SECURING THE ADOPTION OF GOOD PRACTICE IN SCOTLAND'S COLLEGES

A REPORT BY HM INSPECTORS OF EDUCATION FOR THE SCOTTISH FUNDING COUNCIL

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CONTENTS

1 Introduction

In *Improving Scottish Education*[1] HMIE identifies the sharing of good practice as one of the key areas for further improvement in the college sector – "*Colleges should do more to identify, capture and use effectively the good practice which exists in many aspects of their provision and use it to enhance the quality of less effective aspects*."

The purpose of this report is to describe the main mechanisms currently in use in Scotland's colleges to ensure that the adoption of good practice actually happens. It investigates how colleges identify and promote good practice in their own institutions; how they develop strategies and processes to ensure good practice is shared, adopted and implemented effectively; how they gain awareness of and access to sector-leading and innovative practice in other institutions; and how they evaluate the impact of this activity on learners.

The report makes reference to research and activity elsewhere in the UK in relation to the sharing and adoption of good practice, to identify what can be learned. Finally, the report makes a number of recommendations for improvement.

2 Methodology

Evidence for this report includes an extensive survey questionnaire sent out to a sample of colleges between October and December 2005. Focus groups were held in Dundee, Glasgow and Livingston during November 2005, with representatives from fourteen different colleges across Scotland engaged in discussions. Desk research included the analysis of 20 further education (FE) review reports from 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. External stakeholders were consulted, and further desk research was carried out in relation to similar studies and developments elsewhere in the UK. Visits to colleges and other organisations allowed the development of the case study examples within the report.

3 Summary of findings

- Colleges use a variety of terms to describe activity in a particular subject area or support service that can be replicated or adopted more widely across the college, or to describe practice from elsewhere that has been imported into the college to good effect.
- "Good practice" is a term often used and well understood. "Best practice" attempts to move to a higher level of expectation. "Sector-leading and innovative practice" is practice which is particularly effective in terms of impact or outcomes and capable of being adopted either by replication or through customisation by other colleges.[2]

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[1] *Improving Scottish Education, HMIE, 2005*

[2] *Specification for the Review of Standards and Quality in Scottish Further Education Colleges in Academic Years 2004-5 to 2007-8, Supporting Information: August 2005*

- This report is concerned with all good practice that if replicated or adopted suitably can lead to an improved learner experience and positive outcomes, regardless of the extent to which practice is innovative in absolute terms.
- Colleges use a wide range of methods to identify and share good practice. These include systematic methods such as programme team evaluation, operational planning and self-evaluation processes, the use of learner focus groups and survey questionnaires, collaborative approaches to learning and teaching, and continuing professional development of staff.
- External evaluation reports provide additional stimuli for the identification and sharing of practice.
- Associate assessors represent a rich potential source of good practice worthy of dissemination, based on their experience on SFC/HMIE review and contributions to other evaluative reports.
- The use of case studies, online materials from a range of websites, research publications and dissemination events all contribute to the wider dissemination of good practice, and provide opportunities for self-critical reflection by practitioners.
- Individual colleges promote the adoption of good practice. Regular, ongoing professional discussions between staff, increasing use of college websites, and the lead provided by senior managers and college committees all contribute to successful adoption of good practice.
- People-centred approaches that increase staff readiness to actively seek out and adopt practice work best.
- Sector-wide presentations, networking within subject and support areas, partnership and consortium events, and visits to other institutions aid cross-college adoption of good practice.
- There is currently little by way of specific or systematic evaluation of the impact on learners of good practice adopted, and learners have little input into methods of identifying, disseminating or adopting such practice.

Research from elsewhere in the UK[3] provided useful material for the survey questionnaire and focus group discussions used in the fieldwork for this report. That research provided the following conclusions, which are consistent with the findings of this report.

- Successful methods tend not to depend on single approaches.
- Complementary combinations of approaches are always needed.
- Progress depends on direct face-to-face interactive working with trusted experts or colleagues.
- Active promoters need the right skills and support to do the job effectively.
- Champions work best within established relationships based on parity of esteem.

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[3] *Adopting Good Practice, Shane Beadle, Policy Lead – Skills for Success, Department for Education and Skills, January 2004*

4   Good practice, best practice and sector-leading and innovative practice

Colleges are familiar with a variety of terms which describe something which is happening in a particular subject area or a particular support service and that can be replicated or carried through more widely across a college to good effect. These terms are also used to describe practice from elsewhere that has been identified through whatever means and can be imported into a college to good effect.

"Good practice" is a term often used within colleges in a general sense. Some references to "best practice" within the sector may imply a higher level of expectation, but generally it is accepted that being confident that some practice is *the* best is unlikely. For colleges, what matters most internally is the continuous quality improvement and quality enhancement that ultimately has a positive impact on the learner experience.

