Better Together:

PEER REVIEW & DEVELOPMENT

An outline of the structure and organisation of the Peer Review and Development process and an evaluation of its impact across four colleges.

Liverpool **Community** College

Riverside College Halton

THE OLDHAM COLLEGE

KNOWSLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Foreword:

For a number of years now, I have firmly believed in Self Regulation as the way forward for the FE sector. Peer referencing and peer review must form an integral part of this process. In preparing the way for Self Regulation, the Single Voice, representing all major stakeholders, has confirmed that providers will take greater responsibility, both individually and collectively for planning and improving provision, and for sector responsiveness for the benefits of learners, employers, communities and the nation.

The success and rigour of this North West project over recent years in reviewing effectiveness of provision and supporting improvement across a group of colleges has already demonstrated that this can be a reality. I have every confidence that groups of colleges working together in this way will make major steps forward in engendering a collaborate responsibility for improvement.

Sir George Sweeney

Introduction

As Principal of the lead college in the partnership, I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce "Better Together" because the title sums up precisely what we, as a group of four colleges, have experienced as a result of our collaborative work over the last two to three years.

Frank Gill
Chair Principals Group

This project started with enthusiasm and a strong commitment from our steering group of college principals and from senior managers who have directed the day-to-day development. That commitment and enthusiasm is, if anything, even greater today as we have all gained from the support of partner colleges in a whole range of aspects. At first sight, perhaps the most significant part of the relationship is the review process.

Each college has now had five two day reviews each covering two or three aspects of our work. Each review has, in effect, been a mini inspection conducted by trained reviewers from the other three colleges. As well as clearly identifying strengths and areas for improvement, we have all had the benefit of the expertise and good practice in partner colleges to assist in improvement. This has made the experience much more valuable than an Ofsted visit or inspection and has clearly enhanced our collaborative capacity to improve. As one college principal said, *"It feels as though we are one college"*.

Reviews have not been the only benefit. Involvement of partners in validating self assessments, visits to other colleges to gain from particular areas of strength, standardising lesson observation grades and reporting, provision of specialist managers for internal inspections, common surveys and benchmarking have all benefited all of us and driven forward quality improvement.

At first, we did have some concern that a "long term" relationship may lead to some "cosiness" and a consequent lack of rigour in the reporting of reviews, but this has not proved to be the case. In fact, quite the opposite - the longer we have worked together, the easier it is to make unclouded judgements. We really want partners to *"tell it as it is"* so that each college can move forward to meet the needs of our learners, employers and the community.

I feel I can speak for all four principals in saying that this has been an excellent development for all colleges, and that we truly are "Better Together".

Background

Sir George Sweeney, the former principal of Knowsley College - and now Chair of the Single Voice Group – has had a considerable influence on the peer review process through his strong belief in and commitment to the principles of self regulation. This peer review and development (PRD) project followed on from the colleges' involvement in peer referencing where they were one of the eight national pilots developing peer referencing approaches.

Knowsley Community College and Liverpool Community College worked together on the observation of teaching and learning following a North West Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) Support for Success project 2005-07. Alongside this, Knowsley and The Oldham College have a long-standing history of inter-college collaboration on quality improvement strategies. The three colleges worked together and were then joined by Halton College at the start of the formal peer referencing project. (Later to become Riverside College)

Knowsley Community College takes the lead on the organisation and administration of many PRD activities, but all four colleges are equal partners in the project. The 4 colleges are one of the 100+ peer review and development groups established by the QIA as part of the Support for Excellence (SfE) initiative.
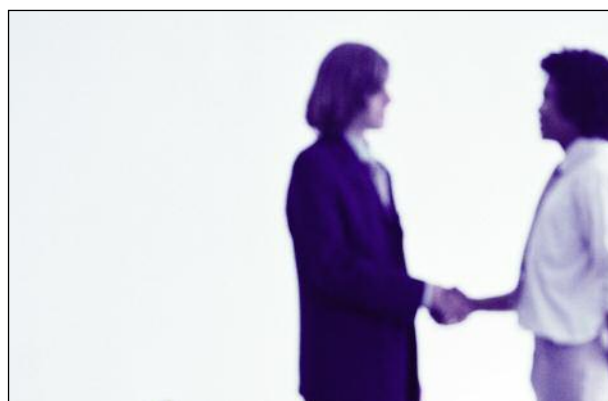
Definition

The QIA defines peer review and development as:

> A process through which professionals of similar status or standing exercise collective judgements about the quality and standards of provision, as well as shared responsibilities for their improvement.

