



WESSEX
GROUP
OF 6TH FORM
COLLEGES

WORKING IN HAMPSHIRE
PORTSMOUTH
SOUTHAMPTON

IMPROVING
QUALITY

5

IMPROVING QUALITY

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This booklet describes the different activities undertaken by the Wessex Group which have a direct or indirect impact on the quality of provision. It links some of the informal contacts and peer support that takes place and describes a specific initiative established to formalise the involvement of partner colleges in self-assessment and review. Looking to the future, the development of shared measures of performance for identifying the need for support within the partnership are highlighted as an important next step.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the work of the Wessex Group of Sixth Form Colleges¹ has a focus on improving the quality of service offered by member colleges to students and communities. Although the partnership was formally established to maximise negotiating power with suppliers, the antecedents of the partnership can be found in the Hampshire-based development of External Quality Review (EQR) which was established to facilitate the continuous improvement of teaching and learning using peer review. The benefits of joint working were quickly seen to have potential to impact positively upon the overall quality of provision. A raft of initiatives and developments within the Wessex Group has therefore been established over time, often based on sharing expertise within the partnership.

¹ Formerly the Hampshire Sixth Form Colleges' Partnership

CURRICULUM SUPPORT GROUPS

The Wessex Group manages around 40 Curriculum Support Groups (CSGs). The groups meet once a term, mostly in colleges but also on field trips or study days in local universities. The brief for the groups comes from the Vice-Principal (Curriculum) network and is straightforward – commitment to improving **teaching and learning** should lie at the heart of all CSG work.

The focus and direction of the groups is overseen by senior managers in the partnership and is managed by the **Curriculum Network Development Manager**. However, within individual groups there is an expectation that members tailor the content and discussion themselves. Their manager has outlined some principles:

- The agenda is designed and driven by practitioner interest
- Voluntarism is everything – being ‘told’ to attend is an antidote to participation
- Activity matters; status doesn’t – everyone has something to offer
- Everyone who comes must be willing to share – ideas, problems, expertise
- The atmosphere is essentially positive, geared to building professional communities that can move from problems to solutions

Good practice is shared via peer meetings and the ready-made groups provide scope for email-based queries and advice throughout the year. More detail about the work of the groups can be found in booklet 6.

OTHER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Peer group meetings for other groups of staff provide further opportunities for **sharing good practice** and working through common concerns. The Wessex Group runs regular peer networks for Vice-Principals, staff development officers, newly qualified teacher induction managers, clerks, human resources personnel, finance and administration managers, personal assistants, equality and diversity co-ordinators and Principals. There have been ad hoc groups set up to tackle major policy initiatives or to bring together groups of staff who have a longer term agenda. There are opportunities for some staff groups to meet in ‘open mornings’ to share experiences and to tackle common problems (see booklet 7, page 6). These have worked well with support staff groups who often have multiple roles in college.

COLLEGE-TO-COLLEGE PEER REVIEW

- Peer moderation of curriculum areas
- Peer review and moderation of lesson observations
- Using specific expertise from one college to support individuals or groups of staff, for example in establishing new courses
- Sharing inspection expertise
- Vice-Principals and Principals providing pre-inspection support
- Periodic joint training / briefing events with a quality focus
- Joint work on real problems and issues in partnership leadership programmes
- Shared approaches to tackling common concerns in peer group meetings
- Common inset days

There is a long history of peer involvement in the assessment of quality within the Wessex Group. Partnership colleges were founder members in 1993 of External Quality Review (EQR), a peer review consortium of sixth form and general further education colleges in the South East of England. It is common for Vice-Principals and quality managers to play a role in another college's self-assessment processes, for example by offering an external perspective on validation panels. And there are various other ad hoc arrangements that involve sharing expertise in moderating and to some extent regulating the internal processes of self-review that are part of all colleges' quality cycles. These **intra-partnership initiatives** have included the range indicated on the left.



FORMALISING PEER REVIEW

In the last decade, there has been a host of policy initiatives relating to the management of quality and improvement³⁴⁵⁶. Colleges have worked through the drafts and redrafts of the Framework for Excellence⁷ performance indicators for the post-16 sector. The agencies responsible for monitoring quality across institutions in a region have been changed, reclarified and then sometimes temporarily moved out of focus once more. However, there does seem to be a common thread – that of **self-regulation**. Both the previous Labour government and the current coalition have indicated a shift towards colleges taking responsibility for regulating the success of their own and, potentially, others' provision.

The interest in this stems partly from recognition that there are cost savings in reducing the bureaucratic burden linked to a centralised monitoring system. There is also a reasonable level of confidence about the quality of both existing provision and the internal systems of review and quality improvement. Nationally, this impetus towards increasing self-regulation has led to a growing interest in:

- **strengthening existing self-assessment processes**
- **testing out the potential for more systematised peer review of our systems and quality and**
- **moving towards self-regulation by the development of shared clear and transparent measures of performance for sixth form colleges – by a range of coalitions and partnerships.**

The Wessex Group has been involved in all three of these approaches. It has capitalised on long-standing relationships with other colleges to strengthen individual college self-assessment and it has found more formal ways of involving other colleges' perspectives in evaluating their provision.