HMIE uses the term "good practice" to define the area of the HMIE website[4] that presents examples of practice that are worthy of emulation. Through a memorandum of understanding and successive annual service level agreements, HMIE carries out the review of colleges in Scotland. The early agreements committed HMIE to "*identify and disseminate good practice*" but this has been more recently developed into what is now the headline term used in college review reports: "sector-leading and innovative practice" (SLIP). Sector-leading and innovative practice examples should be "*particularly effective in terms of impact or outcomes*" and should be "*able to be replicated/adopted/customised by other colleges*".[5]

The shift in terminology served two purposes. As before, it enabled HMIE to highlight particularly noteworthy activities and practices among the many examples of good practice that are found in all colleges. It also addressed confusion and some dissatisfaction in colleges that much of their practice was evaluated by HMIE as good or very good but did not feature specifically in reports badged as "good practice".

Colleges are not wholly supportive about the use of the new term. Not all staff find the change in terminology entirely helpful to them in their self-evaluation. Whilst HMIE reviewers may be in a position to make this judgement, colleges themselves may be unable to judge if they are "leading the sector" or to know whether what they are doing is "innovative" externally, although it may be innovative internally.

It can be highly motivating for college staff to have practice recognised as SLIP in reviews. The current college review model asks colleges to supply examples of SLIP for consideration prior to the start of the review. Colleges are sometimes unclear of the criteria they should be using to identify their own examples, and as a result can submit quite comprehensive listings that are unsolicited and say more

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[4] www.hmie.gov.uk/hmiegoodpractice

[5] *Specification for the Review of Standards and Quality in Scottish Further Education Colleges in Academic Years 2004-5 to 2007-8, Supporting Information: August 2005*

about the college's understanding or otherwise of what SLIP actually is and their internal processes for dealing with it, than about the practice or innovation itself.

However, the primary purpose of identifying SLIP is not to help colleges badge their own practice. The intention is to highlight practice worthy of further consideration by as many staff as possible across the college sector. Practice identified in a college that is studied, adapted if necessary and adopted where appropriate to enhance the experience of other learners, represents a positive outcome irrespective of the nomenclature.

This report is concerned with the process of adoption of practice that leads to improved learner experience and improved outcomes. These processes apply equally to practice that is sector-leading and innovative, and to other good practice that is simply not currently in place in the college concerned. In general, the term "good practice" used in this report should be taken to include SLIP unless the context makes another meaning clear. However, some references to SLIP are specific.

5   Identification of good practice

5.1   The context for identification

As implied in the previous section, the term "identification" is used in this report to convey not just **identification as** good practice but also **identification as suitable for adoption** elsewhere.

Colleges report a range of methods through which they attempt to identify good practice. The majority of colleges have systematic methods of identification such as regular programme team evaluations, and operational planning and self-evaluation processes that are firmly established within quality assurance and improvement arrangements. Most now have identified either good practice or sector-leading and innovative practice as a specific category within their quality documentation, to encourage teams at all levels to reflect more substantially on this area.

The challenge remains, however, to ensure that identification in one area of college activity is followed by action to make sure that sharing is effective, and that adoption and implementation elsewhere in the college becomes a reality. With the continuing emphasis on SLIP, and colleges' recognition of the benefits of more effective sharing, some colleges have set up fora comprising staff who actively search for good practice within the college or from elsewhere.

There are issues of culture in this area. A culture of sharing within colleges and across the sector needs to be more fully developed, rectifying where necessary the challenges relating to ownership, innate conservatism, or reticence manifested by a reluctance to celebrate or promote one's own practice.

Learner focus groups and survey questionnaires continue to provide rich sources for the identification of what works well, and may have the potential to be replicated or transferred elsewhere. These approaches are generally well established, but rarely extend to asking learners whether what they have recognised as effective in one

area may have potential for making improvements elsewhere. There is potential for using the views and imagination of learners in a more constructive way in this respect.

Many colleges are developing approaches to evaluation of learning and teaching. Many see this as an effective mechanism for recognising what really works well in classroom practice and to highlight good practice in relation to the craft of teaching more generally. Some colleges take systematic steps to make sure that identified good practice once highlighted is then openly discussed and reviewed by colleagues, and ultimately replicated, to the benefit of the learner experience. However, the mechanisms for this are still informal in many cases.

Continuing professional development and training provide staff with opportunities, both internally and externally, to share and network with colleagues. Identification of good practice, including sector-leading and innovative practice, may not be the specific aim of such activities but may be an important by-product of the exchange and interaction when professionals meet as a group.

External validation of sector-leading and innovative practice is regarded by many as the important feature that lends credibility and is likely to encourage action beyond the identification through to the implementation phase. Staff can sometimes be reluctant to change without some external endorsement. "External" in this sense may mean only external to the subject area or department through, for example, internal audit activity. Identification through review, external audit, external examiner or external moderator feedback can lend gravitas and credibility.