PRD: Key Principles

- A whole organisation approach
- A collaborative process involving peers
- Specifically directed at helping improvement
- Evaluative judgements based on clear evidence
- Emphasis placed on listening to learners.

Protocol

Between them, the four colleges have a good history of collaborative working. This meant that high levels of trust and co-operation were already present. Clear frameworks to support the review process were developed along with focused training events to ensure consistency of approach. The underpinning protocol, however, has been kept short and to the point:

Everything shared between us but not outside of us.

This commitment to both openness and confidentiality is one of the key strengths of the group. However, the management team acknowledges that, with the possible extension of its core membership, a more formalised protocol will be required.

Organisation & Structure

Each college has made a strong strategic commitment to peer review and development. Initiatives are supported and often initiated by the principals. The four principals meet twice a year. This meeting is attended by the management team comprising of the senior manager in each of the colleges, who has overall responsibility for the PRD process. In addition, the management team meets regularly to co-ordinate the strategic and operational requirements of review activities. Tasks undertaken by the management team include:

- Agreeing the annual calendar of review activities
- Establishing the focus of review activities Identifying review teams and agreeing the lead reviewer
- Organising reviewer training sessions Agreeing focus, organisation and timing of joint training sessions (such as observation and feedback skills)
- Supporting colleges internal inspection arrangements; for example through joint lesson observations
- Reviewing evidence and outcomes from review activities
- Consulting on responses to external bodies Supporting colleagues through monitoring or inspection visits
- Agreeing forms of communication within and between colleges

I have found the peer review to be hugely beneficial to my role. The findings from our review reports influenced our Every Child Matters (ECM) self assessment and helped when reviewing our tutorial system.

Networking between colleges has provided guidelines on how to observe tutorials more effectively. We've standardised all our teaching and learning documentation and the staff development we have carried out has improved our accuracy when grading and giving feedback to teachers.

Being part of the review team has increased my knowledge of broad concepts such as value for money and has increased my level of professional confidence.

Erica Painter: Quality Manager, Riverside College

Framework of Reviews

The focus of review activity is agreed and planned across all four colleges. (I.e. All colleges focus on the same themes) Examples of review activity include:

- The effectiveness of the self assessment process
- ECM
- Leadership and management
- Governance
- Underperforming curriculum areas
- Employer engagement
- Learner feedback
- Value for money

> Change in FE has got to come from within. We can use self-regulation to build the capacity to support the transformation of the FE Sector.
>
> Kath Thomas, Principal, The Oldham College

A calendar of events covering the academic year is agreed and recorded. All activities are prioritised and despite the numerous conflicting pressures in any average college week, all of the timetabled activities have taken place as planned. Lead reviewers – who are not from the college being reviewed – are assigned and the composition of the teams selected. Once the timetable of events has been planned, any necessary team training events are also agreed. Reviews follow an agreed structure:

- Each review is 2 days
- Review teams meet prior to the first review to agree and set the questions to be used when interviewing staff and students
- The host college completes a schedule of activities - who/what/where/when - which is circulated to the review team
- The lead reviewer has a mentor role and assigns reviewers to tasks and meetings according to their skills, knowledge and experience
- The lead reviewer provides appropriate guidance to the review team as required including completion of agreed documentation
- The host college ensures reviewers receive all relevant documentation – self assessment report, observation data, learner feedback etc, prior to review
- The host college ensures that a meeting room and other necessities are provided

- The college receives detailed feedback throughout and at the end of the review
- A report is completed by the lead reviewer and shared with the college
- The college provides a written response to the report including an action plan

> I joined Knowsley Community College from the industry sector 15 years ago and although the college has consistently been grade A for financial health, I had no experience working in any other college. I found that being part of the team in a formal peer review gave me an insight into how other colleges operate.
>
> Under peer review the resource/financial questions were set by, and colleges were reviewed by, staff with expertise in that area. I found that it resulted in more relevant discussion than there had been under the recent college Ofsted inspection.