³ Foster, A (2005) Realising the potential. A review of the future role of further education colleges. DfES

⁴ DfES (2006) Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances

⁵ DCSF, DIUS (2008) Raising expectations – Enabling the system to deliver

⁶ Single Voice (2008). Prospectus for Self-regulation. www.feselfregulation.org.uk

⁷ Eg Skills Funding Agency (2010) Framework for Excellence Provider Guide 2010/11

SELF-DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

The Wessex Group sought to formalise some of the ad hoc peer review work. It wanted to develop further the role that partnership colleges had in raising standards across the whole partnership. In 2008 it established a partnership-wide self-development initiative which aimed to:

1. Validate Wessex Group colleges' existing systems of self-assessment and quality assurance.
2. Recalibrate existing mechanisms within the partnership for observing practice and capturing/disseminating good practice so that standards are raised across the Group.
3. Share experience and good practice in a range of areas – both curriculum and cross-college.
4. Provide help/advice/coaching in colleges which request it in areas that they have identified through existing self-assessment procedures.

STRUCTURE

Two **clusters** of partnership colleges were established to develop a strong self-development function. One of the clusters was already in existence and partially funded by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA); the second was newly created and comprised the remaining colleges. QIA funding was also secured for this group under the Peer Review and Development Scheme (PRD)⁸. The clusters continue to operate although this external funding is no longer available.

PROCESS

Both clusters decided to develop ways of formalising peer review of college self-assessment procedures. They also agreed to provide support to colleges needing help in particular departments or cross college areas. Protocols set out the purposes of peer involvement and also what is expected by and of colleges involved in a peer review activity.

Cluster meetings are also used to address **current issues** relating to assessment of current practice; for example how to evaluate impact of student support, implications of changes to Framework for Excellence and the common inspection framework, criteria for deciding on capacity to improve grades, quality standards in business areas, equality and diversity in self-assessment.

When they got down to business, the two clusters were mindful of the need to maintain trust and work at a pace that suited their partner colleges. Each group developed a slightly **different approach** to their tasks with one group concentrating more on peer review of self-assessment process and practice; the other exploring ways of matching strengths in one college with the development needs of another. The Wessex Group as a whole has benefited from these separate paths as the clusters meet together periodically to share lessons and approaches.

⁸ Grants were awarded for groups of colleges to work collaboratively to plan and carry out peer review and development activities

Peer review of self-assessment

Cluster 1 used a range of different approaches to reviewing colleges' self-assessment processes including paired lesson observations, use of student response data, self-assessment reviews (SARs), grading validation, appraisals etc. Colleges have worked in pairs to offer a peer review of a college's self-assessment systems.

In one example, self-assessment systems in a college were altered to better reflect the significant amount of short course provision. Previously, the system had been an annual cycle self-assessment more closely tied to provision for full-time 16-19 students.

Cluster 2 devised a system of support through matched **development visits**. Honest discussion (based on SARs, Ofsted, internal quality reviews and senior manager intelligence) about strengths and areas for development provided scope to match colleges needing help with those in a good position to provide it. A series of development visits are planned each year, with opportunities to update and add more.

IS IT WORTH IT?

The initiative has spawned lots of activity and some changes to processes which have strengthened colleges' ability to self-assess their provision. Has it had an **impact** on quality? Can it raise standards across all colleges involved?

Those involved give a qualified yes in response. They can see benefits to subjects which have had help, but it is difficult to attribute improvements wholly to that particular intervention. We have gathered soft data and can tell stories about improvements in results, newly motivated staff, focused action planning etc. Evidence that directly proves the value of involvement of partner colleges is harder to come by.

Examples of changes

- Following a development visit to one college, there was an improvement in the exam results in the Psychology department.
- A broader understanding of other colleges' monitoring systems led to one college reviewing the use of minimum target grades alongside data from January exams to provide better targeted support to students.
- A development visit with practical advice and suggestions to a PE Department resulted in a more tightly focused action plan to improve results.
- A college department returned from a development visit with clear ideas about what they were going to do, action plans, strategies for working with struggling students.
- Travel and Tourism staff adjusted their schemes of work to find a better balance between time spent on teaching different stages and learning outcomes.

The groups continue to work in order to identify longer term benefits and because there is a belief in the intrinsic value of sharing expertise and perspective around the large gene pool that is the partnership of Wessex Group colleges. We have certainly learnt a lot about what is needed for colleges to be effective in a peer review system.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT

The value of history and a wider context for sharing and peer review

The importance of group stability and longevity

Size of the groups

The need for sensitivity and confidentiality

The value of peer review based on knowledge

The value of history and a wider context for sharing and peer review

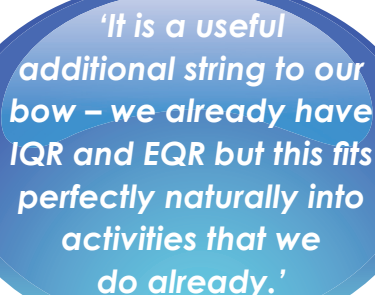
The clusters established under the Wessex Group Self-Development Initiative were effectively the **formalisation** of processes that had been happening in the partnership already. People were accustomed to talking and sharing problems. There were existing forums for sharing expertise and good practice and well-established programmes of shared review eg EQR, which contributed to a climate of openness. The work of EQR was also highly significant in the training of reviewers so that there was an existing skill base for the often sensitive

role of visiting other colleges, observing lessons and feeding back on practice.