Colleges regularly use HMIE review reports or aspect reports to gain insights into what works and what does not work so well within the college sector. Equally, colleges considering their delivery of higher education (HE) may be interested in the reports produced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) or information generated through HE enhancement theme activities. In addition, most colleges now have staff who, as associate assessors, contribute regularly and substantially to the annual review activity of HMIE within Scotland's colleges. Associate assessors benefit from the annual training and development provided by HMIE, and are well placed when it comes to the identification of good or sector-leading and innovative practice. As a result, associate assessors are a rich source of information when back in their own colleges. Their expertise is used in a range of ways to build capacity for improvement within their own organisations, although in some cases the full potential benefit of having associate assessors is not realised.

Colleges acknowledge the identification of good practice as only a first step. However, in combination with complementary activity, some approaches can be powerful. The emphasis in these cases is on the dissemination of information or practice as a useful starting point for raising awareness of what is happening elsewhere in the college sector and what is innovative.

Mechanisms for sharing good practice

5.2   Case studies

Case studies, including the SLIP summaries captured in HMIE's published reports, and as featured in conferences and seminars, provide helpful pointers to what may be achievable. However, colleges generally find that the presentation of a case study taken in isolation does not provide a sufficient basis for adoption of practice by others. There is a tension between a case study being short enough to be engaging and long enough to be comprehensively useful. Interested participants attending the presentation would normally follow up what was particularly stimulating by making contact and engaging with the originators.

Some staff have a perception that it is not easy to share or transfer the messages or practice within a case study across subjects or areas of activity, so in most examples it is desirable through publication to emphasise the transferability, or the generic use that case studies can have. One issue with all case studies is that they may date very easily. What is originally deemed to be innovative may cease to be so almost as soon as it is published.

5.3   Online materials

Online materials are available from a number of sources including SFEU and HMIE. The HMIE website features the full text of all review and aspect reports. The good practice area provides indexed access to all identified SLIP examples on the date of publication of the relevant college report. Informal feedback from colleges suggests that this feature is regarded as useful. However, HMIE has not yet undertaken a detailed survey of usage and user perceptions of its website.

An example from outwith Scotland is the *Excalibur Learning Network*, which is the name that the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has given to the combination of its quality improvement activities. It offers a range of resources, learning materials and networks including a *Good Practice Database*[6] and a *Building Better Practice* area within their website. The *Good Practice Database* currently contains over 220 case studies drawn from around 100 organisations, with another 50 case studies in preparation. These detailed case studies of good practice have been identified by ALI inspectors.

There is no firm evidence that materials mounted online have any greater effect than the same materials in paper form or presentations of case studies. The key distinction is that more people can access online materials more readily. Online materials need to be well constructed and well signposted to encourage their exploration. Users expect high-quality and user-friendly features. As with case studies in particular, there is a need to regularly update and refresh all forms of online materials, to meet the general expectation that online should mean more recent or more current. A significant resource will normally be required to ensure

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[6] www.ali.gov.uk/excalibur/goodpractice

that old and outdated materials are removed and archived within a reasonable timescale.

5.4   Researchers' publications

Publications from credible researchers can stimulate interest, raise awareness and encourage college staff to search further for ways in which they may adopt elements of the research findings to influence their own practice. However, to convert the ideas presented in researchers' publications into effective catalysts for changes in practice takes real commitment, and may need an active promoter or champion.

5.5   Presentations and lectures

The contribution of presentations and lectures depends largely on the quality of the presenter and the presentation, and on the transferability of the particular example of good practice or SLIP. When all these aspects are in place these arrangements can be effective and stimulating. However, it may be difficult to fully explain complex practices in this way. The challenge remains for colleges to find ways of capitalising on the energy that an inspirational presentation or lecture may have provided, and ensuring that further development and implementation occurs beyond the original dissemination.

5.6   Dissemination events

Dissemination events provide the context for a range of activities around a common theme, and may include several presentations or lectures. Dissemination events that are wholly passive, with the majority of time listening to information, are rarely evaluated positively by those attending. When the outcome of such events is no more than some written text, copy of presentation slides or documentation, attendees start to question the value of attending in person. Workshop sessions that allow small group discussion are viewed much more positively. However, a major benefit of attendance can be the exchange of contact details with presenters and the informal networking possible during the often limited time outwith the formal sessions.

Presenters can sometimes be uncomfortable with the "name and fame" dimensions, particularly when disseminating to their peers. There is a need to be careful that it is not always the same people claiming the fame and leading dissemination events, to avoid them becoming exclusive events that appeal only to a limited audience.

6   Promoting the adoption of good practice

6.1   The context for promotion

Colleges promote good practice in several ways, with a wide range of staff involved in the process. There is a general consensus that it is the job of everyone in a college to promote good practice. Most staff are willing to accept this implicitly as part of their responsibility in their day-to-day activities, although most recognise the important lead role of senior staff with overall responsibility for quality assurance and

quality improvement. In many cases this lead will also be supported by other relevant management groups and committees.