Mike Benson
Associate Principal/Director of Finance, Knowsley Community College
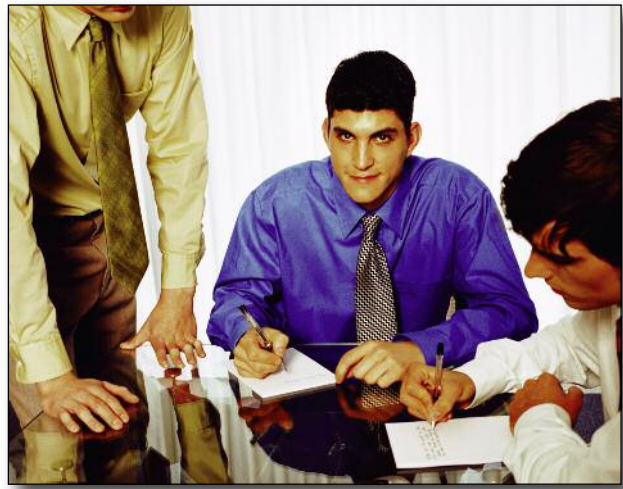
Headline Messages

All four colleges agree that there are four key headline messages resulting from their PRD activities:

- **Capacity to improve**
- **Rigour of process**
- **Value for money**
- **Continued Professional Development (CPD)**

Capacity to improve

Across all four colleges, at both strategic and operational level, peer review and development is viewed as one of the key processes supporting capacity to improve. Individual managers and teachers shared examples of how performance and standards have improved as a result of peer review:

- Identified as a strength in monitoring visits
- Improved inspection grades and judgements (The Oldham College has just received all outstanding grades)
- Improved ECM grades
- Greater access to and sharing of good practice
- Improved consistency of observer judgements and grades - confirmed through internal and external inspection - following joint training in observer and feedback skills and the development of common observation documentation and procedures
- Improved teaching and learning standards - increase in good or better observation grades confirmed through internal and external inspection
- Improved rigour in moderation of observation evidence
- Accuracy of self assessment judgements confirmed through internal review and external inspection
- Development of effective process to address under-performing curriculum areas
- Improved confidence, knowledge and skills of staff at all levels of the organisation
- Development of very effective networks of support at both strategic and operational level.

David Webster,
Senior Data Analyst
Knowsley Community
College

One of our partner colleges had some really good practice in making learner data available to their staff. They take pro-achieve data and export it into excel to produce accessible and standardised reports. We took this idea and developed it, incorporating it into our web-based register system, using Microsoft reporting service to display interactive reports. Ofsted inspection feedback confirmed the value of this improvement stating that the data was 'timely, accurate and accessible.'

Rigour of Process

Every member of staff involved in review activities identified the rigour of the process as one of its key strengths:

- I would call it Ofsted+ - it's got all the scrutiny backed up by support
- Nothing is hidden – we want the feedback to help us to improve
- More attention is paid to the review report than an inspection report because the review team have seen you without your make-up on
- We've had 5 reviews over a short period of time - that's 10 days with teams from 3 different colleges; we can bring in specialists so we are getting advice as well as judgements
- Colleges have collective responsibility for improvement; we expect that partner colleges will pull out all the stops to try and improve
- The reviews have more depth, they delve into issues and unearth more
- We know each other's self assessment reports, we've worked with each other over a period of time so have real insight into each others' organisation, structure and quality
- We have a three line whip for all review activities, it's seen as a top priority and all staff know that
- The action plan becomes part of the overall college action plan so all identified issues are addressed
- Each review starts with reference to previous report; colleges have to demonstrate that they have 'closed the loop'

Selection of comments from individual interviews in response to the question 'How rigorous is the PRD process?'

