assessment was worthwhile in getting them to see how self-assessment and actions arising from it related to them. There were staff across the college who had not previously been involved in self-assessment or had considered that it was only for academic staff. Their attitudes also appeared to change when they learnt how they could and should take part in training that the self-assessment process identified for them and their team.

59. One Principal explained that while it was desirable and important for staff to be able to write evaluative and informative course reviews or cross-college evaluations, she saw it as more important to create the right culture and understanding. All staff, including subcontracted staff, needed to understand the purpose and value of assessing their own performance and that of their learners objectively in terms of progress, attainment and the value added. This could then lead to acceptance of the process of informed, considered and critical self-review.

Actions from self-assessment

60. Visits to two underperforming colleges showed the consequences of self-assessment without tangible improvements: loss of confidence in the process,

perceptions of bureaucratic burden, detachment from everyday working and a lack of ownership. The result is compliance and ineffectiveness, as described here.

The weaknesses in the self-assessment process were fundamental. It was regarded as an annual event to be complied with, but action plans arising from it were not followed through adequately; capturing outcomes from staff appraisal, lesson observations and learners' outcomes lacked a joined-up approach. The multiple action plans generated from different sources were also not joined up and did not lead to improvements. Quality monitoring was flawed and was insufficiently focused on improving quality in ways that staff could recognise as worthwhile and effective.

61. In contrast, this extract from the report of a college that improved to being good shows attention to self-assessment and the clear impact of actions.

'The college has made significant improvements to the effectiveness of its quality assurance and improvement systems since the previous inspection. Self-assessment, at all levels, is accurate, rigorous and sharply self-critical, identifying where further improvements are needed. This rigorous analysis has helped improve learners' success rates, which are now often well above national averages, and to increase the proportion of learners achieving high grades. Teachers are fully involved in self-assessment processes and welcome the heightened levels of responsibility and accountability they have for securing improvement.'

62. Current practice, as indicated by the review and visits, is that nearly all colleges collect the views of governors, learners, employers and parents in the process of self-assessment and when producing the final self-assessment report. However, there is much variation and inconsistency in how effectively these are used in making judgements about the effectiveness and quality of key areas.
63. A college's final self-assessment report is usually made widely available – or a summary, since the final documents can be very long. Practice that is not common but is being considered carefully by one outstanding college is to invite stakeholders – learners, parents, and employers, for example – to a meeting. As a way of validating the self-assessment, the college wanted to find out from them whether the report showed the college as they knew or perceived it. The aim was to test the 'end product and close the loop of self-assessment', with the additional benefits of feedback and good publicity.

Listening to learners: lessons and impact

64. The review of reports and visits indicated that arrangements in many colleges for learners and employers to contribute their views and promote improvement are good. Colleges are increasingly using mobile communication technologies and social networking sites that link to their VLEs to gain learners' views and

opinions and encourage debate. The impact of these technologies has been to improve access to learning. The impact has also been seen in the quality and ease of communication between colleges and learners, especially in monitoring and following up attendance and in terms of support offered.

65. The following extract from an inspection report where user engagement was judged to be good is typical of the practice in many colleges. It shows a range of mechanisms and methods.

'Learners' views are canvassed actively through a well-developed system of learner representatives and focus groups. Learners are confident their opinions are listened to and displays throughout the college illustrate what the college has done to address their issues. Employers' views are also sought, and there are successful industry forums in construction, but employers' views do not figure as prominently as those of learners in the college's quality improvement actions.

'Learners' views are used well to help monitor college performance and plan improvements.'

66. The following extract from the report of a college that was judged outstanding shows the difference between good and outstanding. The college had made the learners aware of what it had done and involved the community thoughtfully and constructively.

'User engagement is very good. In relation to learners and community partners in particular, it is outstanding. A comprehensive learner involvement strategy ensures that learners' views are gathered and acted upon in order to bring about improvements. The promotion of partnership working is now well developed and effective. A broad range of partnerships includes libraries, emergency and probation services and a local football club. While there are highly effective partnerships with some employers, the college is working towards a more effective engagement with this group.'

Continuing professional development

67. All the reports reviewed and colleges visited acknowledged the value and impact of continuing professional development (CPD); this was well established and evaluated. CPD has most impact where it is clearly linked to a well-considered performance management system and to improving the skills, knowledge and expertise of staff.
68. Five of the colleges visited, all improving or outstanding, had developed a 'grow your own' policy for recruiting and developing staff. This was not because they were insular or did not want to bring in outside expertise; it came about through a strategic decision based on the need for succession planning. It also enabled career progression and the transmission of a college's culture and ethos. They had therefore given precedence to programmes that developed the

skills, confidence and expertise of these staff but – because of the strategic approach to staff training – not at the expense of CPD for others.