In all colleges, staff discuss various aspects of the learner experience informally on an ad hoc daily basis. Also, they share materials, and use annual reviews and other evaluative processes to reflect on practice, identify good practice and learn from colleagues. Increasingly, colleges are developing beyond searching documentation or simply holding meetings to promote good practice, to more innovative and accessible strategies. Many colleges have now identified a specific area on their intranet that is given over exclusively for promoting what has been identified around the college, elsewhere in the sector or through HMIE review, allowing easy access to anyone who may be interested. Supporting this development, many colleges have also established a staff newsletter that regularly highlights and promotes what has been identified across the college, or have established focus groups or action groups.

What works well for some colleges or individuals may not be as successful for others. Factors influencing successful adoptions are quite complex, and depend on a wide range of variables that shape the behaviour of individuals and colleges. The challenge is substantial when adopting good practice means abandoning practices that staff have been comfortable with for years. The best context for securing the adoption of good practice is where those who will adopt it have actively sought it out. There is no consensus among colleges as to which mechanisms are most effective, and none are effective under all circumstances. However, a consistent feature is that the mechanisms or methods that staff report to work well tend to focus upon or include people-centred approaches.

Approaches to promoting the adoption of good practice

6.2   Using active, face-to-face promoters or champions

Colleges regard face-to-face interaction as likely to be effective when complex practice needs to be explained or translated into a different context. It is unlikely that documents, written reports or testimony alone will be effective in this situation but they may provide useful background information. Active promoters, including champions, can "sell" the practice to others, enthuse the potential adopters and inspire others to follow. Perceived credibility is the key characteristic required for an active promoter or champion to achieve success, usually gained from previous success, influence or reputation. This is equally true for internal and external champions.

6.3   Networking

Colleges confirm that networking effectively across the sector, both formally and informally, is a powerful way of supporting the adoption of good practice. However, formally constituted networks require to be actively promoted and supported in order to achieve maximum success and to have impact. Through membership of such established groupings, practitioners are able to share their own ideas, learn from others and use the networking arrangements to good effect where consistency and

standardisation of approaches are required. The most effective networks are those where everyone contributes and actively "trades" knowledge and ideas.

Electronic networking can also be effective, but some practitioners are reluctant to have a faceless discussion through the medium of technology, can be put off by technical faults with the infrastructure or fail to prioritise to make the time available when they do not have to leave their own working environment or leave the college to participate.

The requirement for funding for network groups to take place on a face-to-face basis can sometimes be a barrier to their impact, as college staff require time away from the college or their area of activity for networking to achieve maximum impact.

6.4   Informal discussion amongst professionals

Most staff see informal discussion with other professionals as a powerful mechanism for the exchange of ideas, practice and indeed contact details that are often developed into personal networks of contacts for future discussions and deliberations. Even while attending scheduled meetings, training events, presentations or lectures, many staff highlight the benefit they gain from talking informally to their colleagues about what they do and how they do it, sometimes over lunch or coffee.   In some cases, this may be the start of something more sustained and as a result ideas can be carried through to real improvements. Recently, some colleges have established informal discussion forums around breakfast or lunch sessions which are encouraging staff to exchange ideas on a variety of issues relating to the college experience for learners.

6.5   Partnerships and consortium arrangements

Effective partnership and consortium arrangements across the college sector have allowed participants to share development tasks or initiatives and as a result take developments or improvements forward more quickly, or more efficiently. Success is more likely where there is no sense of competition amongst participant colleges and where the partnership arrangements are firmly based on trust. Partners or consortium members need to be fully involved in the developments, with all contributing something as well as gaining the benefits.

Working in partnership or through consortium arrangements can sometimes be a formal condition for the funding and resourcing of particular projects, based on the view that working in collaboration rather than in isolation or competition is both healthy in itself and also efficient, particularly when funds are limited. Even when external factors are the main determinants of collaborative approaches, there are usually substantial benefits to be gained.

6.6   Using quality review and audit feedback

Most colleges value the feedback they receive as a result of SFC/HMIE review and from the range of external audit activity by organisations such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Investors in People, Charter Mark, and various industry bodies. Review and audit reports produce useful information that provides the basis

for adjustments to practice and that can be enhanced by professional discussions between externals and college staff. Colleges sometimes find it useful to have strengths they are already aware of interpreted and presented in new forms and this can also help provide a focus for action on weaknesses that had previously been less clear. In addition, the follow-through phase of the current SFC/HMIE review model generally creates a welcome opportunity for colleges to have their potential SLIP examples developed further through detailed face-to-face discussions with reviewers.

6.7 Open days and visits

College staff frequently attend open days or arrange visits to other organisations, which can provide a catalyst for further work or activity that results in improvement or change. Such attendances or visits need to be well structured and provide bite-sized chunks of information for further dissemination and development into adoption or implementation. The emphasis needs firmly to be on the catalyst effect, with lots of interaction and a certain amount of informality. The most important output from an open day or a visit can sometimes simply be the means of securing continuing contact between practitioners. Where the trigger for a visit is an example of SLIP which is clear, well presented and with some validation or external evaluation, this can be a particularly successful approach.