The rigour of the process is demonstrated by:

- Strategic direction and drive
- Openness and honesty of all those involved - issues are not covered up or ignored
- The prioritising of review activities and the importance given to them
- Effective and very experienced management team
- Clear organisation and structure of review activities - common frameworks developed and adhered to
- Involvement of specialists in all parts of the organisation - teachers as well as managers, business as well as academic staff
- Clarity and accessibility of data
- Use of common policies and procedures to ensure consistency
- Consistent monitoring of activities to ensure that actions are addressed
- Moderation of teaching and learning evidence and judgements to ensure accuracy
- Reporting structures within and across colleges which ensures that review reports are part of quality assurance and quality improvement systems

Value for Money

Value for money can be an elusive concept to illustrate or prove as there has to be a good match between overall costs and outcomes and it is not always easy to fully identify either of these. For example, the cost in direct staff hours is relatively straightforward but there are other administrative costs, as well as organisation and management time - organising an event, preparing for a review or responding to particular issues - which are not always easily quantifiable.

The four colleges involved in this PRD project have developed a spreadsheet of staff hours and have multiplied this by an average hourly rate of, for example, £48, to provide an outline of overall costs. The hours include all timetabled activity within the academic year including review activities, reviewer training, and steering group and management team meetings. They do not include other training such as joint observer training. Overall hours in 2006 were 711 and in 2007 736, resulting in respective costs across the four colleges of a figure approaching £40,000.

These costs appear modest when set alongside external inspection activities and look extremely reasonable when balanced against the

outcomes. All staff remarked on the professional benefits they had gained through involvement in review and internal inspections. However, more than one senior manager raised the need for additional funding to support self-regulation.

Chrissie Jones
Quality Manager, Liverpool
Community College

I have been involved in three Peer Reviews including for example, ECM, Value for Money and Learner Involvement. I have found it a very rewarding experience as the process investigates what works, how it is being measured and what can be improved.

There is the opportunity to learn about the crucial issues affecting FE today, and to see how other institutions are putting them into practice. You have a panoramic view of the implementation of initiatives from senior staff to main grade lecturers, and are able to meet and get to know the staff from our partner colleges. The value of these relationships is that now we can call on the experience and talent not only of our own colleagues, but also from those within the partnership.

CPD

Individual members of staff have referred to their involvement in PRD activities as 'the best staff development I have ever been involved in.' Training has been both formal and informal, using expertise within the colleges and occasionally using external consultants to deliver customised training events. Examples of activities include:

- Effective observation skills
- Effective feedback skills
- Identifying progress in learning
- Moderation of observation evidence forms
- Reviewer training – process and protocol
- Reviewer training – writing survey and interview questions
- Undertaking joint observations
- Examining data

- Being part of a review team - examining evidence, interviewing staff and students, giving feedback, writing reports
- Scrutinising self assessment reports and identifying and/or confirming strengths and areas for improvement
- Identifying, sharing and implementing good practice strategies.

Critical Success Factors

A number of critical success factors supporting the effectiveness and success of the peer review and development process were emphasised by individual members of staff in all four colleges:

- Commitment of Principals
- Management Team
- Culture and Values
- Partnership of equals
- Effective planning & communication
- Immediate rewards/outcomes

Commitment of Principals

The four principals have not only been strongly committed to the PRD process but are actively involved, have prioritised activities and have committed sufficient resources to enable them to be successfully achieved.

> "A label doesn't convey the totality of a college."
>
> Wally Brown, Principal,
> Liverpool Community College

Management Team

The management team is the engine house of the peer review and development process. The four individuals are respected senior managers in their own colleges, with vice principal or director responsibility for quality and standards. They have a good history of collaborative working and have built up a strong relationship of trust and support. As members of their respective senior management teams, they have the experience and influence to make change happen. The Vice Principal of Knowsley Community College chairs team meetings and ensures that team decisions are accurately recorded and minutes and agendas circulated across the four colleges. It could be said that 'the Knowsley influence' is a critical success factor in its own right.

