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# The Impact of the Wessex Group of 6th Form Colleges

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## Executive Summary

This project aimed to study the model of tertiary sector collaboration found in the Wessex Group of 6<sup>th</sup> Form Colleges. It had two main goals:

1. To study the effectiveness of the 6<sup>th</sup> form college model
2. To study the relationship between collaboration and competition, and their respective role in furthering effectiveness in the Wessex Group.

To do this, we used a mixed methods approach. Impact on attainment was studied by constructing a number of matched samples of institutions and constructing value-added models that compare these to the Wessex Group. Information on the relationship between collaboration and competition in the Wessex group was collected using existing evaluation data and interviews.

Main findings are as follows:

- Wessex Group 6<sup>th</sup> Form Colleges significantly outperformed a matched sample of FE colleges.
- Wessex Group 6<sup>th</sup> Form Colleges significantly outperformed a matched sample of school 6<sup>th</sup> forms.
- Main reasons for this high performance were seen to be the breadth of provision, specialised teaching expertise and an environment that prepares for HE.
- The Wessex Group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges was seen as highly effective, providing significant cost savings and providing high quality CPD and leadership development. In addition, the quality assurance mechanisms in place and the mutual support provided by the network were seen as having led to higher standards.
- Reasons for the success of the network were mutual trust built on a foundation of prior collaboration and personal relationships, the mediating role of the network coordinator, and the perceived mutual benefits from the collaboration.

## **Introduction**

The Wessex Group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges represents an innovative and interesting approach to collaborative work in a competitive environment, while the tertiary model itself is under-researched and in many ways under-appreciated within the national education system. This study had two main aims:

1. To study the effectiveness of the 6<sup>th</sup> form college model in terms of
2. To study the relationship between collaboration and competition, and their respective role in furthering effectiveness in the Wessex Group.

## **Methodology**

The study used a mixed methods approach with the intention of maximising information collected while minimising the burden on participating colleges. We used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to do this.

To study aim 1 we used a quasi-experimental quantitative approach. In quasi-experimental studies we compare the study group of interest (in this case the Wessex Group) with a comparison sample that is matched as closely as possible to the study group on as many relevant criteria as possible. As we wanted to compare attainment in 6<sup>th</sup> form Colleges and the Wessex Group to a variety of other providers in a robust way, we looked at three comparator groups:

1. A group of school 6<sup>th</sup> forms;
2. A group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges that do not form part of the Wessex group but are located in an authority where they form a major part of 6<sup>th</sup> form provision;
3. A group of general FE colleges.

This allowed us to look at the following questions:

1. Does the tertiary model lead to higher levels of attainment and participation compared to school/GFE models?
2. Does the Wessex model of collaboration lead to higher levels of attainment compared to other tertiary models?

Comparison groups were matched based on student characteristics such as prior attainment, ethnicity, gender and social disadvantage, as well as location (institutions were selected from authorities that are reasonable statistical neighbours to the Wessex Group area). Comparison groups were constructed so that they contained an approximately equal number of students to the Wessex group. This will mean that, for example, the school 6<sup>th</sup> form comparison group contained a larger number of schools than there are colleges in the Wessex group due to the difference in size between school 6<sup>th</sup> forms and 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges.

Propensity score matching was used to construct the matched sample. We then analysed attainment, and changes therein in Wessex Group and comparison samples from 2007 to 2010.

The National Pupil Database (NPD) was used to collect data on students' levels of attainment as well as their background characteristics and college-level data such as cohort sizes.

To study aim 2, we used qualitative data collection methods to look at the characteristics of the Wessex groups and 6<sup>th</sup>-Form colleges, ways in which Wessex Group colleges collaborate within a competitive setting, and what the implications of this are for leadership and institutional effectiveness.

Interviews were conducted with senior leaders in 10 of the 11 colleges to provide in-depth information needed to gain an understanding of processes involved. A total of 24 group and individual interviews were undertaken with a range of senior leaders such as principals and vice principals, curriculum leaders and finance directors. Semi-structured interview schedules were used to ensure sufficient flexibility while employing a common framework allowing comparability of results. Of course, this evidence has its limitations, in that it represents the views of managers of sixth-form colleges, without including, for example, the views of students or the alternative perspectives from school sixth forms.