6.8 Staff training and continuing professional development

Generally, staff are responsive to high-quality training, particularly when delivered by providers with good credibility. The requirements for staff training in relation to implementing good practice are no different from any other kind of training, nor indeed from the ideal learning experience provided for learners. It needs to be focused and well delivered. While on its own training may not bring about a change in practice or guarantee the adoption of good practice, it should provide a substantial foundation on which to develop further.

6.9 Setting targets

The setting of explicit targets in relation to securing the adoption of good or sector leading and innovative practice is of limited value. To identify exactly how many examples of new practice that any area of a college should pursue in any particular period may be unhelpful, may stifle and is likely to be fairly arbitrary. A more successful approach is where targets for improvement are specifically identified, and one of the solutions to the problem or the particular challenge may be to seek out examples of good practice that may help move things forward. Adopting good practice becomes a problem-solving strategy rather than an end in itself.

7 Case studies – some success stories

7.1 Learner and staff participation in national awards and competitions

Many colleges participate in national awards and competitions, with substantial activity in particular subject areas like construction, hairdressing and hospitality. Colleges confirm both the general benefits to learners from the participation in such events, and the particular self-fulfilment for those who won awards and prizes. National competitions provide a forum for the dissemination of sector-leading and innovative practice, and opportunities for wider implementation by college staff or learners observing role models worthy of emulation. Frequently, competitions and events also incorporate trade fairs and exhibitions that help to inform staff and learners of the latest equipment, technology and resources that are available in their subject areas. Participants have the opportunity to see other learners in action and employers get the chance to assess potential talent.

An annual *SKILLBUILD*[7] competition is the main national focus in the area of construction with several of Scotland's colleges regularly taking part and achieving success. According to Peter Rainbird, Chairman and Director, *SKILLBUILD* Competitions Ltd:

SKILLBUILD is there to provide a benchmark of excellence for all young aspiring persons who wish to come into the construction industry and succeed in a craft. SKILLBUILD is a national competition which is trying to find excellence among young craftspeople and of these, we pick the very best to go forward to compete internationally.[8]

Hairdressing learners participate regularly in regional and national competitions and, again, similar benefits are identified by both staff and learners. The increase in motivation from learners who are competitors is significant, and a substantial "buzz" is experienced by others in their classes who help in the organisation of the events, or supply highly valued moral support. Colleges identify learners' growth in confidence and self esteem as other noticeable benefits.

In hospitality, some colleges have a considerable history of participation in local, regional and national competitions. Many staff also compete in industry competitions such as the Culinary Olympics, and participation and success help them and others to adopt practice of a quality required for all learners aspiring to establish themselves at the highest level in the hospitality industry.

The emphasis on wider achievement within the revised HMIE/SFC quality framework[9] has helped to focus colleges on the potential benefits to learners of awards and competitions. Some colleges are beginning to look beyond the subject

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[7] www.skillbuild.org.uk

[8] *Improving teaching, training and learning through competitions, Standards Unit, Department for Education and Skills, 2005*

[9] *Standards and Quality in Scottish Further Education, Quality Framework for Scottish FE Colleges, May 2004*

areas previously mentioned as having the history of involvement in competitions, to expand their involvement into other subject areas.

HMIE review findings and other intelligence confirm that extending the learning experience in this way really works. There is consistent evidence of innovations and positive outcomes deriving from this type of activity. Learners participating in competitions or attaining external awards gain first-hand awareness of current industrial or commercial practice and bring back ideas to their college from which co-learners derive benefits. As a result, many learners enhance their self-esteem, gain in confidence, obtain confirmation of the value of what they have learnt, and develop *employability* and *citizenship* skills.

7.2   The Scottish Colleges Biotechnology Consortium

The Scottish Colleges Biotechnology Consortium (SCBC)[10] comprises Forth Valley College of Further and Higher Education, Adam Smith College, Fife, James Watt College of Further and Higher Education, Dundee College and Bell College. The SCBC central office is located within Forth Valley College of Further and Higher Education. The aims of the project were to establish state-of-the-art centres of excellence providing high-quality technical training for the biotechnology industry in Scotland and to develop partnerships with schools.

This partnership has enabled a diverse and multi-skilled team to provide training and education in biotechnology across Scotland. New qualifications in biotechnology have been developed that meet industry needs, and these partnerships have been exploited to produce learning materials for the units in the new qualifications – materials that are freely available to all colleges in Scotland, and to any schools who wish to deliver biotechnology topics. Master folder packs have been developed to a high standard with a rich set of resources.