Culture and Values

In many ways this is the most important critical success factor. Nearly every senior member of staff interviewed saw the culture of partner organisations as crucial to the success of the peer review process.

- The process worked because there was such a high degree of trust between us
- I've worked with x college so much over the years that I almost feel like a member of staff
- We were able to put our cards on the table and be totally open about where we had a problem
- We were confident that (partner college) had the same sense of trust in its staff that we had
- They are like us - a supportive rather than a blaming organisation
- Like us they have a passion to improve because they put the learner at the centre of everything they do
- They know as well as we do that just because you're seen as an outstanding college doesn't mean that you have no problem areas

Selection of comments from individual interviews in response to the question 'What have been the contributing success factors?'

This common culture and sense of shared values in some ways came out of the history of collaboration but particularly from an enthusiasm for partnership working across the four colleges.

Roger Clegg - Head of Learning Resources, The Oldham College

As Head of Learning Resources at The Oldham College I have been involved in the peer review process as part of a review team at Knowsley Community College and Riverside College. I have also undertaken joint peer teaching & learning observations.

Whilst I initially considered the process to be an extra demand on my time it has proved to be invaluable both to the College and to me personally as part of my continuing professional development.

To have the opportunity to share good practice across the four institutions has given me greater insight into what we are

doing well at The Oldham College and also allowed me to improve and develop the services that learning resources offers to staff and learners across the curriculum. The biggest benefit has been the new working relationships that have been formed whilst still ensuring that the rigour and formality of the process is maintained throughout, ensuring that we continue to monitor and improve the quality of our provision.

Partnership of Equals

This means values and principles worked out through the actual partnership relationships between the four colleges. Although Knowsley Community College leads and in many ways drives the peer review and development process they are not seen - and do not see themselves - as senior partners in the process. This sense of equals working together to raise standards was identified by principals and the management team as crucial to the success of their review activities and critical to the eventual success of self regulation.

Effective planning & communication

Peer review process and activities are well planned. The principals' group considers strategy and, with the management team, agrees the focus of activities for the academic year. The management team then structure and organise the range of activities. Dates for review activities are agreed and a calendar of events drawn up.

The management team then considers process and resource requirements for individual reviews or internal inspections. For example, selecting the questions to be used in the learner voice survey or agreeing the scope and remit of a peer review of overall value for money. Teams are selected and informed and appropriate training activities arranged.

The lead reviewer then manages the review process and, using evidence from individual reviewers, produces the final report for the college. Detailed feedback is given to the college during the review process and a written report produced, usually within two days of the review.

The main area for improvement in both planning and communication results in many ways from one of the main strengths of the group, namely, the high levels of trust which exist between the colleges. This has meant that

they are operating very much on a perceived, unspoken code of conduct. For example, the production of the written review report usually happens within two days but this time frame is not yet formalised.

Members of review teams - especially new reviewers - feel well-informed and supported by the lead reviewer. (Many reviewers used the term 'mentor' when referring to the lead reviewer). However, most of them have indicated that they would welcome some type of formal feedback on the effectiveness of their role and contribution following the review. This would further support their professional development.

Phil Glover College Manager, Hair & Beauty, Riverside College

My own confidence has been boosted as a result of peer review as my first involvement was only six weeks after being appointed as a college manager. I was invited to The Oldham College for an internal inspection to critically evaluate their Self Assessment Review for Business. This allowed me to reflect upon the way I produce my self assessment reports which have subsequently been singled out for praise by Ofsted at a recent Annual Monitoring Visit.

As part of Riverside College's lesson observation team, I have been invited to Knowsley Community College for an annual standardisation meeting involving all the partner colleges in the peer review project. These meetings have helped to reinforce the validity of the grades I give and improve the feedback communicated to the staff I observe.