This qualitative data was analysed using a thematic framework, where we looked for main themes using the Qualrus software programme.

## Findings from the quantitative study

### 1. Do students in the Wessex group outperform those in a matched comparison sample of school 6<sup>th</sup> forms?

#### 1.1. Matching the sample

Propensity score matching, a statistical method based on logistical regression, was used to identify school 6<sup>th</sup> forms as similar as possible to each of the 11 Wessex group colleges in terms of student intake. Student intake was measured through:

- Key Stage 4 results, i.e. total points score and percentage students achieving GCSE grades at A\*-C including English and Maths
- Free school meal eligibility
- Special Needs status
- IDACI score
- Ethnic groups

Each college was matched to a number of school sixth forms as similar to itself in intake as possible, until an approximately equal sample size was reached. The final dataset contained 60 school sixth forms. Statistical analysis showed that the matched sample did not differ significantly from the Wessex group on any of the intake measures mentioned above.

#### 1.2. Analysis

Data was analysed for the 4 years from 2007 to 2010. Anonymised data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) was obtained from the Department for Education. We used multilevel modelling to analyse the data. This method divides the variance in outcomes between the different hierarchical levels at which the data is structured. In this case there were two such levels, individual students and schools/colleges. This then allowed us to look at the contribution of different variables at their proper level. So, for example, we would expect any 'Wessex group effect' to explain differences between school/colleges rather than differences between individual students. Multilevel modelling allows us to test exactly this.

As no one measure can accurately reflect academic outcomes, we looked at a number of outcome measures:

- Total A-level points score,
- Number of A-level passes,
- Number of AS-level passes
- Number of passes at A\* and A grades

These were compared for Wessex group and comparator schools.

In order to provide accurate measures, a number of predictors of student outcomes were added to the model. These were

- GCSE passes at grades A\*-C including English and Maths, a measure of prior attainment
- Free school meal eligibility
- Special educational needs status
- Gender
- IDACI score
- Ethnic group

A dummy variable (0-1) was added at the school/college level indicating membership or otherwise of the Wessex group. Overall, between 13% and 36% of the variance in student outcomes was explained at the school/college level (i.e. that part of the difference in performance between students that results from them going to different schools/colleges), with the remainder at the student level (i.e. that part of the difference in performance between students that results from individual differences between students such as ability or social background).

In each year studied and for each outcome variable, the main predictor of A-level outcomes was prior attainment, which explained between 26% and 42% of the variance in student-level outcomes. Once prior attainment was factored in, the other background variables were not strong predictors of outcomes, with FSM eligibility, IDACI scores and ethnicity (in favour of ethnic minorities) only occasionally reaching significance, and gender and SEN not significant.

In a next phase the variable of interest, the dummy variable for membership of the Wessex group, was added to the analyses. Table 1 shows for which years and which outcomes a difference was found between Wessex group sixth-form colleges and comparison schools. A significant difference is marked with an X. In all cases a significant difference means that students in Wessex group colleges outperformed their peers in school sixth forms. (The full multilevel models can be provided on request).

Table 1: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched school sixth forms – significant differences

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 |      | X    |      | X    |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   |      | X    |      | X    |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. | X    | X    | X    | X    |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      | X    | X    | X    | X    |

The table shows that students in Wessex group colleges had significantly higher levels of performance than their peers in comparison school sixth forms in most analyses. This is particularly apparent for number of passes at A\*-A grades and AS-level passes.

However, in order for us to get a more accurate picture of this difference between Wessex group sixth form colleges and matched school sixth forms we need to look at what is called a measure of effect size, as the large sample size may make even small effects statistically significant. To do this, we will look at what percentage of the variance in student outcomes is explained by them attending Wessex group sixth form colleges rather than school sixth forms. As Wessex group membership is a school/college level variable, we will look at the percentage of the school/college level variance explained. Results are given in table 2.

Table 2: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched school sixth forms – percentage of variance explained

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 |      | 8%   |      | 11%  |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   |      | 9%   |      | 9%   |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. | 19%  | 17%  | 20%  | 19%  |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      | 23%  | 20%  | 21%  | 25%  |

Table 2 shows that Wessex group membership explains up to a quarter of school/college level variance in student outcomes, a practically significant amount that indicates that Wessex group colleges outperform the matched comparison sample of school sixth forms.