69. Three of the colleges visited also provide cautionary lessons about CPD. There were instances where CPD was not seen to be arising from strategic college needs or the clear developmental needs of staff. One example suffices.

In one of the colleges visited, two of the key recommendations from the previous inspection had been to improve differentiated approaches in teaching and the observation and impact of teaching and learning.

When inspectors asked about staff training, the different groups of staff – excluding senior managers – were very positive. According to the staff interviewed, there appeared to be no restrictions on the courses they could attend or training they could access. Managers were very accommodating in granting requests but on a 'first come' basis which meant that some staff missed out. Staff had undertaken training in using data, funding, self-assessment, and use of ILT. When then questioned about how these related to the mission and priorities of the college and the recommendations from the college's last inspection, the staff were unable to explain.

Using management information

70. This review found that how colleges manage and use their data readily marks out outstanding colleges and many good colleges from less successful and underperforming colleges. The following is an example.

The management information system in an outstanding college visited allowed the whole 'learner journey' to be captured. Through this easy-to-use system, the teams which provided learning and support were able to focus on meeting learners' needs from the diagnostic stage to the progression stage. The expertise of all members of the team was focused more closely, as a result, on the needs of each learner. The system integrated closely the timetabling arrangements for deploying resources with learners' preferences for the curriculum they needed. The college's curriculum was truly learner-based: learners were put at the right level and studied suitable subjects.

71. The positive impact of management information systems stemmed from harmonisation and synchronisation. Accessible data enabled staff to track learners from before they started their courses to the end. A few colleges were

taking this further so that they could track progression and destinations as key aspects of assessing quality outcomes.¹⁶

72. Using accessible, timely and reliable data, these improving and outstanding colleges were able to monitor and analyse performance constantly at all levels and to provide support at the right moment. Pre-course assessment data ensured learners were on the right course at the right level, while targets, attendance, punctuality and on-course support could all be tracked.

An outstanding college introduced rigorous monitoring some years ago to produce reports for managers. The progress, attendance and retention of learners at all levels could be tracked which then permitted early intervention. This all-embracing system made up for deficiencies in the system it replaced. A consequence, however, of the attention to detail which was needed was that managers at all levels were expected to produce frequent reports about learners at risk and where performance appeared to be tailing off. As a result, their time was disproportionately taken up with producing reports, which other managers were also producing, or which revisited areas where action had already been taken.

The system was therefore refined, allowing managers to see what others were doing and when. Smarter reporting eliminated the duplication of effort, while there was still confidence that monitoring and tracking were good enough to identify any underperformance.

The result was a reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy and a freeing of managers, enabling them to focus on improving teaching and learning and providing targeted interventions when needed.

73. In the improving, good and outstanding colleges the links between self-assessment and access to management information and data were well-established. Questions were not about access to and the quality of data, but what the information signified. As one college Principal remarked: 'Data ... it's in our college DNA and is the oxygen of the college – we all recognise its power in connecting us all.'
74. For the Vice-Principal of one of the outstanding colleges, data were a way of bringing everything together: 'Data are not only an essential tool for assessing and gaining insights into all aspects of the college's work and learners' experience, but also it conditions and influences behaviour.' His perceptive analytical report of his college's statistics, 'Retention and Profile by Student Characteristics,' (for example, by disability, learning difficulty, gender, ethnicity, support, financial information, level of prior attainment, previous school) engaged staff in reflecting on the performance of learners, questioning assumptions and changing their practice where necessary. The staff felt that

¹⁶ Ofsted's report, *Moving through the system*, discusses these aspects. *Moving through the system – information, advice and guidance* (080273), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080273.

they were able to do this because his reports presented and explained the college's information and data.

75. The examples from these two colleges show how timely, relevant, meaningful and accessible management information can be transformed from being simply figures into giving accounts of real people.

Features of colleges with poor or declining performance

76. Perhaps the most single important driver in high-performing colleges is their total focus on learners. However, there is no one explanation as to why other colleges have underperformed or been less successful, although certain factors are more prominent than others. This review has identified some common features of the colleges that have made limited or too little progress between inspections. The importance and impact of each of these features varied but many were present in some way in all the underperforming colleges reviewed. To some extent the story is simply that they did not do the things that the improving and outstanding colleges did. The Principal of an improving college visited summed up the key message like this: 'To make progress, colleges, particularly the leadership, management and governors, must be honest and open about the things done badly or good things not done or good things done poorly.'
77. Some common themes emerge from the colleges that have been judged to be inadequate since September 2009, although the specific details vary.
 - Primarily, these colleges had poor outcomes for learners. Success rates were usually below the national average and sometimes declining. The colleges did not have sound information on progression routes, and these routes were not always clear. Their tracking of learners' progress was inconsistent.
 - Teaching, learning and assessment were inadequate. Lessons often did not meet the needs of individual learners and too often were poorly planned. Targets set for learners were too vague, and learners were not challenged to ensure they made good progress. The use of ILT to engage learners and enliven learning was ineffective or underdeveloped. The assessment of learning was inconsistent and did not help learners improve. Attendance rates were low and punctuality was poor.
 - The lesson observation schemes were not rigorous enough and did not provide a robust basis for improvement. The sharing of good practice among staff was not systematic.
 - Leadership and management in these colleges were judged to be inadequate. Some colleges had staffing problems relating to the lack of staff or training and the right expertise as well as underperforming staff. The problems were compounded by unsettled senior or middle management teams who were dealing with short-term contracts, too many changes and