I brought the ethos of the critical friend into the everyday practice of the Hair & Beauty section that I manage; staff now review their colleagues' files rather than waiting for internal audits or external inspections. I am also ensuring that training sessions for peer review are shared across my whole team. For example, what makes an effective lesson?

Immediate rewards/outcomes

Being able to quickly see and experience the tangible benefits of review activity has ensured its success and guaranteed the continuance of further review activities. Peer review is not seen as something handed down from on high; individuals are eager to be involved in an activity which is recognised as one of the best tools to develop individuals and teams.

Individual staff across all four colleges agree that the most important outcome of the peer review and development process is the improvement in standards which has resulted from:

- Identification and sharing of good practice (see next section)
- Shared resources
- Joint training and development

This has in its turn, led to a number of unforeseen but highly important outcomes identified by a large number of staff:

- Significant increase in professional knowledge and confidence
- Development of 'real' professional networks
- Effective solution focused activities developing a 'can do' attitude
- Enhanced insight and co-operation between business services and academic areas of college
- Very effective preparation for external monitoring/inspection
- Confirmation that colleges can effectively regulate their own quality and standards

Good Practice

One of the strengths of the peer review process is the wider access to good professional practice. Examples of good practice which have been used across partner colleges include:

- Data presentation
- Tutorial Policy
- Observing Tutorials effectively
- Health & Safety Policy
- Lesson Observation documentation
- SAR writing at team level
- Curriculum improvement for underperforming areas
- Learner voice strategy

A good example of impact and development resulting from the sharing of good practice is the observation of teaching and learning process. Specialist observers from all four colleges undertake joint observations as part of the internal inspection of a curriculum area. All observers use a common observation grading grid to support consistency of evidence and judgements, (developed as part of QIA S4S Project). However, when colleges held joint moderation events to validate and confirm the written judgements and grades recorded, it was found that the very different format and focus of the evidence forms made standardisation very difficult. For example, there was insufficient focus on and evidence of the progress made by learners in the lesson. Following discussion, the colleges have now developed and adopted one common observation form to be used across all four colleges. They have undertaken joint training and have used the best parts of each other's practice to establish a common approach which will ensure greater consistency and standards in the observation of teaching and learning.
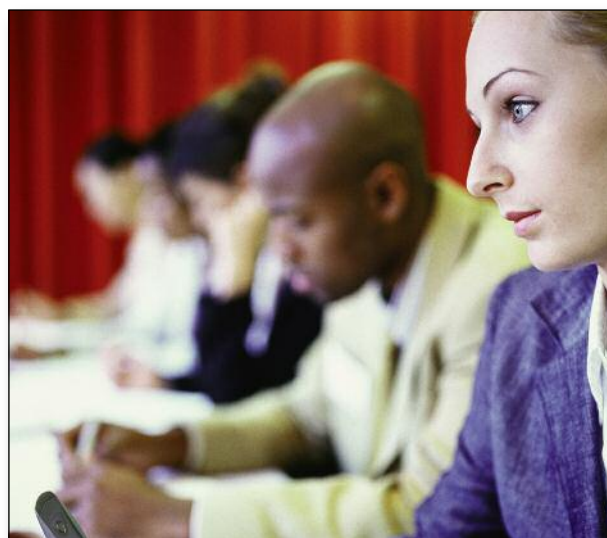
In addition, the experience of joint observation has resulted in improvements to observation protocols to ensure that feedback results in actions which are monitored and achieved.

The value of an observation is in the feedback and the value of the feedback is in the actions for improvement which result from it. If nothing changes as a result of an observation then an opportunity has been missed to identify good practice, discuss and address issues and raise teaching and learning standards across the college.

The result in all colleges is a rigorous and effective observation system which supports development and raises standards. The accuracy and consistency of both process and evidence has been confirmed by external monitoring and inspection activities.

Inspectors agree with the college's judgement that teaching and learning are good. The college's process for monitoring the quality of lessons is robust; a team of specialist observers have been trained, moderation is comprehensive and modifications have been made to further improve the system for 2007/08.
The Oldham College (Inspection Report Feb 08).