One particular SCBC initiative resulted in the development of an online resource for the support and guidance of learners who were in employment. This product (*e-Mentor*) is now widely used across the colleges, particularly for the support of learners in evening or community-based provision. In another development, Forth Valley College has been through the process of becoming a Managing Agent for a Modern Apprenticeship in Biotechnology (with SEMTA) and will now assist the other consortium members to achieve similar status. SCBC has recently developed a set of e-learning tools to underpin the adoption of blended learning approaches in delivering biotechnology across the consortium colleges. These include tools to teach report writing, meeting with management and health and safety. Again, these resources are finding a wider use within the colleges through conversion to local VLE systems.

This initiative was supported by the Scottish Executive and gained additional funding from the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council. SCBC used the funding support to equip the consortium colleges with modern training laboratories and to upskill their science staff in biotechnology processes. Science staff in the

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[10]   www.scottishbiotech.org

consortium colleges have worked in partnership with each other and with industry and SQA to develop the new qualification and the resources to support its delivery.

SCBC organised the training and updating for all science staff in the consortium in collaboration with biotechnology companies. It also arranged the sharing of the development cost of high-quality materials for teaching and assessment. SCBC science staff were able to use their knowledge of the biotechnology industry and good-quality resources to provide stimulating learning experiences for learners.

Many learners have benefited from the consortium activity. They have refined or enhanced their ICT skills, put to good affect the opportunities for using a wide range of other learning approaches and materials, and gained significantly from exposure to latest industry-standard practices. Crucially, consortium members working together have adopted new practices and have been able to enhance the quality of learner experiences in ways they could not have achieved individually.

7.3 Scotland's Rural Colleges Benchmarking Group

The Scotland's Rural Colleges Group comprised 14 colleges that were in receipt of specific funding from SFC to benchmark aspects of their activity. These colleges, although diverse in nature, and located across the length and breadth of Scotland, faced similar challenges in relation to travel, sparseness of population and higher fixed costs associated with either their rural locations or their focus on land-based provision or both. Despite these difficulties, the member colleges worked in collaboration, deriving significant benefits from benchmarking activity, sharing of expertise and good practices and joint curriculum development. The member colleges were committed to the wellbeing of the rural economy and communities, and to providing students in rural areas with as extensive a curricular choice as possible within the constraints of rural areas.

Led by the principals of the colleges, and coordinated by Angus College, a benchmarking network had been established whereby data on a range of key performance indicators were submitted to the coordinating college which developed and distributed the collective information. The member colleges then utilised this data to compare results with comparable colleges within the network, based upon size and activities on a range of issues. This arrangement helped colleges to compare and contrast their performance in relation to other similar types of provision or activity within the network, and to adjust practice or introduce new practice in light of their findings.

The colleges in the benchmarking group had an agreed protocol for the sharing of good practice, and worked together as a whole or in small groups to share practices and to discuss openly with their colleagues the issues surrounding the reasons for success in the respective performance indicators. In this way colleges were able to:

- learn from each other and enter a professional dialogue on issues relevant to them;
- identify areas for potential future collaboration;

- commence the development of practical and tested improvement plans based upon what they had learned from those colleges where the performance indicators were stronger; and
- anticipate potential areas of concern and establish plans to manage risk.

Every college within the group had derived benefits from involvement, with these evident across a wide range of curriculum development, delivery, management, and support areas, including measurable improvement in teaching efficiency since the commencement of the project. Specific examples of positive outcomes over the past two years included:

- enhanced work experience opportunities for learners;
- improved core skills assessment pre-entry and the organisation of successful learning support interventions;
- enhanced information and financial support for learners with additional needs;
- more effective arrangement to support the recording of soft skills development within the hair and beauty curriculum;
- integration of additional certification options within the sports curriculum;
- joint development of progression award, professional development award and development of materials and delivery approaches for new HN frameworks; and
- joint development of online learning materials and extension of effective blended learning practice using online learning approaches.

7.4   *Focus on Learning* projects

In recent years, two *Focus on Learning* projects, undertaken by FE practitioners and stakeholders, have contributed to identifying and spreading good practice. The first project involved Cardonald, Cumbernauld, Falkirk and Angus colleges working in partnership with the SFEU and funded by SFEFC. The project aimed to improve learner achievement and retention through an innovative approach to motivate and support staff. This involved raising staff awareness levels on key themes such as learning styles, thinking styles, emotional intelligence and physical factors. By adopting a focus on learning and its impact upon levels of learner retention and achievement, the project illuminated the key issues and offered important insights into staff, curriculum and quality issues.

Staff development sessions were identified as the core vehicle for the success of the project. Working collaboratively through a management group, fourteen project teams each comprising a small team of lecturers, reviewed a current programme and devised an *intervention* which would have an impact upon learner achievement and retention. The interventions were based upon ideas and issues that were highlighted during taster seminars, including topics such as learning styles, thinking skills, emotional intelligence, physical factors and so on.