2. Do students in the Wessex group outperform those in a matched comparison sample of other 6<sup>th</sup>-form colleges?

In a second set of analyses we compared Wessex group sixth form colleges to a matched sample of non-Wessex group sixth form colleges. The same procedures were used to match colleges as was used in the previously described schools analysis, and a total of 12 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges were matched with the 11 Wessex group colleges. Propensity score matching was used, and no significant differences were found between Wessex group colleges and matched comparison colleges on any of the intake variables.

The same outcome variables were used as in the schools comparison, and the same multilevel modelling strategies and predictors were employed. The majority of the variance in outcomes is explained at the student level (i.e. is due to individual differences between students), with between 12% and 24% of variance explained at the college level. Again prior attainment was by far the strongest predictor of outcomes, explaining between 24% and 45% of variance at the student level. The remaining student predictors were not in most cases significant, with only FSM eligibility and IDACI scores reaching significance in some of the analyses.

Wessex group membership was added as a predictor in a second phase of the analyses. Table 3 shows significant differences between Wessex group and matching sixth form colleges, indicated by X.

Table 3: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched sixth form colleges – significant differences

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 |      | X    | X    |      |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   |      |      |      |      |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. |      |      |      |      |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      |      | X    | X    |      |

As can be seen in table 3, there is limited evidence of significant differences between students in Wessex group colleges and students in other sixth form colleges. Where differences are found it is mainly in total points score and AS level passes, where in some years Wessex group students outperformed their peers in matched sample colleges.

In table 4 we show the percentage variance explained at the college level for those years/outcome measures where significant differences were found. Differences are generally around 10%

Table 4: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched sixth form colleges – percentage of variance explained

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 |      | 7%   | 10%  |      |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   |      |      |      |      |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. |      |      |      |      |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      |      | 11%  | 9%   |      |

3. Do students in the Wessex group outperform those in a matched comparison sample of general FE colleges?

In a third set of analyses we compared Wessex group sixth form colleges to a matched sample of general FE colleges. The same procedures were used to match colleges as was used in the previously described schools analysis, and a total of 10 GFE colleges were matched with the 11 Wessex group colleges. Propensity score matching was used, and no significant differences were found between Wessex group colleges and matched comparison FE colleges on any of the intake variables.

The same outcome variables were used as in the schools comparison, and the same multilevel modelling strategies and predictors were employed. The majority of the variance in outcomes is again explained at the student level (i.e. is due to individual differences between students), with between 15% and 27% of variance explained at the college level. Again prior attainment was by far the strongest predictor of outcomes, explaining between 22% and 46% of variance at the student level. The remaining student predictors were not in most cases significant, with only FSM eligibility reaching significance in some of the analyses.

Wessex group membership was added as a predictor in a second phase of the analyses. Table 5 shows significant differences between Wessex group and matching FE colleges, indicated by X.

Table 5: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched FE colleges – significant differences

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 | X    | X    | X    | X    |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   | X    | X    | X    | X    |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. | X    | X    | X    | X    |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      | X    | X    | X    | X    |

As can be seen in table 5, Wessex group colleges outperformed comparator FE colleges in all years and on all measures.

In table 6 we show the percentage variance explained at the college level for those years/outcome measures where significant differences were found.

Table 6: Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges compared to matched FE colleges – percentage of college-level variance explained

|                                                    | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
|----------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Total Points score                                 | 12%  | 14%  | 13%  | 16%  |
| Number of passes at GCE A Level.                   | 15%  | 17%  | 15%  | 18%  |
| Number of A Level qualifications at grade A or A*. | 24%  | 29%  | 27%  | 33%  |
| Number of passes at AS Level.                      | 33%  | 27%  | 34%  | 31%  |

Table 6 shows that Wessex group membership explains up to a third of college level variance in student outcomes, a practically significant amount that indicates that Wessex group colleges outperform the matched comparison sample of general FE colleges. The differences between the Wessex group 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges and comparator general FE colleges is greater than for any of the other comparisons.