no clear direction. Although some colleges were aware of their problems and had plans to bring about improvements, at the time they were inspected these plans had not made sufficient impact or lacked sufficient urgency.

- In other colleges, the self-assessment report was over-optimistic, lacked critical insight and brought about limited improvements. Managers and teachers did not use management information systematically to monitor learners' progress. Governors were not sufficiently aware of the key aspects of the college's performance and therefore did not set clear or challenging targets, and did not monitor performance well enough.
- Financial insecurity contributed to the decline in performance of some colleges and where this dominated the attention of senior managers, governors or both, outcomes for learners declined or had not improved at a steady rate or quickly enough. In a few colleges where leaders and managers became inward-looking, focusing on finance and reducing a deficit, curriculum development and quality improvement suffered.
- Instability was a major factor in poor performance. Unplanned cuts to staffing, teaching and resource budgets led to a loss of staff and their expertise. Outcomes declined in colleges that introduced many and frequent changes and initiatives too quickly. Compounding this was a failure to engage staff sufficiently by explaining the rationale for changes, whether this was because of government or college policy.
- Other major distractors contributing to the decline in performance of some colleges were too much attention being paid to new builds, a preoccupation with mergers, and the quest for new and fresh business, especially abroad, all to the detriment of current learners.

Notes

This review was carried out from May to June 2012. During this period inspectors visited 18 colleges and reviewed the inspection reports of 55 colleges inspected between September 2009 and May 2012. Discussions were also held with lead inspectors.

The sample of 18 colleges consisted of 10 general further education colleges, two land-based colleges and two sixth form colleges, two independent specialist colleges and two specially designated colleges of adult education. The colleges visited were in three groups: outstanding colleges; those staying at the same grade, mostly grade 3, in at least two inspections; and colleges where performance had declined.

The report illustrates the findings with case studies from the visits to explain the work undertaken in colleges or a specific college. Where similar examples were found in other colleges, these have been combined to avoid repetition, but all elements in them were taken from the first-hand evidence obtained during the visits.

It was not the aim of the visits to replicate inspections of the colleges but to use the findings from the visits and existing information such as reports from inspections and surveys to build up a clear picture of the main features that help or hinder improvement.

Further information

Publications by Ofsted

Skills for employment: the impact of skills programmes for adults on achieving sustained employment (110178), Ofsted, 2012; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/110178.

Tackling the challenge of low numeracy skills in young people and adults (100225), Ofsted, 2011; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100225.

Equalities in action (080272), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080272.

How colleges improve (080083), Ofsted, 2008; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080083.

Learning: creative approaches that raise standards (080266), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080266.

Moving through the system – information, advice and guidance (080273), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080273.

Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training: what works and why (090236), Ofsted, 2010; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/090236.

Other publications

A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities, The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), 157 Group, Association of Colleges, 2011; <http://shop.niace.org.uk/dynamic-full.html>.

A review of governance and strategic leadership in English further education, Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Association of Colleges, 2009; www.lsis.org.uk/AboutLSIS/MediaCentre/PressReleases/Pages/LSISandAoCpublishReviewofGovernanceandStrategicLeadershipinEnglishFurtherEducation.aspx.

2020 vision: report of the teaching and learning in 2020 review group, Department for Education and Skills, 2011; <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6347/>.

Equality, diversity and governance: brief guide for governors and clerks in further education colleges, Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2009 (updated 2011); www.lsis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/EandDGovernance.aspx.

How one college improved – key messages for governors, clerks and managers, Learning and Skills Improvement Service, 2011; www.lsis.org.uk/Services/Publications/Pages/Howonecollegeimproved.aspx.

New challenges, new chances, further education and skills system reform plan: building a world class skills system, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011; <http://bis.ecgroup.net/Publications/FurtherEducationSkills/FEReformImprovement.aspx>.

The English colleges foundation code of governance, Association of Colleges, 2011; www.aoc.co.uk/en/college_governors/english-college-code-of-governance.