The findings were disseminated to the college sector through a series of conferences and publications. The outcomes of the interventions included improved retention rates and positive feedback from the learners involved. Critically, the process of encouraging learners to reflect on how they learn also gave the necessary

prominence to core skills development, consistently stressed by HMIE as vital to maximising the potential for individuals to develop further.

Building on the success of the first project, a second *Focus on Learning*[11] project, *STEPS to Employment,* was conceived. This project, funded by SFC and involving six colleges working with SFEU, helped develop and broaden learners' employability skills by enhancing the learning experience. The partnership, led by The Adam Smith College, also included Aberdeen College, Cardonald College, Dumfries and Galloway College, North Glasgow College and Reid Kerr College.

The project had an 18-month lifespan and is nearing its completion date in autumn 2006. There were 22 interventions presently running in the project that targeted a range of learners who would benefit most from developing and broadening their employability skills. The interventions adapted existing learning and teaching approaches to meet the needs of the target groups and achieve the aims of the project. Overall, 611 learners had enrolled on the programmes, with 89 staff from the six colleges contributing to the development of the project.

The areas of activity in the project include:

- creating a common understanding of employability skills;
- transferring good practice;
- developing staff continuously to enhance the effectiveness of the interventions;
- producing support materials for learning and teaching;
- disseminating the outcomes of the project; and
- evaluating the project to measure the achievement of objectives.

Each of the interventions utilised an action research approach based upon a robust framework that combined the following elements:

- a research plan identifying the aims, objectives and methodology;
- a clear explanation of how data would be collected and analysed; and
- a well-considered and thorough evaluation of the intervention and an assessment of outcomes in terms of impact upon the learner.

The staff involved are assigned a mentor who liaise with them and provide a point of contact to assist in measuring progress towards their objectives. Teams are asked to demonstrate triangulation of data from a variety of sources to support assertions in their research.

The mid-point reports for the interventions confirmed that the *Focus on Learning 2* project was having a positive impact on the learning experience for almost all learners involved in the programmes. The majority of interventions were nearing completion at the end of April 2006 and staff were in the process of collecting and triangulating the data they collected to evaluate progress. However, the outputs

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[11] www.sfeu.ac.uk/fol2.asp.

from interventions commenced earlier highlighted a demonstrable improvement in the development and broadening of learners' employability skills. These included:

The *Core Skills for Real* intervention at Cardonald College has increased learners' engagement with written English and responded to employers' concerns on the standard of communication skills. Learners' surveys emphasised high levels of satisfaction with the intervention. For example, 89% of the learners specified that the additional work had been useful in improving their class and course work and 95% of learners confirmed that their performance in assessments to date were providing encouraging evidence of their progress towards passing the English exam. An employer survey confirmed external support for developing skills in this way.

The *Motivated to Succeed* intervention at Reid Kerr College explored the links for learners on the NQ Graphic Design programme between the learning experience and motivation and attendance, using reflection techniques. Visualisation and positive thinking techniques helped learners develop a powerful motivation to improve attainment and achieve success. Early retention figures for the programme have improved to 100% and timekeeping and attendance have improved significantly. The projected outcome for success in the programme in 2006 is 95% compared with 70% for the same time in the previous year.

The *For Life* intervention at The Adam Smith College aimed to improve the motivation and attainment rates of learners on the NC Leading Sports programme. Learners in previous years had failed to see the relevance of units and how they inter-related, particularly units to support employability skills. Staff integrated the units into practical learning environments with a wider range of teaching styles adopted making learning more relevant to the workplace. The findings confirmed that attendance had improved and learners had enhanced their attainment in the practical elements of the programme. Comparison with a control group using the existing course work practices and materials showed that early retention in the *For Life* group was better by 5% in the first semester of 2005-06. Also, comparison of retention rates between the NC Leading Sports group in 2004-05 and the current *For Life* group demonstrated a 23% improvement in retention rates for the *Focus on Learning* group.

7.5   Appreciative Enquiry

Cardonald College has made good use of an SFEU-developed[12] *appreciative enquiry* facilitator programme. The *appreciative enquiry* approach looks for the positive core in an organisation, and takes it as the starting point for discussions on how to create a shared vision and make appropriate changes. It:

- encourages people within the organisation to discuss what is working well, to envision a future that builds on that success, to look at all the structures and procedures that would support such a future, and to develop a way forward;
- looks at a system or an organisation and searches for the success stories, adopting an appreciative stance rather than a problem-centred focus; and
- examines the best experiences and asks what works well and why, helping to develop insights into what success actually means, linked to people, resources, the organisation and its community.

Appreciative enquiry consists of four main steps

- bringing out stories or narratives of the moments of achievement which the organisation most values;
- combining these to create a vision for the future;
- sharing exciting discoveries and possibilities; and
- constructing the future through appropriate actions.

The fact that the plans for the future are grounded in reality from the past builds confidence that the desired futures can be achieved.