#### 4. Conclusion

The evidence presented here shows that students in Wessex group schools outperform their peers in school sixth forms and general FE colleges with a similar intake profile to a significant degree. They do not, however, outperform other sixth form colleges with a similar intake profile.

## **Why do students in sixth form colleges outperform their peers in school sixth form?**

While we cannot provide definitive answers as to why a sixth form college effect appears to be present, we do have some evidence from qualitative data on factors that may help to explain this. As part of the project the research team conducted interviews in 10 of the 11 Sixth Form Colleges. A total of 24 interviews were conducted. As part of these interviews we probed advantages and disadvantages of sixth form colleges. A number of key themes emerged from these interviews:

### **1. Breadth of provision**

A major advantage of sixth form colleges for students is that their scale allows them to provide a broad range of subject options, making it more likely that students will be able to study subjects that fit both their interests and abilities. This was seen as a factor that distinguished colleges from schools to a great extent and that was advantageous to students: 'We are able to offer a full range of A-level subject choices, which is difficult for a school. I think that allows students to make choices that fit their interests better' (Senior Manager). The size differential also means sixth form colleges can offer high quality resources which create a good learning environment in a range of subject areas.

### **2. Specialised teaching expertise**

Due to their specialised nature, sixth form colleges have developed high levels of expertise in the teaching of A-level subjects. Teachers are all specialist A-level teachers, which is not always the case in school sixth forms, where teachers will typically teach across a range of Key Stages. 'In schools, a lot of sixth-form teachers will do this only part-time, they will mainly teach in other Key Stages, and maybe get some sixth form as a reward. Here we don't have that, so our teachers are really focussed on A-level.' (Curriculum leader). This specialisation may result in improved teaching quality, and in turn in improved performance

### **3. An environment that prepares for HE**

Sixth form colleges often create a campus-like environment, in which students have an experience of freedom and scale that is closer to university life than can typically be offered to students in a school sixth form. This may help ease the transition to university by providing students with an intermediate step between the more regulated and personal nature of school and the freedom and scale of a university campus.

### **4. Specialist pastoral support**

As well as specialised teaching expertise, sixth-form colleges can also offer a range of specialised pastoral support and careers advice. Again, the scale differences with school sixth form provision and the specialised nature of sixth form colleges that allows them to focus on the specific needs of their students are key factors in enabling this: 'We have a whole team of pastoral people, health people, careers advice and so on, so that side of things is catered for very well here, and that is clearly benefitting students, not least as they have some privacy when accessing these resources' (Senior Manager). Funding cuts are presently threatening the breadth of this provision, however.

Of course, there are also acknowledged disadvantages to sixth form colleges, which, like many of the advantages, are linked to both the scale and specialised nature of the colleges. The first of these is that the campus-like environment may not suit all students, with some requiring the additional structure of the school environment as they may feel lost in the more impersonal setting of a sixth form college campus: 'For some students, of course, it can be too much freedom, they don't cope well with that. In those cases they would probably be better off in a school sixth form' (Principal). The greater subject choice may also suit students who are more confident in their choices better. Finally, there is a danger that the specialist nature of teachers may lead to recruitment from a relatively narrow pool of potential staff: 'Yes, we do often have teachers who kind of stay in the system. We find ourselves recruiting in the same pool, sixth-form teachers from Hampshire' (Principal).

A specific problem for sixth-form colleges are inequities in the funding formula which leave them underfunded on a per student basis when compared to school sixth forms (which may also benefit from cross-subsidies within the school). This may lead to vulnerability to worsening economic conditions, competitive pressures and demographic changes.

## **Collaboration, competition and the Wessex group of sixth form colleges**

The Wessex group of sixth form colleges was founded in 1997 as the Hampshire sixth form colleges partnership and consists of 11 sixth form colleges operating in Hampshire, Southampton and Portsmouth. The constituent sixth-form colleges vary greatly in terms of intake and environment. What they have in common, however, is the need to operate within a competitive environment of free parental and student choice and limited resources. In this section we will look at ways in which the Wessex group may aid or hinder the effectiveness of the sixth form colleges in the area working in this competitive environment, the impact of competition and collaboration on the sixth form colleges, and the extent to which they hinder or help the effectiveness of the sixth form colleges.