A rigorous system is in place to improve teaching and learning across the college. The profile of grades is continually improving.
Liverpool Community College (Monitoring Visit Report July 07)

Jim Spriggs, Assistant Director Skills for Life, The Oldham College

I have been involved in the Self Regulation Pilot from virtually the beginning, working at the other three colleges. During this time I have undertaken a wide range of activities, including SAR validations, internal inspections, and teacher observations and as part of a general review on specific areas of work. In addition, the standardisation meetings on such topics as teacher observations.

My involvement in the project has been far more rewarding for the College and myself personally, than any of the time I have previously spent as an Associate Inspector. Built upon trust, mutual and professional respect, I would summarise the benefits of this projects as:

- Maintaining standards across the Colleges

- Sharing good practice

- Close working relationships, which enable contacts for College and individual development.

Risks/Issues

Many of the risk factors are the reverse of the critical success factors. A number of risks or possible development issues have emerged through this evaluation:

- Resources and funding
- The need for a formal protocol
- Balance between competitiveness and co-operation
- Culture and shared values
- Sustaining rigour and objectivity
- Importance of using the right staff in the right setting
- Balance between input and outcomes
- Comparing resources, pay and conditions across colleges

Resources and funding

Managers confirmed that the benefits of peer review outweigh the costs involved. However, some concerns were expressed about sustainability and, in a wider sense, capacity. Realistic funding is seen as crucial to the long term success and development of peer review activities.

The need for a formal protocol

The four colleges have worked together successfully and have not felt the need to formalise their relationship or establish agreed codes of conduct. Many of the senior managers have worked together over a long period of time and feel that they have moved beyond formal rules of engagement. One senior manager expressed it well when he commented that they *'preferred to spend their time doing the business than developing the protocols.'* They have, however, developed clear frameworks for action and have been extremely successful in raising standards and improving the quality of provision.

The college has formed a strong peer-referencing partnership with three other colleges and has contributed fully to strategic and operational groups. Significant time investment has been made by all partners. Peer reviews have been carried out in each college, covering all aspects of the common inspection framework and additional themes such as employer engagement and the five outcomes of 'Every Child Matters'. The benefits derived by the college include common survey mechanisms, standardisation of quality assurance processes, the sharing of good practice, and improved self assessment. In addition, the opportunities for mutual support and working together for improvement are seen as key benefits. The arrangements provide a credible basis for peer referencing and improve the capacity of colleges to self-improve.
Knowsley Community College (Monitoring Visit Report January 2007)

Exemplary collaboration with a group of North West colleges has enabled the college to further embrace and disseminate good practice and fine tune quality assurance processes.
The Oldham College (Inspection Report February 2008)

Peer referencing with Oldham, Knowsley and Liverpool Community College is well established and productive and continues to have an impact. Good practice is shared within college and between partners.
Riverside College (Monitoring Visit Report November 2007)

However, managers have identified that, with the potential expansion of the peer review group to include additional colleges in the North West (see section on Vision) and the involvement of a greater number of staff within the colleges, there is now a need for an agreed protocol of working which all the colleges and reviewers can adhere to.

Balance between competitiveness and co-operation

The four colleges who formed the initial peer referencing group did not see themselves as competitors despite the fact that two of the colleges in the group are geographically quite close. It could also have been an issue when one of the colleges merged with a sixth form college located close to a partner college. The fact that this did not happen illustrates the shared set of values underpinning the work of the four colleges. However, managers have identified the potential conflict between co-operation and competition as a possible area of concern as more colleges form peer review groups.

Leigh Broadbent Director for Quality Improvement, Knowsley Community College

I have been involved in Peer Review for a couple of years in my previous role as Section Manager for Sport and Public Services. Here I completed two joint observations within Sport and Recreation at Liverpool Community College as part of their Internal Review. This helped me gain new ideas and good practice to take back to KCC. Since September 2007, I have attended various events, meetings and staff development, particularly in the area of observing and grading lessons in my new role as Director for Quality Improvement. From this, I have – in partnership with the other colleges - developed a new lesson evidence form and narrative and adapted training for observers in College. I have found peer review to be hugely beneficial in gaining new ideas, resources and sharing good practice with colleagues.