An appreciative enquiry is said to go through a '4d' cycle of conversations:

- Discover – appreciating and valuing the best of what is;
- Dream - envisioning what might be;
- Design - dialoguing what should be; and
- Deliver - innovating what will be.

One of the key assumptions with this approach is that in every organisation there will be examples of something that works well.

SFEU[13] worked with members of the Board of Management and management team of Cardonald College to build a picture of the direction of travel for the college using the college's strategic plan as the foundation for their discussion. By identifying and mapping the strengths with the aims and values of the college, trainers could help participants to establish what the possibilities in the future might look like and provided a context for future planning activity. The Board members and senior staff engaged with the appreciative enquiry process and determined where the strengths lay within the college, based upon the themes identified within the strategic plan. By

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[12] www.sfeu.ac.uk

[13] www.sfeu.ac.uk

articulating the positive features, participants gained a better shared understanding of the importance of underpinning values in determining the character of the college. The emphasis in subsequent planning documents shifted to give greater prominence to 'how we intend to do things' as well as the more traditional objectives reflecting 'what we intend to do'. The learner experience became more central to planning.

The exercise resulted in changes to the college strategic plan and other planning processes, providing a firmer basis for improvements and expressing the college's high aspirations more clearly and confidently.

SFEU have developed training packages in appreciative enquiry and offer facilitator training events to widen this approach in Scotland's colleges.

8   The challenge of evaluation

There is little specific or systematic evaluation of the impact on learners of good practice, best practice or sector-leading and innovative practice being adopted in colleges, mainly because it is inherently difficult in most cases to quantify what exactly has made the difference when improvement is acknowledged or recorded. For most colleges, improvement generally comes about through a combination of changes, adjustments and improvement activities, so singling out where the impact on learners actually comes from is difficult. However, colleges generally have a range of activity within their quality assurance arrangements that may provide some evidence of impact:

- specific learner surveys
- general learner satisfaction surveys
- programme review meetings
- programme review reports
- learner progress and achievement data
- learner retention data
- learner attendance data
- recruitment trends
- HMIE review evaluations and grades
- other external audit activity

In most cases, colleges would identify positive changes in any of the above feedback and evaluation processes as at least consistent with the positive impact of adopting good practice or sector-leading and innovative practice.

9   Recommendations

This section provides recommendations for improvement. Some recommendations involve SFC, some are recommendations for colleges themselves, and others relate to where HMIE has a role to play.

SFC should:

- develop ways of helping colleges to overcome barriers to sharing good practice;

- review the role of national agencies with quality-related responsibilities in providing collaborative support to help secure effective adoption of good practice;

- develop means of extending effective local collaboration and partnerships between colleges with the specific remit of sharing and taking forward good practice either generally or within specific subject areas; and

- provide further support for moves to develop stronger networks of subject specialists and support area staff in colleges.

Colleges should:

- develop further their approaches to planning to clearly include an explicit focus on identifying and securing the adoption of good practice;

- promote more rigorously the sharing and adoption of good practice within their own institutions and across the sector;

- plan the deployment of staff including associate assessors and others as appropriate to encourage further adoption of good practice; and

- capitalise fully upon associate assessor skills, knowledge and expertise to help secure the adoption of good practice.

HMIE should:

- working with SFEU, support more actively the adoption of good practice within colleges;

- review the content and usability of the good practice area of its website, together with a detailed analysis of user feedback, and act on the findings;

- further develop the role of college HMI in building the capacity to secure the adoption of good practice.

Appendix 1

Colleges which took part in the consultation:

- Aberdeen College
- Angus College
- Banff and Buchan College of Further Education
- Barony College
- Cardonald College
- Central College of Commerce
- Cumbernauld College
- Dumfries and Galloway College
- Dundee College
- Edinburgh's Telford College
- Elmwood College
- Forth Valley College of Further and Higher Education
- Glasgow Metropolitan College
- Inverness College
- James Watt College of Further and Higher Education
- Lauder College
- North Glasgow College
- Perth College
- Reid Kerr College
- Sabhal Mor Ostaig
- South Lanarkshire College
- Stevenson College Edinburgh
- Stow College
- The Adam Smith College, Fife
- West Lothian College

Other organisations consulted:

- Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC)
- Association of Scottish Colleges (ASC)
- Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU)
- Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)
- The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI)

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Appendix 3   **Glossary**

ALI   The Adult Learning Inspectorate

ASC   Association of Scottish Colleges

FE   Further Education

HMIE   Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education

HN   Higher National

JISC   Joint Information Systems Committee

NC   National Certificate

NQ   National Qualification

QAA   Quality Assurance Agency

SCBC   The Scottish Colleges Biotechnology Consortium

SEMTA   Science, Engineering, Manufacturing Technologies Alliance

SFC   Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council

SFEU   Scottish Further Education Unit

SLIP   Sector-leading and Innovative Practice

SQA   Scottish Qualifications Authority

VLE   Virtual Learning Environment