### 1. Effectiveness of the Wessex Group

Collaboration within the network is largely seen as a highly positive factor for its members.

The collaborative is seen as having led to a number of cost savings, in particular relating to joint procurement of, for example, insurance. The exact size of the cost savings will differ for each college and is hard to calculate, but is estimated by some interviewees as being up to 250K: 'In our college, we believe we have saved well over 200K by being part of the network, and this is really one of the key aims for us. It's across a range of activities, insurance, ICT, procurement, CPD, so really that has been very beneficial to us' (Senior Manager).

The network also allows the colleges to engage in shared professional development activities, for example by organising common inset days. These are seen as particularly helpful in providing high quality professional development as well as in allowing visits to other colleges to, for example, 'Look at how they use technology, what we can learn from them' (Curriculum leader). The extent to which colleges within the group appear willing to share good practice was frequently remarked on. A major part in this is played by the curriculum support groups, which meet regularly to share good practice, and which allow teachers in similar subject areas to share good practice. These are seen as particularly helpful for the smaller colleges, where a teacher may be the only one in her/his school to teach a less popular subject, and would otherwise be lacking in opportunities for professional dialogue with peers, though some are seen as more effective than others. 'We discuss various aspects, curriculum, teaching, pastoral care, and that sharing of expertise is really important' (Curriculum leader). Training happens in a number of areas. This can take the form of external partners, such as Edexcel coming in to train subject groups. Working as a group is an advantage here 'They are interested in us as a market place, so we can get them in more easily' (Principal). Training can take the form of getting colleagues from other colleges, such as in one case a specialist in funding implications to organise CPD in their specialist area.

Leadership development provided by the Wessex Group is also seen as a major positive. Leadership development in the group takes two forms: formal leadership development programmes provided by the group and leader networks that exist in the group. One Vice

principal, for example, commented that: 'Being part of the Vice Principals curriculum group has been really useful, and allows us to share good practice. A piece of work we have been doing recently was on how we use exam boards and how we coordinate exam board training. We are coordinating approaches to obtaining training from exam boards, seeing who uses which exam board for what subject, and how we can coordinate that.' Administrators also have a number of network groups, such as the finance group, and it is this breadth of networking across levels of staff in the colleges that is said to make the network particularly useful. Coaching training is again seen as helpful.

The longstanding EQR process is seen as a major factor in the success of the Wessex group. The EQR training where the colleges, together with others from outside of the county, work on quality assurance through visits from trained staff of other colleges who look at particular areas using Ofsted criteria is seen as very helpful: 'It gives us an impartial, external view of the college' (Principal), and as one of the reasons for the excellent inspection results many of the colleges get. Outside of the formal EQR process, staff, often at high levels, also visit and provide feedback on various occasions: 'There really is an ethos of being happy to help, it is like a free consultancy' (Principal).

Political influence is a further advantage of collaboration. By being part of a network, and one that encompasses a high proportion of A-level provision in the locality, the colleges are able to exert an influence that would not be feasible for any single college. This is evident in relations with exam boards, where the network is able to invite and have a dialogue with key staff, and with politics, where the network allows access to Ministers and local politicians that may not otherwise be forthcoming.

The perceived usefulness of collaboration is demonstrated by the setting up of a further collaborative network located in the urban part of the county. These colleges perceive themselves as having specific similarities, interests and circumstances that mean they would benefit from closer collaboration as a group. Member colleges, however, stress that they see this collaboration as complementary to their existing collaboration in the Wessex group, which they perceived as both inherently valuable and useful, and as having a strong 'brand' in the region.