Self-assessment: updated guidance for the further education system 2008, LSIS/LSC/QIA/CEL, 2008; <http://archive.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=166172>.

Ofsted's good practice website area

For the last three years, Ofsted's good practice database for learning and skills has been hosted by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service on its Excellence Gateway. In March 2011, Ofsted launched its own website (www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice) showcasing good practice across the sectors that Ofsted inspects and regulates.

The case studies are written by Ofsted's inspectors following a visit to the provider to investigate a lead about good practice, which has usually been identified during an inspection. A number of the examples on the website include documents supplied by the provider which can be downloaded and adapted. There are currently over 80 learning and skills examples, including four video case studies, which illustrate effective teaching and learning in business administration, construction, hairdressing and engineering.

Annex: Key actions to promote improvement

The following 10 top tips and questions are included as an aide-mémoire for colleges.

How do you know you are genuinely learner-centred?

Test the effectiveness of this by subjecting processes, procedures and practices to this simple question: 'What is the impact on learners and learning?' The successful colleges were learner-driven, listened to their learners, and took proper account of community, employer and local needs and priorities. They developed the employability, social, literacy and numeracy skills of learners. They regarded their learners and former learners as their best ambassadors and in many cases as 'repeat business'.

What measures are in place to ensure that teaching, learning, assessment and the curriculum are well-planned and skilfully delivered to enable all learners to enjoy their work, progress and achieve at the pace that is right for them? How does the college challenge them to go further?

The successful colleges analysed carefully the management information and data they held on the different groups of learners and took prompt action if any fell behind. They knew their priorities for teaching and learning and translated them into straightforward objectives, concentrating on doing them unstintingly. As one college Principal said: 'We just try to do the simple things brilliantly.'

How do you make sure that the right staff have the right know-how, knowledge and competences for the roles they have and those they might aspire to? How does the college build their confidence, capability and capacity?

It was a key aspect of best practice among thriving and outstanding colleges. This was most apparent in how they managed the learner journey, in which parents, employers and universities had confidence and belief from first contact with a college to the end of it.

What can you do to create a culture and ethos of urgency and ambition for learners that raises their confidence, aspirations and achievements?

The atmosphere, environment and mood in successful colleges were positive and characterised by high expectations; it became the custom for staff and those connected to them to share and celebrate their success and for the colleges also to recognise the success and achievements of staff.

How might you build a climate in the college where self-review and feedback are welcome and not seen as criticism? What training for staff can you provide to make feedback informative, supportive and pertinent, while avoiding being negative? How can you educate them to receive and act positively on feedback?

Colleges were successful, buoyant and 'great places to work' where performance management was fair, staff were trusted, and the consequences of poor performance were made clear and dealt with promptly.

Can you evaluate how effectively and how quickly management information and data inform decisions and become meaningful actions?

Good information and data are essential. A feature of the outstanding and improving colleges was that self-critical and self-reflective assessment was accompanied by action with impact.

Do your planning, monitoring and evaluation take account of all the college activities, including arms-length, off-site and subcontracting work?

Employer engagement was most effective where employers were genuinely and routinely involved in planning and decision-making.

How do you assess the effectiveness of communications with learners and stakeholders – whether and how they lead to improvements in the key areas of the college's work?

Colleges found that listening to the little things learners and stakeholders told them could lead to big improvements and improve their overall experience.¹⁷

Do you know or check whether the college's values and vision are known and shared by staff, learners and the community? Are they inclusive of all and how do they foster respect, trust, honesty, fairness, dignity, independence and accountability?

This was the toughest journey for the colleges aspiring to excellence and, for those achieving it, the most rewarding. They were confident about the positive contribution they were making to society and their community by the training and education of their learners.

¹⁷ A key finding of the report, *A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities*, was: 'In terms of meeting the skills needs of the local area, employer engagement is vital, but the most successful is engagement that goes beyond just treating employers as customers and involves them as co-designers of the skills training offer. Likewise, in terms of meeting the learner needs, the greater the involvement of learners in the design of the curriculum, the greater the buy-in, sense of ownership and achievement, the greater the success.' *A dynamic nucleus: colleges at the heart of local communities*, The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), 157 Group, Association of Colleges, 2011; <http://shop.niace.org.uk/dynamic-full.html>.

What checks, balances and assessment of impact are in place when the college embarks on a new venture or initiative?

Governors and/or leaders should consider using their audit or standards and quality improvement committee or equivalent as a 'check and balance' committee if the college is considering or about to embark on a building or merger or deficit reduction programme or new venture that has the possibility of diverting attention from its main business. This should be independent of those responsible for the project and should have the authority to scrutinise and question the possible and potential impact on the work of the college.