Culture and shared values

The culture of a college and the values and principles underpinning its work are crucial factors when determining which colleges will be able to work together successfully. More than one principal identified this as both a critical success and a risk factor.
'You have to be happy with the values of any organisation you are working with.'

Where there is no history of partnership working, it can take time to confirm that there is a shared set of values and even with shared values, misunderstandings may occur. This is where it is essential to agree a protocol which, from the beginning, clarifies the working principles of the group. However, as some managers pointed out, the establishment of a protocol does not automatically result in openness and honesty.

Sustaining rigour and objectivity

Good working relationships can quickly become cosiness over time. Managers in the PRD group are aware of the tension and possible contradictions between openness, honesty, empathy, support, rigour objectivity and challenge.

However, it is important to note that peer review is not inspection and reviewers are not inspectors. The outcomes of review activities are as much about development as they are about judgement and the judgements are based on valid and sufficient evidence which is shared in a constructive and positive manner.

Importance of using the right staff in the right setting

All the early peer referencing and review activities were mainly staffed by very experienced senior managers in the colleges. As many of them also had experience of inspector or external examiner roles, they were well-placed to review evidence, make judgements and feed back key issues confidently and succinctly. The experience of the four colleges in this peer review and development group is that this has been the most successful way of conducting reviews.

As the scope of reviews has been extended, however, so has the range of staff involved in them and not all of whom have felt wholly confident or competent in their role. The selection, training and deployment of staff are, therefore, crucial to the success of review activities.

Barry Sherriff, Head of Faculty, Construction & Engineering, Liverpool Community College

I am responsible for a large vocational faculty that has 70 full time teaching, 30 support and around 40 part time staff. Together we provide training education and assessment for 2800 learners. As a head of faculty, I have been fortunate in being involved in several peer review events which has also provided me with the opportunity to involve many of the staff in the various meetings and forums. We have found the experience to be very informative and rewarding particularly from the point of view of 'sharing good practice'.

It has also proved beneficial in testing the rigour and accuracy of our own self assessment process as well as helping us rethink both our strategic and operational planning. Two very good examples spring to mind of how my participation in the initiative has proved invaluable: firstly, when carrying out an Internal Inspection of another vocational area of the college I was joined by members of the peer review team from another college whose input proved invaluable. Secondly, by participating in the meetings and through valued discussions we have changed the way we administer the tracking of work base learners which has greatly helped its overall performance when measured at our recent AAV monitoring visits.

Balance between input and outcomes

One college felt strongly that the only way to balance the time, effort and resources needed to make peer review successful against outcomes generated, was to ensure that review activities did not replicate internal quality processes but replaced them where possible. E.g. using a specific peer review in place of an internal inspection.

Comparing resources, pay and conditions across colleges

One of the great benefits of peer review and development is the opportunity to experience quality and standards in other colleges and share good practice. This opportunity, however, also means that individuals become aware of how different colleges' resource and support key areas and this could lead to comparisons and tension. E.g. an Advanced Practitioner in one college realising that his peers in other colleges are much more generously resourced than he is. As colleges work ever more closely together and align their systems and processes, any significant disparity in resource issues might also need to be considered.

Vision/Future Actions

The four colleges are aware that to stand still is not an option. They have a vision for the future which further develops the scope and remit of peer review and development. From September 2008, the review group could expand to include additional colleges in the North West.

This will not mean one group of thirteen colleges but three groups of four or five colleges, co-operating closely on the structure, management, organisation and principles of peer review and development.

Alongside this, senior managers identified possible future strategies which would further enhance the quality and impact of PRD:

- Greater involvement of governors
- Broader teams to include teachers and other professionals e.g. Health & Safety managers
- Development of common reviewer training programme
- Development of a reviewer training pack
- Development of cycle of self regulation

Contact List

If you would like to discuss any of the information in this newsletter, please contact a member of the PRD management team.

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