## 2. The impact of competition on colleges and the Wessex Group.

Within the local sixth-form landscape, colleges clearly compete as well as collaborate with one another. Free enrolment of pupils, with funding dependent on pupil numbers, means that colleges pursued active marketing and recruitment strategies. The impact of this competitive environment was seen differently in different colleges, determined to a large extent by their location and situation. In those colleges seen as most desirable and high performing by students and parents, which tended to be located outside of the largest urban areas in the county, competition was often seen as a positive: 'Competition keeps you sharp, it forces you to raise and maintain standards' (Principal) was a typical quote, and competition was generally seen as a motivator for improvement. The greater freedom that came with the introduction of competition was also seen as a benefit: 'The autonomy that we now have, to shape policies and

practice, has, in my view, strongly improved standards in this college' (Vice principal). However, in those colleges that were less strong in the market, in general those colleges situated in large urban centres, views were more negative. 'What are the benefits of competition? There are none.'(Principal). In these colleges the impact of competition was seen to lie mainly in causing students in their catchment areas to go elsewhere, leaving them with a smaller and academically weaker student body than would otherwise be the case. There was also a perception that competition could work against institutions collaborating for the benefit of all students in the region, though a strong moral commitment to the broader student body was evident nonetheless.

Whatever the views of interviewees, competition was considered to be a given within the present system, and one that colleges would have to work within. The network was seen as playing a key role here, in that as well as the advantages mentioned above it was seen as almost a regulator of competition in the region. Issues related to competition were frequently discussed in network meetings, especially those between college Principals: 'Discussions can become quite heated sometimes' (Principal), and could go into a variety of issues from marketing to the distance from the college which college buses were to go to pick up students. The network had reached a number of agreements to temper competition, for example by precluding negative comments about competing colleges in marketing. In this way the network had led to what one Principal referred to as 'civilised competition'. Interestingly, some interviewees also commented that the competitive environment had in some senses led to more genuine collaboration than existed within the Local Authority controlled framework, where much was left to the authority and genuine collaboration between individual colleges was limited.

### 3. Making collaboration work

One of the key elements in resolving the tensions that competition may cause in a network like the Wessex Group has been the fact that the network has been built upon a longstanding basis of collaboration and the trust that has developed along with it. Even before the advent of the group in 1997, collaboration between the colleges occurred, with, for example, a quality review manual developed jointly as early as 1993. This 'civilised competition' within the network had not appeared from nowhere, however. In the early days of competition, when the colleges were first incorporated and released from local authority control, competition had been far fiercer and collaboration limited. It was partly due to some of the perceived problems with this approach that the group was founded and collaboration strengthened. The existing ties and relationships between colleges in the area allowed collaboration to be resumed and strengthened following this initial period of systemic upheaval. These ties of trust have been strengthened through collaborating, and also through the personal relationships that exist within the network. There is a fear that the reduced funding levels hitting colleges may intensify competition and increase tensions in the group.

One major advantage here is that the group is seen as a space where open discussion is possible 'I see it as quite an honest forum, where we can really discuss any issues we have, around timetabling or even resources' (Principal). There is considered to be a great deal of openness, especially at the levels below that of principals where strong collegiality is present. Competition

is experienced more strongly at the senior management levels, at the level of middle management and teachers there is a strong sense of solidarity, which is further strengthened by the fact that many teachers identify strongly with their subject, and therefore with other teachers of that subject across institutions.

A major factor in making the network effective is the role of the network coordinator. As has been shown in previous research, the presence of a coordinator who is not one of the principals of the participating organisations and therefore can act as a neutral mediator as well as providing essential organisational support and momentum is key to effective networking. The Wessex group clearly has such an arrangement in place, and the effectiveness of the coordinator was frequently remarked upon.

Building up trust over time and clear mutual benefits had allowed colleges to sustain the network in the face of competitive pressures. This had been facilitated through personal relationships, with many of the principals having worked in several of the network colleges before attaining principalship. However, increased financial pressures had recently necessitated the signing of a concordat to formalise collaborative work and regulate competition.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study shows a clear positive impact of both the 6<sup>th</sup> form model of A-level provision and the Wessex group of 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges.

There is quantitative evidence that the group outperform matched groups of school 6<sup>th</sup> forms and FE colleges in terms of student attainment, though this was not the case for a matched group of other 6<sup>th</sup> form colleges.

The collaboration is perceived to have led to:

- More effective provision of CPD
- More effective provision of leadership development
- Cost savings through joint procurement
- Greater political influence
- Effective quality assurance mechanisms
- Regulation of inter-college competition

These benefits are built upon a foundation of trust and the important role of the network coordinator. A key challenge for the network will be managing increased tensions resulting from financial cutbacks in the sector.