The importance of group stability and longevity

Colleges in one cluster spent a lot of time in the early stages exploring each other's self-assessment systems. Later on, they became confident about sharing performance data and inviting colleagues from other colleges to provide a critical eye, not only on their quality systems but also on their actual provision. In the early stages focusing on the process was felt by the group to be an important first step in order to **build up trust**. This is a long-term relationship and time is needed to ensure that colleagues feel safe about sharing weaknesses.

The time invested in building relationships and creating a safe environment means that there is value in working in the same groups over the medium term (possibly on a three year cycle).



'It is a useful additional string to our bow – we already have IQR and EQR but this fits perfectly naturally into activities that we do already.'

Size of the groups

The optimum size of the clusters varies according to their task and remit. Colleges involved in peer review of self-assessment felt that four colleges in a cluster worked well – it allowed for pairings which can be altered according to need and it was easy to ensure that the workload was evenly shared.

Where development needs are matched with strengths in other colleges, the group size could be larger to maximize the pool of expertise. This is now conducted across all 11 colleges of the Wessex Group.

The need for sensitivity and confidentiality

The nature of the discussion within meetings was frank and sometimes hard-hitting. It is important to minute meetings sensitively and respect confidentiality. The minutes therefore do not reflect the full detail of the strengths and weaknesses in particular colleges and it is vital that all colleges are represented at key meetings.

The value of peer review based on knowledge

The Wessex Group staff involved in this initiative feel that it is a more powerful and useful assessment of quality in a college than a formal external review. The combination of a critical friend with knowledge and understanding of the college can lead to a realistic picture of a college's performance. When the

stakes are less about the reputation of the college and more about improving performance, there is a much greater scope for learning and development.

For example, during one peer review a candid discussion with a director of finance highlighted that the checks and balances required under the self-assessment system were effectively repeated in standard audits. As a result of this feedback, the college reviewed its quality systems. It was considered unlikely that this issue would have emerged during, say, an Ofsted inspection.

A WIDER CONTEXT

Similar types of initiative are operating throughout the country, many of them established under the Quality Improvement Agency PRD scheme. The Sixth Form Colleges' Forum has established a group of peer review co-ordinators and collates an annual guide of peer review activity⁹. This illustrates the range of approaches taken by groups of colleges such as CENBASE, S7, NorVlc. Almost all sixth form colleges are involved in peer review groups and the guide includes practical information provided by them on protocols, agreed principles, working documents, training, use of data etc.

⁹ The Good Practice Guide to Peer Review (2009). SFCF

JOINTLY AGREED MEASURES OF PERFORMANCE

Members of the Wessex Group have signed a **Concordat** (see booklet 2) which sets out the terms of membership and principles of the partnership.

It includes a commitment to formalising collaboration on quality assurance and improvement.

The Group is working towards establishing clear, transparent and agreed measures of performance for partnership colleges.

Where any one of the 11 sixth form colleges is identified as underperforming according to such measures, the first action external to the college is to support them using the demonstrable expertise in quality

improvement available in the other 10 sixth form colleges.

Membership of the partnership requires an undertaking that, should an individual college be identified as giving cause for concern, it will accept support from fellow member colleges; and that support will be forthcoming from member colleges, all of which will have been signatory to the Concordat.



JOINT PROFESSIONAL AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Joint training opportunities have a valuable **spin off** over and above the savings that can be made by bespoke local programmes (see booklets 4 and 7). Whenever groups of staff get together, they take advantage of the opportunity to talk about what they are working on and to ask for advice. Within the leadership programme format, there is scope for case study work based on real issues facing partnership colleges; there are also action learning sets to allow participants to work through a current project as the course progresses.

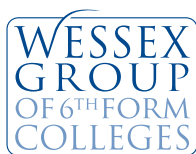
The mentor programme, particularly at senior manager level, allows cross-fertilisation of ideas as Principals from other colleges offer their expertise.

In addition to this incidental approach to improving quality, the Wessex Group has organised a number of **specific events** with a quality focus, often incorporating input from outside the partnership and the sector. For example a quality conference organised jointly with the three local authorities covered by the Wessex Group colleges provided colleagues from governance, local authority, Learning and Skills Council and sixth form and general further education colleges with the chance to discuss the implications of the machinery of government changes on performance management.

Similarly, common inset days organised on an annual basis bring groups of staff together with an agenda of improving teaching and learning.

Improving quality and performance is a major plank of the Wessex Group's work. Some of the initiatives and developments that facilitate this have been deliberately created and have a specific focus on quality. Others are by-products of an ethos of sharing and mutual support which has been established over time. The whole package of quality-related activity probably adds up to more than the sum of its parts – because there is clear direction from the partnership's leaders that we are working towards collaborative improvement.





WORKING IN HAMPSHIRE
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